IMRF #WomenInSAR

https://www.international-maritime-rescue.org/contact-the-imrf

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Contents

The IMRF

The International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF) is an international, non-governmental organisation (NGO) that supports search and rescue (SAR) organisations with the development and improvement of maritime SAR capacity around the world.

This is done by providing guidance, facilitating training and enabling SAR providers to share knowledge and expertise between members across the IMRF community. Its work spans some of the most important issues facing maritime SAR and is vital to raising and maintaining standards, as well as improving overall global SAR capability.

The IMRF currently has more than 140 member organisations in over 50 countries, creating an engaged and passionate global SAR community. Our influence is amplified through our consultative status at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and our role in key IMO Working Groups such as the IMO/ICAO SAR Joint Working Group. We also lead several industry-wide programmes to tackle issues facing the international maritime SAR sector, including #SARyouOK? mental health initiative, Mass Rescue Operations (MRO) guidance project and #FutureSAR climate change initiative.

Our members remain our strongest asset and each year we welcome more SAR organisations, technology and equipment suppliers, and governmental organisations, each of which support one another by sharing knowledge, experience, expertise and innovations through our programme of webinars, conferences, events, forums and other activities. By cooperating in this manner, the IMRF members can cost-effectively share the burden of developing rescue capabilities to meet ever-growing challenges by learning from the ideas and experiences of others.

The IMRF continues to be at the forefront of the maritime SAR sector, offering a vital support network to the sector worldwide, regardless of the size and scope of the member.

#WomenInSAR

According to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the current huge gender gap in the maritime sector is well-documented as "women represent only two percent of the world's 1.2 million seafarers". In maritime SAR, all available evidence suggests that the position is essentially not different, although the proportion of women is somewhat higher: women are greatly under-represented across maritime SAR, in both volunteer and paid positions.

In a bid to address this, the IMRF launched its #WomenInSAR initiative in June 2019 at the World Maritime Rescue Congress in Canada. The initiative aims to increase the representation of women in the maritime sector generally and to provide support for, and raise the profile of, women in the maritime SAR sector specifically.

The IMRF initiative supports the IMO's Empowering Women in Maritime initiative.

Since it's launch, the initiative has included in for instance a survey and the associated report, a best-practices guidance, two workshops in Africa, two WomenInSAR leadership trainings with the third being organised later in 2025, and several local level events undertaken and organised by IMRF members organisations. Additionally, the initiative has in the last few years expanded within the IMRF to include the entire EDI (equity, diversity, inclusion) sphere.

Introduction

The IMRF #WomenInSAR initiative was launched at the World Maritime Rescue Congress in Vancouver, Canada, in June 2019. The principal aim of the initiative is to encourage more women and girls to take roles in maritime SAR by providing support for, and raising the profile of, women in the maritime SAR sector. The initiative also supports the "Empowering Women in Maritime" initiative of the International Maritime Organization as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".

One of the aims of the IMRF was to produce recommendations and guidance on best practice for increasing the representation of women in both volunteer and paid SAR capacities. To make this possible, the IMRF first had to address the lack of hard data on the status of women in SAR by organising a global #WomenInSAR Survey. The aim of the survey was to discover what people in all kinds of roles across the SAR sector think about gender balance and equality of opportunity across the maritime SAR sector and – crucially – what might be done to improve things.

Therefore, in October 2020, IMRF launched the #WomenInSAR survey. The survey attracted more than 1 600 responses from individuals and SAR organisations across the globe, highlighting that there had been a real need for such a survey. The results of the survey were included in the #WomenInSAR Report, launched on 8 March 2021, the International Women's Day.

Based on the findings of the #WomeninSAR report, the IMRF later released #WomeninSAR guidance showcasing guidance and best practices for increasing the representation of women in the maritime SAR sector. The full copies of the #WomenInSAR Guidance, #WomenInSAR Report, and the Executive Summary are freely available for download to the maritime SAR community on the IMRF website.

Four years after the launch of the initial survey, the IMRF returned to evaluate the progress the industry has made in gender balance and equality by conducting another industry-wide survey, with the aim of understanding of women's current position in maritime SAR, as well as identifying other areas of improvement that can be made to make the industry a more inclusive place for everyone.

Summary of the initial survey

The initial survey ran for three months in 2020-2021. The survey was open to all, although some of the questions were reserved only for those identifying as female. Interim analysis indicated that many individuals could not answer more general questions concerning the situation in their parent organisation as a whole, and so a short additional survey was sent to IMRF member organisations in January 2021.

The specific objectives of the original survey were to gather information on:

1. How many women are working in the maritime SAR sector;

2. What kinds of roles they are working in;

3. What barriers they face;

4. What individuals and organisations think can be done to improve the situation.

Fifth objective was to establish a comprehensive and accurate benchmark, enabling the IMRF to better focus its support and to measure the success of the #WomenInSAR initiative. Of these five objectives, the first one, the number of women working in maritime SAR, remained unanswered as the number of responses from different organisations was insufficient. The other survey objectives were met.

Although there was a good response to the survey in terms of numbers of individual responses, 90% of the responses came from northern Europe or North America. Therefore, caution should be used in generalising the results globally.

Women who responded to the survey were working many roles, including SAR vessel or aircraft commanders and crew members, shoreside response team commanders and team members, support staff, RCC/RSC commanders or team members, SAR trainers, and managers. However, for the same reason as not knowing the total number of women working in SAR, it was not possible to come up with an accurate picture of the proportion of women in different roles.

Male dominance remains a fact in many SAR teams, and this can have an indirect discriminatory effect, for example in terms of the facilities and equipment provided. The survey indicated that a disappointing level of gender discrimination still exists in some quarters. Some women felt that they needed to out-perform their male counterparts in order to be accepted as equals.

Important barriers, indicated by both male and female respondents, included perception of SAR jobs as being more suitable for men; resistance from existing male staff; women not knowing that these jobs are there for them; and concerns about family life, childcare in particular. Additionally, a lack of adequate toilet, sanitary, showering and changing facilities, and a failure to provide personal protective equipment appropriate for women, or to consider women sufficiently when designing equipment, were reported by a significant number of respondents.

Desired actions for improving the situation in recruitment and retention, based on the survey, included for instance 1) concomitant action on providing suitable facilities and equipment, 2) equitable working conditions, mentoring and other in-post support schemes, 3) having female role models, 4) attention given to diversity and equality education for all staff, 5) equality of opportunity and flexibility of work patterns, 6) feeling for all potential recruits that they will receive all the training that they need; and 7) recruitment drives that focus on women or which emphasise male/female equality.

The updated survey

The updated survey was launched on November 15, 2024. The survey was available for answer through the IMRF website, and it was marketed in the IMRF Weekly newsletter, social media posts, and in different events and specialised WhatsApp groups.

The survey consisted of 41 questions, of which 8 were targeted for women only. Altogether there were 194 responses to the survey, significantly less than the 1 655 responses received to the original survey. This is understandable, this being a repeat exercise. Additionally, the IMRF had just run an EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion) survey a few months before the WomenInSAR survey.

1. Background of Respondents

Individual respondents identified their gender as:
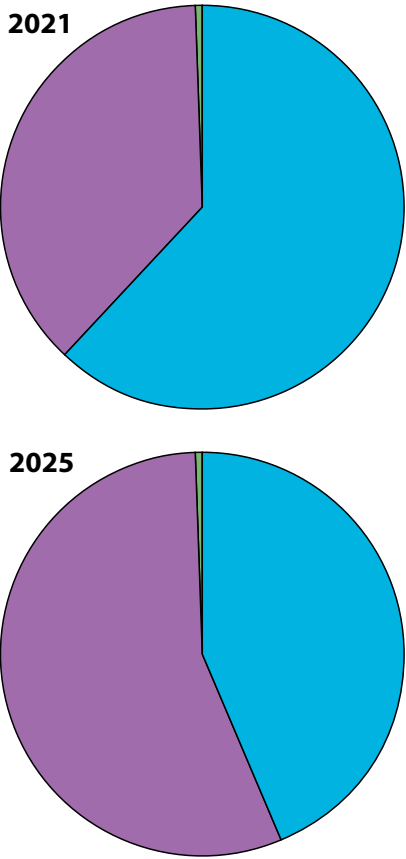
2021

2025

Gender	Responses	% in 2025	% in 2021
female	120	62%	44%
male	72	37%	56%
other	1	0.5%	0.3%

Individual respondents stated their geographical location as:
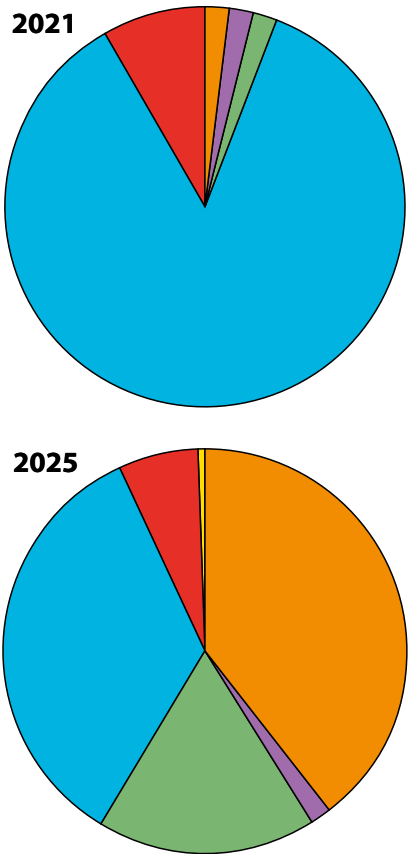
2021

2025

Country	Responses	% in 2025	% in 2021	female %
Africa	77	40%	2%	40%
Asia	3	2%	4%*	100%
Australasia	34	18%	4%*	59%
Europe / UK	67	35%	85%	88%
North America / Canada	12	6%	8%	73%
South America	1	0.5%	0%	0%

* In 2021 Asia and Australasia together contributed 4% of the responses.

62% of the respondents identified as women, compared to 44% in the initial survey.

Country level information was not asked in the survey, but the region of the respondents was indicated. Although the number of total responses was much lower than in the 2021 survey, the representation of Australasia (in practice Australia and New Zealand) and Africa were much higher than in 2021, making the results of the latest survey more global by nature. However, some of this increase came from increased male activity, as 60% of respondents from Africa identified as male.

Respondents recorded their years of SAR experience as:
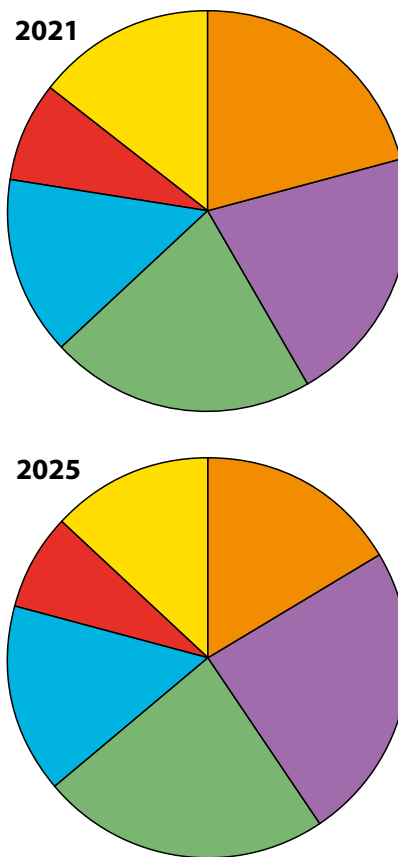
2021

2025

Years	Responses	% in 2025	% in 2021
1-2 years	32	16%	41%*
3-5 years	47	24%	41%*
6-10 years	45	23%	21%
11-15 years	30	15%	14%
16-20 years	15	8%	8%
more than 20 years	25	13%	14%

* In 2021 1-2 years and 3-5 years together contributed 41% of the responses.

The age of the respondent was asked on a different scale in 2021, so a direct comparison cannot be made. However, regarding the age the results are qualitatively similar to those of the 2021 survey. Additionally, the experience distribution of the respondents is essentially identical to that of the initial 2021 survey.

The respondents' age groups were:

2025

Years	Responses	% in 2025
18-24	16	8%
25-34	32	16%
35-44	50	26%
45-54	52	27%
55-64	29	15%
65 or older	15	8%

In summary, the background variables indicate that in the updated survey there were overall fewer responses (as expected), but relatively more of them were from Africa and Australasia, and relatively more of them were from respondents identifying as women rather than men.

Respondents' SAR roles were asked through an open question. The responses, slightly edited to omit organisation names, can be seen in the word cloud at the bottom of this page. The world cloud suggests that the same roles were involved as in the 2021 survey, perhaps with the exception of the SAR aircraft commanders and crew. 76% of the respondents stated that their roles were volunteer by nature, while 23% indicated paid full-time positions.

The results of the current survey indicate that, on average, 25% of the SAR workforce is made up of women, with the median being also 25%. The proportion of women in different organisations varies significantly, ranging from 0% to 80%. These figures are solely based on the estimates of those who responded to the survey, so caution needs to be used in generalising the figures.

Compared to the 2021 report, where a more detailed breakdown was provided, the overall percentage of female staff (including both paid and volunteer positions) was similar, with a mean of 26% and a median of 20%, but the range extended from 3% to 100%. When looking specifically at paid positions, women made up a higher percentage, with a mean of 40% and a median of 33%, while female volunteers accounted for a mean of 27% and a median of 20%, with both categories also showing a wide variation across organisations.

2. Motivations and Experiences

What motivates you to be part of SAR?

Motivation	Total	Female	Male
Passion for helping others	137	82	53
Excitement/adventure	97	61	35
Sense of duty	91	49	42
Camaraderie/team spirit	84	52	32
Skills development/challenge	101	63	36
Love of outdoors	74	44	30
Building confidence/resilience	57	40	16
Mentoring/training others	87	51	34
Family/cultural tradition	18	12	6
Other (please specify)	10		

The primary motivation for both women and men in SAR is a passion for helping others, with 137 respondents selecting this option, making it the most commonly cited motivation. Roughly 70% of both women (82 out of 120) and men (53 out of 72) selected this motivation, suggesting that the humanitarian aspect of SAR is a primary motivation for many of those involved, regardless of gender.
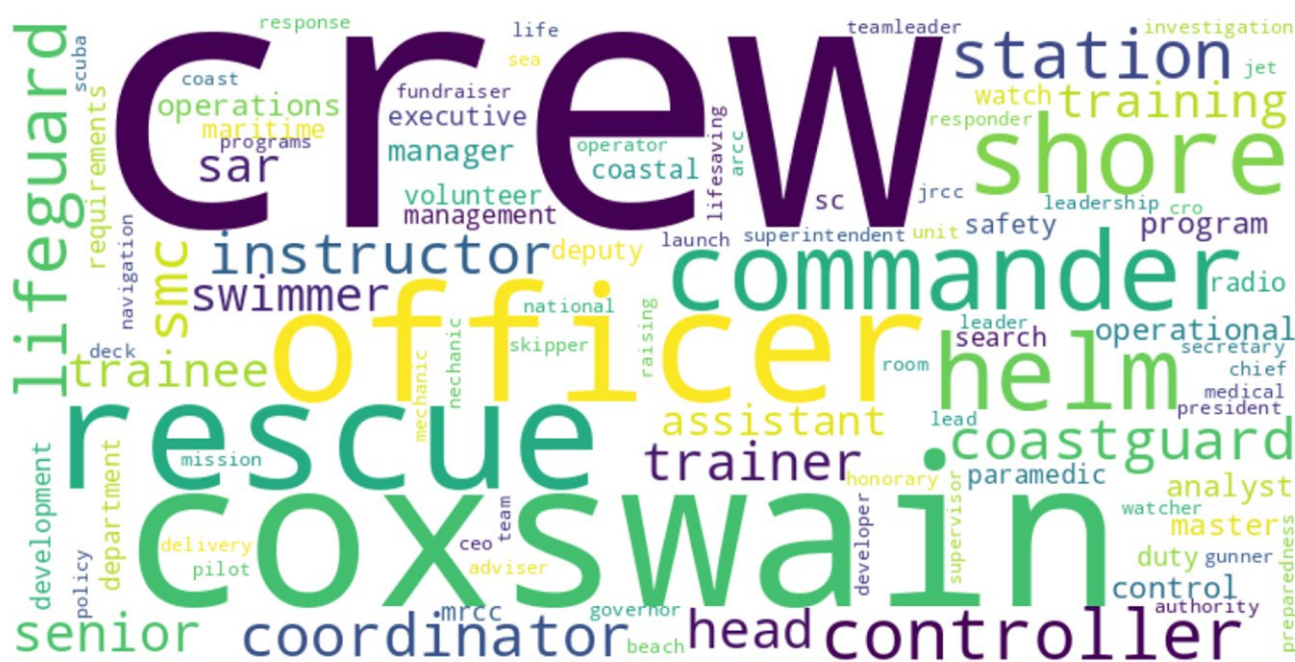
Other top motivations included skills development and challenge, excitement and adventure, and a sense of duty, which was more important for male respondents. Women were more likely to cite confidence-building and resilience as a key motivation, suggesting that SAR plays an important role in personal development for many female participants.

Men and women were similarly motivated by camaraderie/ team spirit and mentoring/training others. Family or cultural tradition was the least common motivator, with only 18 respondents selecting it.

The open responses highlight additional personal motivations, including employment opportunities, community engagement, and personal experiences with being rescued. Some respondents expressed a strong sense of purpose and fulfilment, stating that SAR is simply "what we do." Others appreciated the opportunity to spend time on the water, connect with local people, and contribute to their communities.

Overall, while both men and women are drawn to SAR for similar reasons, women tend to place a stronger emphasis on personal growth and confidence-building, while men show slightly higher levels of motivation related to duty and adventure.

2.1 Most rewarding aspects in SAR

The most rewarding aspects of SAR, as shared by the respondents, revolve around saving lives, making a difference, personal growth, teamwork, and mentoring others. Many respondents highlighted the deep sense of fulfilment that comes from knowing their actions have directly contributed to bringing people home safely, providing closure to families, and making a real impact during critical moments. The emotional reward of seeing the relief and gratitude on the faces of those rescued was frequently mentioned, reinforcing the powerful human connection at the heart of SAR work.

Personal and professional growth was another major theme. Many respondents valued the skills and experience they have gained, including leadership opportunities, practical SAR skills, and the ability to push themselves beyond their perceived limits. Some specifically mentioned the challenges they have overcome, the confidence they have built, and the honour of becoming role models for new recruits.

Teamwork and camaraderie were also regarded as highly rewarding aspects of SAR. Respondents described their SAR teams as a second family, with lifelong friendships built through shared challenges, trust, and a common purpose. Some mentioned the satisfaction of mentoring and training others, particularly helping newer members – including other women – develop their confidence and skills.

Several respondents reflected on the privilege of contributing to the SAR community beyond direct rescue efforts, whether through improving procedures, training the next generation, or representing women in leadership roles. Others mentioned the excitement and sense of adventure that comes with SAR work, particularly in challenging rescues that test their abilities in extreme conditions.

While the primary motivation for many remains helping others in their most vulnerable moments, SAR also provides personal fulfilment, skill development, and a strong sense of belonging to a mission-driven community. Whether on the frontline or in support roles, respondents consistently expressed pride in knowing that their work truly makes a difference in people's lives.

2.2 Least rewarding aspects in SAR

The least rewarding aspects of SAR, as shared by the respondents, largely revolve around internal politics, gender-based discrimination, lack of recognition, bureaucracy, and the emotional toll of the work. Many respondents expressed frustration with station politics, ego-driven conflicts, and institutional inefficiencies that detract from the mission of saving lives. Bureaucracy and red tape were frequently cited as obstacles, with some feeling that management fails to understand the needs of frontline SAR personnel.

For women in SAR, gender-related barriers remain a significant challenge. Many reported feeling undervalued, dismissed, or excluded from opportunities. Some described having to work harder to prove themselves, fighting for training access, or being overlooked in leadership roles. Others experienced sexism, condescension, or a lack of support from male colleagues. A particularly difficult experience was being treated differently after returning from maternity leave, feeling like they had lost their place in the team.

The physical and emotional toll of SAR was also mentioned by many. Some respondents cited traumatic incidents, PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), and the weight of delivering bad news to families. Others expressed distress over unsuccessful searches, losing casualties, and witnessing suffering during migrant rescues or disasters.

Another recurring issue was the struggle to balance SAR commitments with personal and family life. Some respondents mentioned long hours, shift patterns, and time away from home as major sacrifices. Others noted barriers to work arrangements that prevent them from thriving in their roles.

While SAR is deeply rewarding for many, the responses highlight the need for cultural and institutional changes to address gender biases, improve leadership pathways for women, and ensure fair access to training and opportunities. Additionally, stronger mental health support and better work-life balance policies could help mitigate some of the emotional and physical burdens faced by SAR personnel.

2.3 Gender-based discrimination

Have you ever experienced or witnessed any gender-based discrimination in SAR?
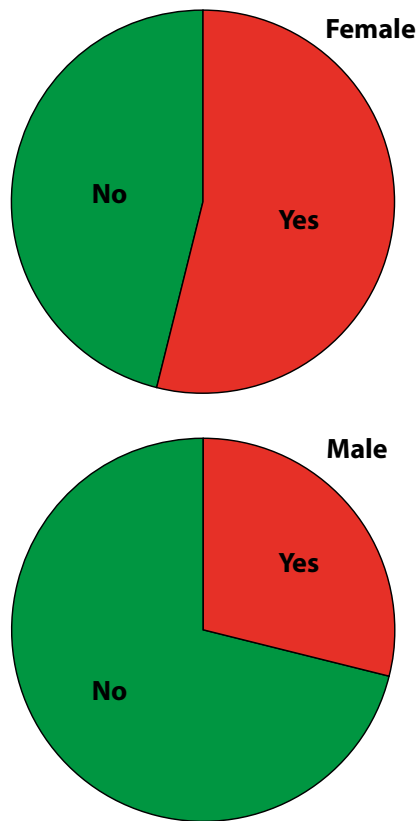
Female

Male

	Responses	All	Female	Male
Yes	60	43%	54%	29%
No	78	57%	46%	71%

Gender-based discrimination remains a significant issue in SAR, with 43% of all respondents reporting that they have either experienced or witnessed it. However, women were much more likely to report encountering discrimination, with 54% saying "yes," compared to only 29% of men. This suggests that while many men may not perceive discrimination as a widespread issue, a substantial number of women continue to face gender-related barriers in SAR environments.

The comments highlight a range of discriminatory experiences. One of the most frequently mentioned issues was the lack of equal opportunities, with respondents noting less access to roles such as helm, being assigned to secondary tasks like administration or cleaning, and receiving fewer opportunities for career development or event nominations. Several women also reported not feeling respected, trusted, or heard, reinforcing earlier findings about the need to work harder to prove competence compared to male colleagues.

Another recurring theme was verbal discrimination and exclusion, with multiple respondents mentioning negative talk behind their backs, being left out of project work, or facing condescending attitudes. Some also pointed to institutional discrimination such as ill-fitting PPE or other gear and the lack of proper accommodations for women in SAR.

While most comments highlighted discrimination against women, four respondents noted experiencing or witnessing discrimination against men. This aligns with a comment elsewhere about a perceived shift toward "beating up on men" in inclusivity discussions, suggesting that while gender equity efforts are necessary, they must be approached in a way that fosters mutual respect across all genders.

More severe forms of discrimination were also reported, including sexual harassment, condescension, and exclusion from leadership and training opportunities. The mention of gendered language and male-dominated terminology further suggests that SAR culture still has room to become more inclusive.

The findings indicate that gender discrimination in SAR is still a significant challenge, particularly for women. Addressing these issues requires active efforts to ensure equal opportunities, clear pathways for leadership development, unbiased training access, and a culture shift toward mutual respect and inclusion.

2.4 Overall experience as a woman in SAR

How would you describe your overall experience as a woman in SAR?
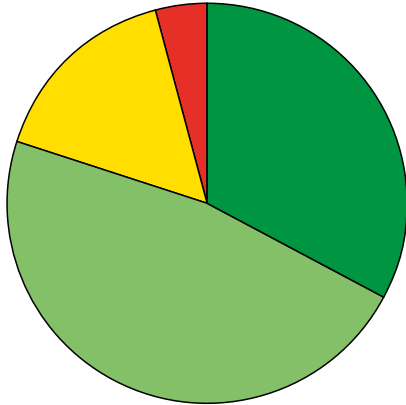
Very positive	33 %
Positive	47 %
Neutral	16 %
Negative	4 %
Very negative	0 %

(only female respondents were asked this question)

The experiences of women in SAR are largely positive, with 80% of respondents describing their overall experience as either "Positive" or "Very Positive", with 16% reporting a neutral experience. While only a small percentage (4%) described their experience overall as negative, and no one as "very negative", the open responses suggest that challenges still exist.

The respondents highlighted that experiences may vary significantly depending on the station or team dynamics. While many men encourage, support, and mentor their female colleagues, others remain reluctant to fully accept women in operational roles. One respondent described the overall experience as mixed, stating that while most interactions were positive, the negative moments, when they occur, are particularly impactful.

These responses suggest that while the overall experience is mostly positive, the experience of women in SAR is still shaped by individual team cultures and attitudes.

2.5 Top challenges for women in SAR

Women in SAR face a range of challenges, with equipment fit (46 responses) emerging as the most frequently cited issue, highlighting the ongoing struggle to access properly sized and designed gear. Lack of mentorship (35 responses) was also a significant concern, pointing to the need for stronger support networks and guidance for women in the field. Work-life balance (25 responses) was another key challenge, reflecting the difficulty of managing SAR commitments alongside personal and family responsibilities. Physical expectations (17 responses) and cultural barriers (16 responses) were also noted, suggesting that both operational demands and workplace culture continue to impact women's experiences.

Open responses shed further light on these challenges, with multiple women sharing experiences of being underestimated, facing resistance from male-dominated teams or even experiencing bullying, including from other women in leadership positions. Others cited misperceptions and the need to prove competency or over-perform as persistent issues. Some respondents highlighted broader structural issues, such as age and gender discrimination and the difficulty of attracting more women to SAR roles.

In terms of gender-related discrimination, the initial 2021 report found that 12% of respondents cited discrimination, including ill-fitting protective equipment, male reluctance to accept women in SAR roles, external skepticism about women's competence, the need to out-perform men to be accepted, and overt sexism in language and behaviour. The present findings reflect similar themes, with equipment fit remaining the most frequently cited challenge, followed by lack of mentorship, work-life balance, and cultural barriers. In the 2021 report, 33% of respondents reported no particular challenges, whereas in the present survey only four respondents explicitly stated that they faced no gender-specific challenges.

While physical expectations (small size and limited strength), work-life balance and age discrimination were mentioned in both reports, the 2021 report categorised these as challenges not necessarily related to gender. However, in the present findings, women specifically highlighted how physical expectations, perceptions of strength, and differences in how women train and learn remain an issue. Additionally, lack of mentorship is now recognised as a significant challenge, suggesting a growing awareness of the importance of structured support networks for women in SAR.

3. Training and Competence

3.1 Confidence in own ability

How confident do you feel in your ability to perform key SAR tasks?
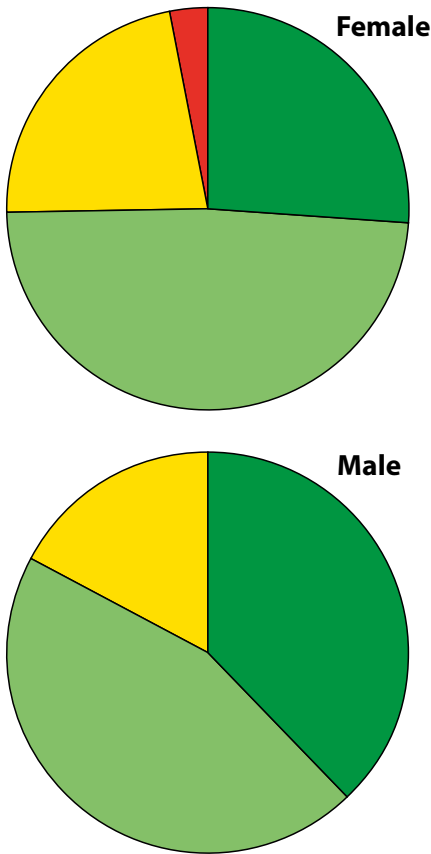
Female

Male

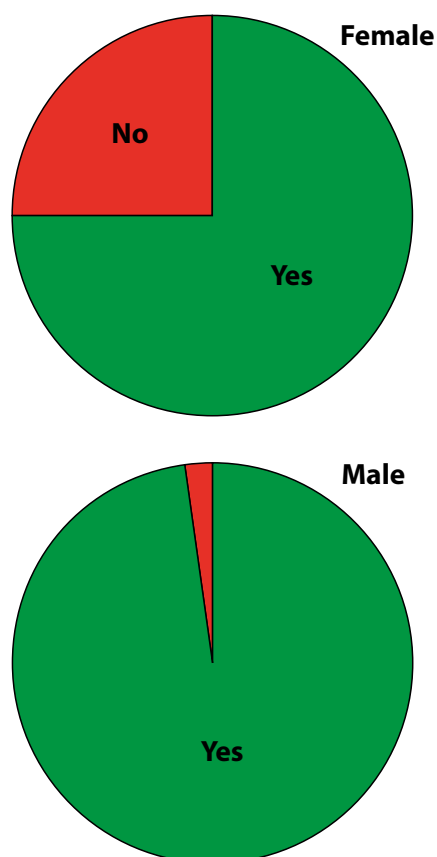| Confidence	Responses	All	Female	Male
Extremely confident	49	31%	26%	38%
Very confident	76	48%	48%	45%
Somewhat confident	31	19%	22%	17%
Not so confident	3	2%	3%	0%
Not at all confident	0	0%	0%	0%

The majority of SAR personnel, regardless of gender, report feeling highly confident in their ability to perform key SAR tasks. 79% of respondents feel either "extremely confident" or "very confident," indicating a strong sense of competence across the sector.

However, there are gender differences in confidence levels. While 38% of men feel "extremely confident," only 26% of women reported the same. Women were more likely to report feeling "somewhat confident" (22%) compared to men (17%), and while 3% of women reported feeling "not so confident," no men selected this response.

These findings suggest that while women in SAR generally feel confident in their abilities, they may experience slightly higher levels of self-doubt compared to their male counterparts. This aligns with previous findings on mentorship gaps and the need to prove competency, which may contribute to a more cautious self-assessment. However, it is positive to note that no respondents, male or female, reported feeling "not at all confident".

3.2 Access to training opportunities

**Do you feel that training opportunities are equally accessible for men and women in SAR?**

Female

Male

	Responses	All	Female	Male
Yes	119	84%	75%	98%
No	22	16%	25%	2%

The majority of SAR personnel (84%) believe that training opportunities are equally accessible for men and women. However, when looking at the responses by gender, a notable gap emerges: while 98% of men feel that training is equally accessible, only 75% of women share this view. Conversely, 25% of women reported that training opportunities are not equally accessible, compared to just 2% of men.

This disparity suggests that while formal training opportunities may be open to all, women in SAR may in practice still face barriers to accessing or fully participating in them. This aligns with previous responses, where women mentioned having to push for training opportunities, being excluded from certain activities, and needing to prove themselves more than their male colleagues. The on-the-ground reality may differ due to cultural attitudes, station-specific practices, or unconscious biases.

3.3 Training challenges unique to women in SAR

Have you experienced any challenges related to training that you believe are unique to women in SAR?
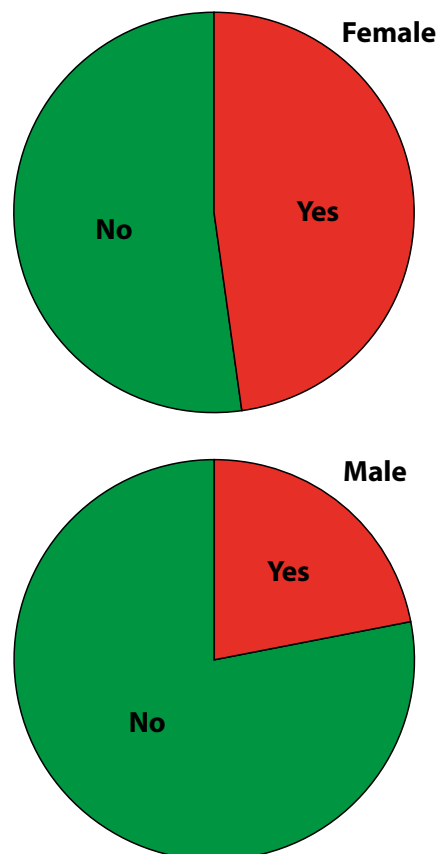
Female

Male

	Responses	All	Female	Male
Yes	52	38%	48%	22%
No	85	62%	52%	78%

The respondents were asked if they have experienced any challenges related to training that they believe are unique to women in SAR. The responses indicate that nearly half of women in SAR (48%) have faced training-related challenges that they believe are unique to women, compared to only 22% of men, suggesting that such challenges are not fully recognised by men in the sector. Open responses indicate that these challenges can be divided into three categories.

Physical challenges and gear: Women frequently cited physical challenges (15 responses) related to training, such as casualty pickups, boat entry from water, CPR, and manual handling. Nine respondents mentioned issues with ill-fitting gear and equipment, which can hinder performance and comfort during training.

Cultural barriers, gender stereotypes and bias in evaluation: Women reported experiencing attitudes such as "women cannot do this" or "women are probably not interested in this." Some felt pressure to conform to aggressive or loud male leadership styles, and that compassion, logical thinking, and caution are sometimes overlooked in favour of more traditionally "masculine" approaches to SAR training. Some noted that minor mistakes by women are scrutinised more harshly, and they are often corrected by people who themselves lack expertise. A common theme was being undervalued or underestimated, with prior experience not recognised and women needing to meet higher standards ("higher goalposts") to gain the same level of acceptance. Several respondents also reported being not favoured for courses or training opportunities.

Life stages and health considerations: Several respondents noted that SAR training environments are not always adapted for women, with inadequate facilities (washrooms and feminine hygiene accommodations) or lack of comfort breaks while operating on vessels. Women pointed out also the challenges of training while pregnant or having to undergo fitness tests during menstruation. Hormonal fluctuations affecting energy levels and discomfort were also mentioned, highlighting a need for better awareness and adaptability in training schedules and expectations.

3.4 Physical expectations and equipment design

Have you faced any barriers related to physical expectations or equipment design in SAR?
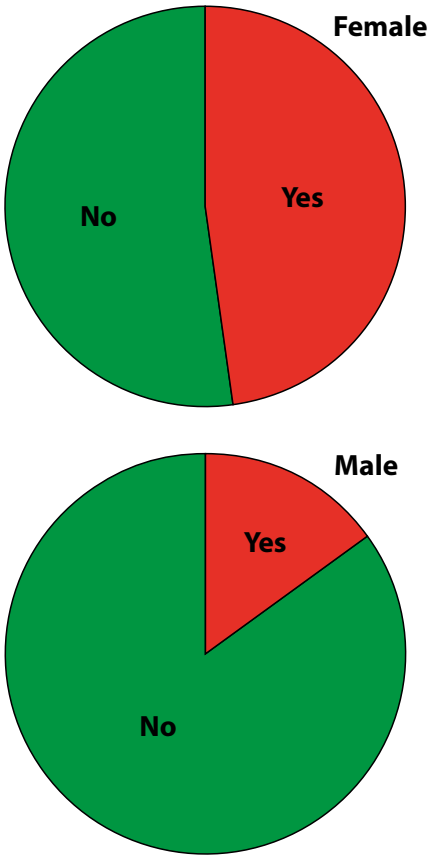
	Responses	All	Female	Male
Yes	49	36%	48%	15%
No	88	64%	52%	85%

Nearly half (48%) of women report facing barriers related to physical expectations or equipment design, compared to only 15% of men. This significant gender disparity highlights ongoing challenges in ensuring that SAR gear, equipment, and operational environments are designed to accommodate a diverse workforce.

One of the most commonly cited issues was drysuit design, with multiple respondents noting that sizing and body shape considerations were inadequate, and the lack of a back zipper made them impractical for women. A broader concern was that most equipment, clothing, and vessel layouts are designed for tall people. Respondents specifically mentioned life vests, helmets, storage spaces, safety railings, handles, windows, seats, and searchlights as examples of gear and infrastructure that do not take women's physical proportions into account. Beyond equipment fit, the absence of toilets on rescue boats was also raised as a barrier, making long-duration missions particularly challenging.

Physical strength requirements were another reported issue, with some women struggling with tasks such as steering, operating a salvage pump, or carrying a stretcher with a patient. Manual handling expectations also posed difficulties. A key issue raised was that some women felt they were not physically strong enough or tall enough for certain roles. Interestingly, one respondent pointed out an inconsistency in expectations, stating that women are expected to meet the same strength standards as men but are then not always given the opportunity to apply their physical abilities.

Although in principle physical expectations and equipment design can be challenges to anyone regardless of gender, the fact that 85% of men reported no barriers suggests that many of these challenges remain invisible to those who do not experience them firsthand. Addressing these issues will require re-examining equipment design, improving accessibility on rescue vessels, and fostering an inclusive training culture that recognises different physical capabilities without limiting operational effectiveness.

3.5 Training to prepare women in SAR roles

The respondents were also asked what kind of training they think should be emphasised to better prepare women in SAR roles. The responses indicate a strong divide in opinions regarding whether women-specific training is necessary in SAR. Many respondents believe that all SAR personnel, regardless of gender, should receive the same training and that women should be treated as equals, without differentiation. Some criticised the question itself, arguing that the real issue is not preparing women better, but rather addressing cultural and institutional barriers that limit their full participation.

However, others identified key areas of training that could empower women, particularly confidence-building, assertive communication, leadership development, and physical training. Several respondents emphasised that women often struggle more with confidence rather than capability and suggested training that helps them find their voice, assert themselves in male-dominated environments, and develop resilience in leadership roles.

Physical training was also frequently mentioned, for instance, developing physical training programmes to teach practical adaptations, such as lifting techniques that do not rely on upper body strength alone. Some respondents pointed out that women are often raised differently, with less early exposure to mechanical and technical skills, making foundational training in areas such as engines, tools, and navigation beneficial. Others emphasised that technique, rather than brute strength, should be prioritised in SAR training.

Some responses pointed out the need for cultural and leadership training – not for women, but for organisations. Respondents stressed the importance of training male colleagues, supervisors, and course facilitators to recognise and remove biases, respect diversity, and ensure that training environments are inclusive and supportive for all.

3.6 Additional support and resources needed

In addition to training, the respondents were also asked about what kind of additional support or resources would improve the skills and training of women in SAR. The responses highlight a mix of perspectives on potential additional support or resources. Mentorship and networking emerged as one of the most frequently suggested resources. Many respondents called for more mentorship programmes, women-specific support networks, and regional or international platforms for women in SAR to connect, share experiences, and offer guidance to one another. Some suggested mentoring opportunities led by experienced female SAR professionals to help newer members navigate challenges in the field.

Women-focused training events, seminars, and workshops were another key recommendation. Several respondents suggested more Women in SAR conferences, online forums, and regional training initiatives that allow women to train together, build confidence, and develop leadership skills. Some emphasised the need for dedicated training spaces where women can refine their skills without intimidation or bias.

Additionally, support for women returning to SAR after life events such as pregnancy, injury, or menopause was raised as an area needing attention. Some suggested that SAR organisations should offer better flexibility, reintegration support, and accommodations for women balancing SAR with caregiving responsibilities.
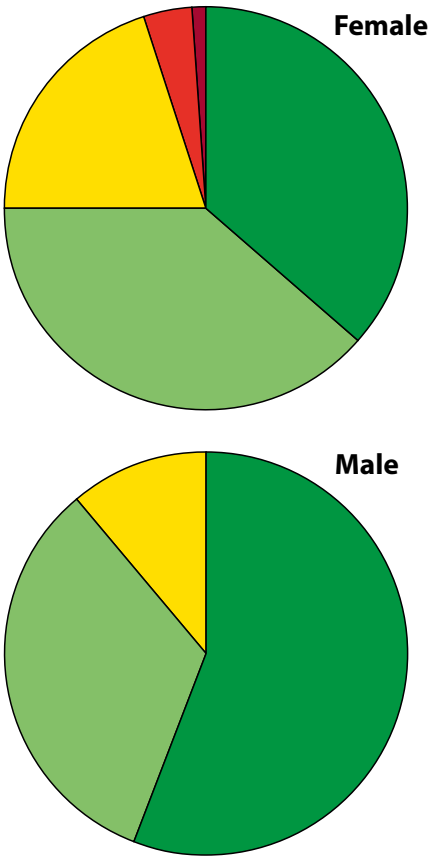
4. Teamwork

4.1 Valuation of contributions

To what extent do you feel your contributions are valued by your male team members?
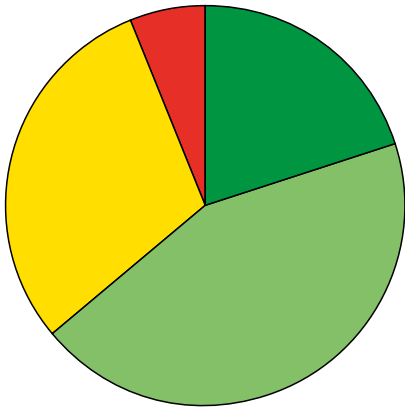
Extremely valued	20 %
Very valued	44 %
Somewhat valued	30 %
Not so valued	6 %
Not at all valued	0 %

To what extent do you feel having women in the team is valued by your local community?

Female

Male

Value	Responses	All	Female	Male
Extremely valuable	63	45%	37%	56%
Very valuable	50	36%	39%	33%
Somewhat valuable	22	16%	20%	11%
Not so valuable	3	2%	4%	0%
Not at all valuable	1	1%	1%	0%

The female respondents were asked to what extent they feel that their contributions are valued by their male team members. The majority of women in SAR feel that their contributions are highly valued by their male team members, with 64% reporting feeling either "Extremely valued" or "Very valued." However, 30% feel only "Somewhat valued," and 6% "Not so valued".

Open responses suggest a mixed experience, with some women feeling fully accepted as equals, while others face exclusion from certain activities and must continuously push for training opportunities. One respondent noted that while attitudes are improving, some male colleagues still hold fixed views that they are naturally better simply because of their gender.

The majority of SAR personnel believe that having women in the team is highly valued by their local communities, with 81% rating it as either "extremely valuable" (45%) or "very valuable" (36%). However, there is a gender gap in perceptions, as 56% of men rated women's presence as "extremely valuable," compared to only 37% of women. While most women still rated it positively, they were more likely than men to select "somewhat valuable" (20%) or "not so valuable" (4%).

The open responses suggest that community attitudes toward women in SAR vary significantly by location and cultural context. Some respondents highlighted that "old-school thinking" remains an issue in certain communities, with public perceptions posing a greater barrier than internal team dynamics. One respondent noted that in some cultures, women are only valued when performing administrative or communication tasks, such as radio work or paperwork, rather than operational roles like vessel control or deck work.

On the other hand, some respondents emphasised the positive impact of having women in SAR teams on broader community representation. Women in SAR serve as role models, inspiring other women and young girls to pursue these roles and push for equal opportunities. This highlights the importance of visibility and representation in breaking down stereotypes and encouraging greater female participation in SAR.

The gender gap in responses suggests that while most men see women's presence as highly valued by the community, women themselves may experience more subtle or overt resistance. Addressing this perception gap could involve community outreach, visibility campaigns, and leadership opportunities to ensure that women are recognised for their contributions in all SAR roles, rather than being confined to traditionally "acceptable" tasks.

4.2 Inclusion in SAR teams

How inclusive do you find your SAR team towards women?

Female

Male

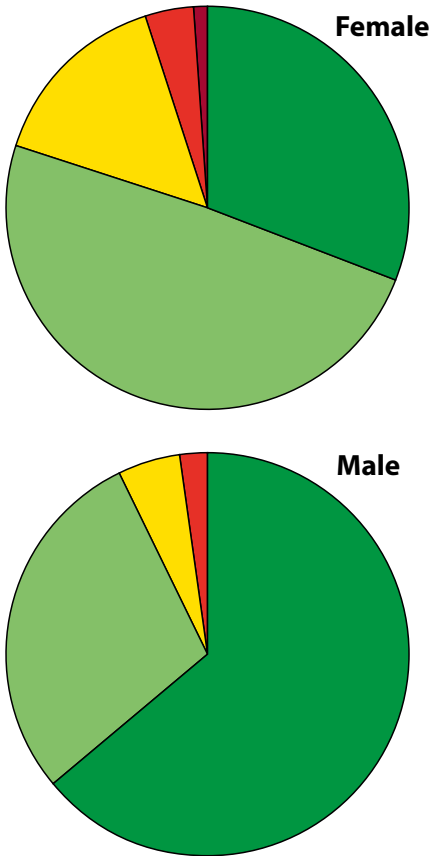| Score	Responses	All	Female	Male
5	74	52%	42%	69%
4	42	30%	35%	22%
3	22	16%	20%	9%
2	2	1%	2%	0%
1	1	1%	1%	0%

The majority of SAR personnel perceive their teams as inclusive towards women, with 82% of all respondents rating inclusivity as either 4 or 5 on a scale 1-5. However, a noticeable gender gap exists in perceptions of inclusivity. While 69% of men rated their teams as fully inclusive (5), only 42% of women felt the same. Similarly, while only 9% of men rated inclusivity at a 3 or lower, 23% of women gave their teams a neutral or negative rating.

These findings suggest that while SAR teams generally strive for inclusivity, women experience the environment differently than their male colleagues. The difference in ratings may reflect ongoing challenges highlighted in previous responses, such as exclusion from training opportunities, gender biases in leadership expectations, and physical barriers in equipment and facilities.

The presence of a small percentage (3%) of respondents rating their teams as a 2 or 1 indicates that some SAR environments still lack full inclusivity, though these cases appear to be limited.

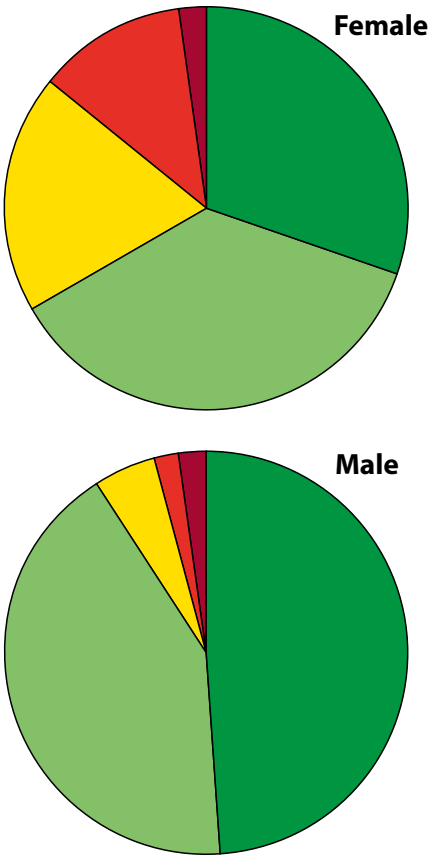## 4.3 Dynamics and teamwork between male and female members

How would you rate the communication and teamwork dynamics between male and female members in your SAR team?

Female

Male

Score	Responses	All	Female	Male
5	62	44%	31%	64%
4	58	41%	49%	29%
3	16	11%	15%	5%
2	4	3%	4%	2%
1	1	1%	1%	0%

To what extent to you feel comfortable voicing concerns or feedback?

Female

Male

Comfort	Responses	All	Female	Male
Very comfortable	54	39%	30%	49%
Comfortable	53	38%	36%	42%
Neither nor	19	14%	19%	5%
Uncomfortable	11	8%	12%	2%
Very uncomfortable	3	2%	2%	2%

The overall perception of communication and teamwork dynamics between male and female members in SAR teams is largely positive, with 85% of all respondents rating it as 4 or 5 on a scale 1-5. However, there are notable gender differences in how these dynamics are experienced.

While 64% of men rated communication and teamwork as excellent (5), only 31% of women felt the same. Conversely, 49% of women rated it as a 4, compared to 29% of men, suggesting that while many women have positive experiences, fewer feel that communication and teamwork are truly seamless. A higher percentage of women (20%) rated teamwork at neutral or negative (3 or below), compared to only 7% of men.

The majority of SAR personnel feel comfortable voicing concerns or feedback, with 77% rating their comfort level as either "very comfortable" (39%) or "comfortable" (38%). However, there is a gender disparity in how freely individuals feel they can speak up. While 49% of men feel "very comfortable," only 30% of women reported the same. Women were also more likely to express neutrality (19% vs. 5%) or discomfort (14% vs. 4%) when raising concerns within their teams.

The open responses suggest that while some women feel comfortable speaking up, they do not always feel heard or that their concerns lead to action. Several respondents noted that feedback is sometimes ignored, dismissed, or even met with resistance. Some described a culture where women who voice concerns risk being labelled "emotional," "sensitive," or "a Karen," making it harder to engage in open dialogue without fear of backlash. Others reported needing to bring an ally to difficult meetings to avoid being dismissed or excluded.

One response highlighted the additional challenge of being the only woman in a male-dominated team, making it feel like "my word against everyone else." Another noted that while progress is being made, bullying and ostracization for speaking out remain issues.

These results indicate that while teamwork between genders is generally strong, women experience more challenges in collaboration compared to their male colleagues. In contrast, one male respondent mentioned feeling that there is now a culture of "beating up on men," suggesting that efforts toward inclusivity may also be creating tensions that need to be managed thoughtfully.

5. Support and Networking

How often do you interact with other women in SAR outside of your immediate team?
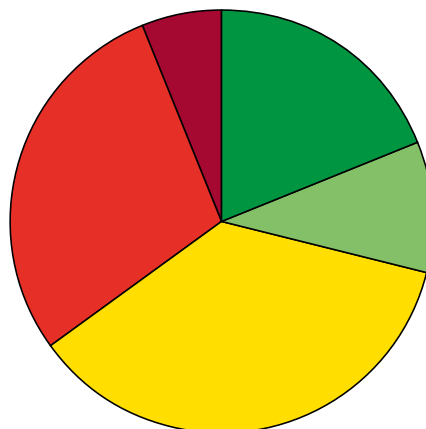
Often	19%
Usually	10%
Sometimes	36%
Rarely	29%
Never	6%

The female respondents were asked how often they interact with other women in SAR outside their immediate team. Most women in SAR have limited interaction with other women outside their immediate teams, with roughly one third interacting "rarely" or "never". Another one third report interacting with other women "often" or "usually." The largest group, 36%, interact "sometimes," indicating that while connections exist, they are not consistently strong across the sector.

These findings suggest that women in SAR may often find themselves working in male-dominated environments with few opportunities to engage with female peers. The lack of frequent interaction could contribute to challenges such as limited mentorship opportunities and a weaker sense of community among women in SAR. Strengthening networks, mentorship programs, and platforms for women to connect across teams and organisations could help foster a more supportive environment and encourage knowledge sharing.

The responses indicate that formal support networks for women in SAR are limited and inconsistent across different regions. While some areas have social media groups, informal mentorship, and occasional conferences or events, many respondents stated that no specific networks exist in their region, or they are unaware of any.

Several respondents mentioned social media groups such as Facebook groups for women in SAR. Others referenced one-time or new initiatives, such as Women in SAR events, regional mentorship programmes, and national campaigns aimed at increasing female participation in leadership. However, some respondents were unsure whether these networks were still active or effective. A few respondents noted international and external initiatives, such as IMRF's Women in SAR programme, Sea Light Sisters (for women in the marine industry), and regional training programmes.

In some regions, SAR organisations provide equal access to general support systems for all members, regardless of gender. Some respondents believe that separate networks for women are unnecessary, arguing that true inclusion means integrating support systems rather than creating gender-specific ones.

Others, however, pointed out that women still face unique challenges in SAR and would benefit from dedicated mentorship, training, and leadership support.

A common theme among respondents was a lack of awareness about existing support networks. Even in organisations that have women-focused initiatives, many respondents were unaware of them or did not know how to access them. This highlights the need for better communication and promotion of available resources.

6. Leadership

6.1 Top qualities for SAR leaders

The responses overwhelmingly highlight communication as the most crucial quality for SAR leaders, with teamwork, empathy, decision-making, adaptability, and experience also frequently mentioned.

Communication is considered essential for building trust, ensuring clear instructions in high-pressure situations, and fostering a supportive team environment.

Many emphasised the need for leaders to be good listeners, open to feedback, and able to motivate their teams through effective communication.

Teamwork and collaboration were also widely cited, with respondents stressing that a great leader knows their team, values different perspectives, and leads by example. Some highlighted the importance of mentorship, conflict resolution, and the ability to bring out the best in their crew.

Empathy and emotional intelligence were identified as key traits, with many emphasising that SAR leaders must understand and support their team members, remain approachable, and respect diverse skills and backgrounds. Several responses noted that a leader who values people and prioritises crew well-being fosters a stronger, more united team.

Decision-making and adaptability under pressure were also seen as critical, with leaders needing to be calm in crises, think strategically, and make quick, informed choices in dynamic environments. Several respondents mentioned the need for leaders to balance operational focus with people management, ensuring both efficiency and team morale.

Experience and technical knowledge were frequently mentioned, as respondents believe that leaders must have a deep understanding of SAR operations, maritime skills, and situational awareness. However, many emphasised that knowledge alone is not enough – leaders must also be approachable, willing to learn, and open to feedback.

Other qualities such as integrity, resilience, patience, and humility were also mentioned, reinforcing the idea that strong SAR leaders are those who earn respect through their actions, support their team, and remain focused on both the mission and the people they lead.
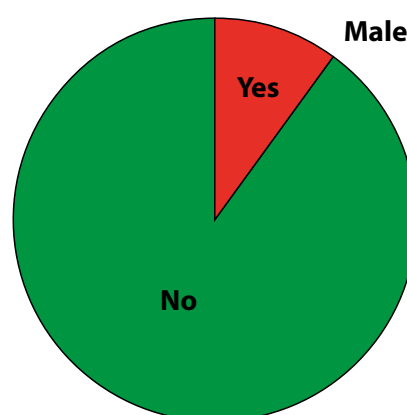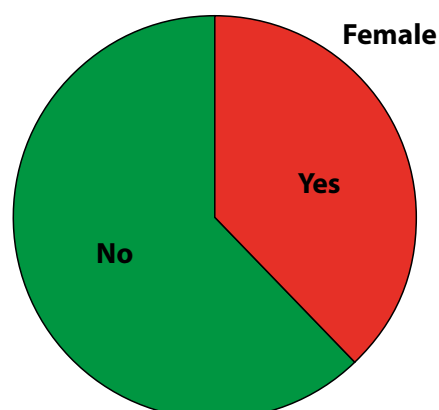
6.2 Women in leadership roles

Do you see enough women in leadership roles within your SAR team or organisation?
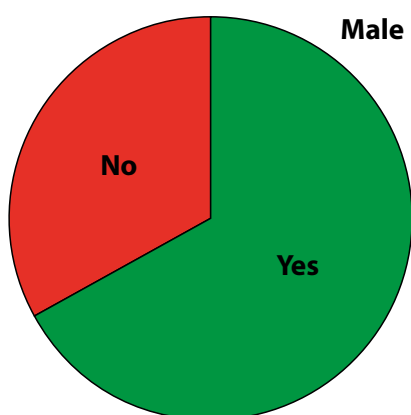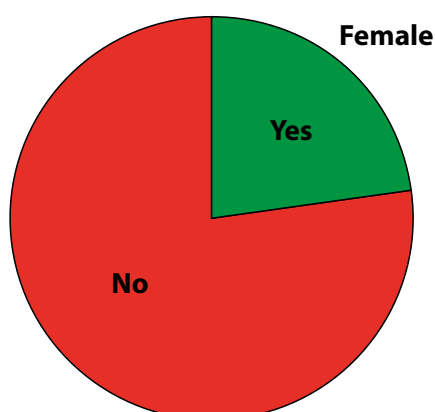
Female

Male

	Responses	All	Female	Male
Yes	55	41%	23%	67%
No	78	59%	77%	33%

Have you encountered any gender-related barriers when pursuing leadership opportunities within SAR?

Female

Male

	Responses	All	Female	Male
Yes	34	26%	38%	10%
No	96	74%	62%	90%

The majority of respondents (59%) believe there are not enough women in leadership roles within their SAR team or organisation. However, there is a significant gender divide in perception – while 67% of men feel that women are adequately represented in leadership, 77% of women disagree, indicating that they see a lack of female leadership opportunities in SAR.

This gap suggests that while male respondents may feel that progress has been made, women still experience barriers to advancement and do not see enough representation at higher levels. This aligns with earlier findings where women reported being overlooked for key roles, given fewer training opportunities, and having to work harder to prove their competence.

The responses to gender-related barriers in pursuing leadership opportunities indicate that while the majority of SAR personnel (74%) have not encountered gender-related barriers when pursuing leadership opportunities, 38% of women report having faced such challenges, compared to only 10% of men. This stark difference suggests that women experience more obstacles in advancing to leadership roles within SAR.

These findings align with the above data showing that women believe there are not enough women in leadership roles, while most men feel that female representation in leadership is sufficient. The contrast in perceptions underscores that while leadership opportunities may appear equally available in theory, women often face structural and cultural barriers that make progression more difficult in practice. Without specific support initiatives, SAR organisations risk perpetuating a leadership pipeline that remains male-dominated, despite growing female participation in operational roles.

6.3 Encouraging women to take on leadership roles

The responses suggest that mentorship, visibility, training opportunities, and cultural change are the key ways SAR organisations can encourage more women to take on leadership roles.

Mentorship and role models were among the most frequently mentioned solutions. Many respondents emphasised the importance of mentorship programmes that connect women with experienced female leaders to guide them through leadership pathways. Others stressed the need for women in leadership roles to be more visible, as "you can't be what you can't see." By showcasing successful female leaders, SAR organisations can help inspire and motivate more women to pursue leadership positions.

Training and targeted leadership development were also widely suggested. Respondents called for more leadership courses tailored to women, increased training opportunities, and clearer pathways to leadership roles. Some suggested actively seeking out and encouraging women to apply for leadership roles, as many may not step forward due to a lack of confidence or awareness of available opportunities.

Cultural and structural changes were seen as essential to breaking down barriers. Some respondents pointed out that male-dominated decision-making structures still limit women's progression in SAR. They suggested that SAR organisations should actively address gender biases, remove gatekeepers who hinder progress, and ensure that leadership selections are based on merit rather than tradition. Others highlighted the need for work-life balance adjustments, particularly for women balancing SAR leadership with family responsibilities.

Some respondents opposed the idea of gender-specific initiatives, arguing that SAR organisations should ensure equal opportunities for all, without enforcing quotas or special treatment. However, even among those who opposed targeted leadership programmes, many acknowledged that women often face additional challenges in SAR leadership.

7. Dynamics of the Situation
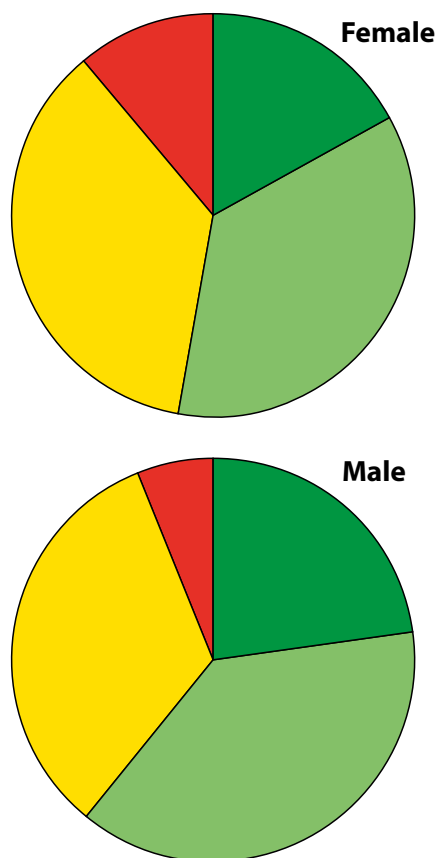
7.1 Progress in the past four years

Do you think progress have been made over the past four years to increase the representation of women in the maritime SAR sector?
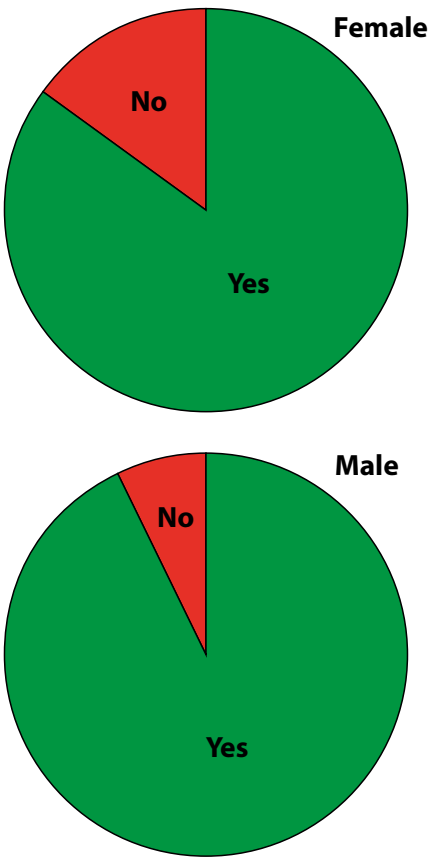
	Responses	All	Female	Male
Yes	105	88%	85%	93%
No	14	12%	15%	7%

To what extent do you believe the SAR field has become more inclusive of women in recent years?
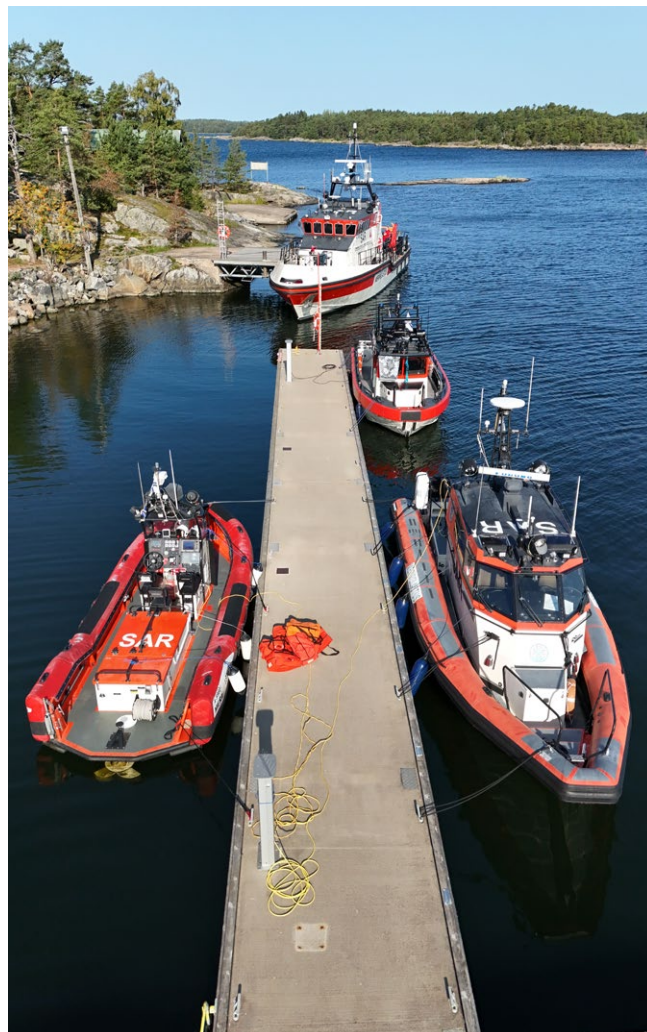

Female

Male

Extent	Responses	All	Female	Male
A great deal	24	20%	17%	23%
A lot	45	37%	36%	38%
A moderate amount	42	34%	36%	33%
A little	11	9%	11%	6%
Not at all	0	0%	0%	0%

The vast majority of SAR personnel (88%) believe that progress has been made in increasing the representation of women in the maritime SAR sector over the past four years. While both men (93%) and women (85%) largely agree on this progress, a slightly higher percentage of women (15%) feel that not enough has changed, compared to 7% of men.

Similarly, the majority of SAR personnel believe that the field has become more inclusive of women in recent years, with 91% rating progress as at least "a moderate amount" or higher. No respondents stated that the SAR field has become "not at all" more inclusive, which reinforces that positive changes have been recognised by all.

The comments suggest that while positive strides have been made, progress remains inconsistent and localised. Some respondents were unsure about the extent of change, while others noted that improvements have been patchy, with start-stop initiatives rather than sustained momentum. One respondent stated that no significant progress had been made locally, reinforcing the idea that advancements are not yet universal across all SAR organisations.

However, there are clear indicators of positive change. Several respondents highlighted the increase in women in leadership roles, the growing use of female representation in promotional materials, and the broader visibility of women in SAR. One respondent pointed out that simply having more women in the system has encouraged others to join, demonstrating that representation itself plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining female SAR personnel.

Others emphasised the grassroots nature of this progress, with many improvements occurring at a station or team level. Some teams have taken specific actions to increase diversity, with success stories including stations proactively encouraging female participation and female coxswains leading by example. One respondent noted that in their area alone, the number of women in SAR has tripled in just over five years.

How would you rate the progress that have been made?

Female

Male
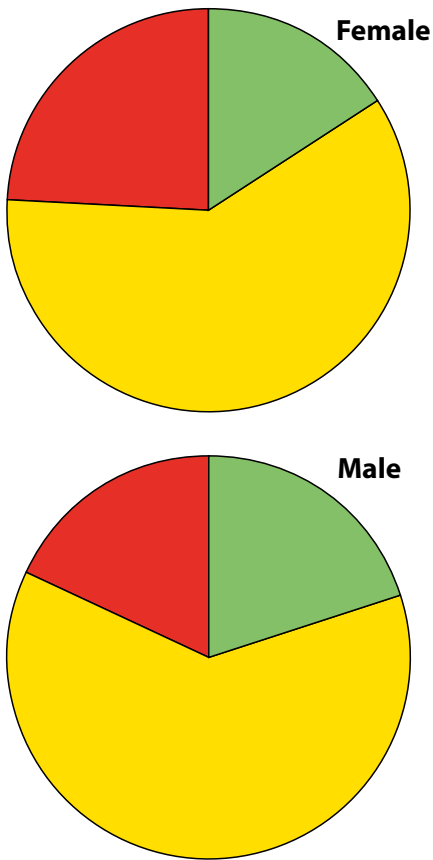
The majority of SAR personnel (61%) believe that progress in increasing women's representation has met expectations. However, 22% feel that progress has been below expectations, while 17% believe it has exceeded expectations. The responses were relatively similar across genders, though men were slightly more likely (20%) than women (16%) to feel that progress had exceeded expectations. Conversely, 24% of women felt that progress had fallen below expectations, compared to 18% of men.

The comments suggest that, at least for some, expectations for progress were not particularly high to begin with, with some respondents stating that they never anticipated rapid or transformative change. Several acknowledged that while more women are joining SAR, retaining them and ensuring they are treated equally remains a challenge. Others pointed out that efforts have been more visible in communication and social media than in concrete changes within SAR organisations.

Some respondents noted regional differences in progress, stating that not enough publicity or priority is being placed on gender diversity in certain areas. Others remained unsure about the extent of progress or felt that while things are moving in the right direction, much more still needs to be done.

Progress	Responses	All	Female	Male
Exceeded expectations	20	17%	16%	20%
Met expectations	71	61%	60%	62%
Below expectations	25	22%	24%	18%

7.2 Improvements in local teams or organisation

The responses indicate that progress toward gender inclusivity in SAR varies significantly across different organisations and regions. While some teams have made notable improvements, others report little to no change, or only symbolic efforts without real impact. Key improvements include the following:

- **Increased female participation:** Many respondents noted that more women are joining SAR teams than in previous years. Some reported a rise in the percentage of women in their units, with some stations going from zero female members to a significant presence in leadership and operational roles.

- **More women in leadership positions:** Several teams have appointed female station commanders, coxswains, or senior crew members, helping to normalise women in leadership roles.

- **Better representation in media and recruitment campaigns:** Respondents observed greater visibility of women in SAR promotional materials and recruitment efforts, helping to encourage new female recruits.

- **Gender-inclusive policies and facilities:** Some organisations have implemented structural changes to accommodate women better, such as: 1) Updated PPE and uniforms (for instance replacing coveralls with two-piece gear for easier restroom access); 2) Sanitary bins and proper changing facilities; 3) Considering height and physical differences when designing equipment; 4) Adjustments to fitness testing to account for menstruation.

- **Shifting attitudes and increased awareness:** Many respondents reported that discrimination and bias are now openly discussed, with diversity and inclusion becoming more widely recognised as necessary for strong SAR teams.

- **Training and awareness initiatives:** Some organisations have introduced diversity and inclusivity training, mentorship programmes, conferences and networking events, or policy changes discouraging discriminatory behaviour.

Areas still requiring attention include:

- **Lack of lasting impact:** Some respondents noted that while gender inclusivity is discussed more openly, real change has been slow. Others felt that some efforts were merely performative ("seen to be making an effort") rather than producing real outcomes.

- **Resistance from traditional structures:** Some respondents noted that male-dominated decision-making still limits female progression. One respondent expressed frustration that women in leadership are held to higher standards than men: assertive men are seen as decisive, while assertive women are labelled "emotional."

- **Inconsistent application across regions:** Some teams embrace gender inclusivity, while others remain male-dominated with little change in attitude or policy. One respondent noted that their station is inclusive, but when visiting other bases, they did not feel welcomed or respected.

- **Retention challenges:** A few respondents reported that while more women are joining SAR, fewer are staying long-term, indicating potential issues with work culture, inclusivity, or career progression opportunities.

7.3 Reaching a more supportive environment

The responses suggest that practical accommodations, cultural shifts, and targeted recruitment efforts are needed to make SAR a more inclusive and supportive environment for women. While many respondents believe women should be treated as equals without lowering standards, others highlight existing barriers that disproportionately impact female recruitment and retention.

A recurring theme is the need for greater inclusion and equal treatment. Many respondents expressed a desire for women to be treated as equals rather than being singled out, with some stating that they do not see themselves as "women in SAR" but simply as SAR professionals. Others emphasised that women should not have to fight for the same opportunities, respect, and training access as their male counterparts.

Many respondents emphasised that "you can't be what you can't see" and called for more publicity showcasing women in SAR. Targeted recruitment campaigns designed by women for women were suggested to help attract new female recruits and break down the perception of SAR as a male-dominated field. Some suggested female-focused outreach events, including school visits and partnerships with programmes like "Girls Can Fly Too" to inspire the next generation. A few respondents noted that SAR teams need to highlight the full range of roles available, rather than focusing only on the physically demanding "action" aspects of SAR.

Mentorship, confidence-building, and training in assertive communication were also suggested as ways to support women in SAR roles. Some noted that a more inclusive culture would not only benefit women but strengthen SAR teams overall, as diverse teams are proven to perform better.

Several respondents suggested increasing the number of female trainers and assessors to create more role models for aspiring female SAR members. Many highlighted the importance of mentorship programmes and leadership training specifically for women to boost confidence and encourage them to take on senior roles.

Some respondents noted that women's retention and advancement would improve if they were actively encouraged to step into leadership roles and given structured career progression pathways.

A common theme was that women with families often struggle to stay in SAR, particularly with long shifts and on-call duties. Respondents suggested greater flexibility in shifts, shorter assignments, and support for returning after maternity leave. Some suggested on-call childcare or family-friendly station environments to help single parents or caregivers stay engaged in SAR. Better integration of work-life balance policies for both men and women, including recognition of paternity leave and caregiving roles, was recommended to create a more equitable environment overall.

Many respondents highlighted that basic infrastructure needs to be improved to support women in SAR. Suggestions included: 1) Better PPE and uniforms designed for women; 2) Dedicated changing facilities; 3) Access to sanitary products at stations and on boats; 4) Toilets on rescue boats to make operations more comfortable for all crew members.

A cultural shift in attitudes was also highlighted, particularly regarding older male perspectives and deeply embedded biases. Some respondents mentioned that "old boys' networks" and male-dominated leadership structures continue to pose challenges, with women needing to constantly prove themselves. Others noted that gender-based assumptions—such as doubting a woman's ability to handle physical tasks—need to change.

Some respondents highlighted that women often leave SAR after a few years, either due to family commitments or a lack of advancement opportunities. Suggested solutions included: 1) Ongoing professional development opportunities; 2) Formalised policies to help women return after career breaks; 3) A stronger sense of inclusion at all levels, ensuring women are fully integrated into station culture rather than treated as outsiders.

Several respondents emphasised the importance of strong leadership in shaping SAR culture. They called for zero tolerance toward discrimination, stronger accountability measures, and leadership actively enforcing inclusivity rather than leaving the burden of change solely on women. Others stressed that men in SAR should also advocate for gender inclusivity, rather than relying on women to push for change.

While many respondents supported proactive recruitment and policy changes, others opposed the idea of gender-based hiring quotas and emphasised that all SAR members must be equally capable of performing the job. Some warned against "lowering the bar" for recruitment, arguing that SAR teams should be built on skill and capability, not gender representation alone. A balanced approach – increasing recruitment efforts while maintaining high standards – was seen as the most effective way forward.

While some respondents feel that cultural changes are already happening, others believe that progress is slow and that deeper, more meaningful changes are still needed—not just within SAR teams but also in society's perception of women in SAR. One respondent pointed out that even when women are included in promotional material, public comments still default to praising "brave men," demonstrating how cultural change needs to happen both internally and externally.

8. Summary Of Findings

The survey provides a clear look at the experiences, challenges, and progress of women in search and rescue. While there has been notable improvement in gender inclusivity across some SAR organisations, barriers still exist that hinder recruitment, retention, and advancement of women in the field. The findings highlight both structural and cultural challenges, as well as opportunities for change that could help create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

8.1 Overall experience

The majority of women in SAR reported positive experiences:

- 80% described their experience as either "very positive" or "positive."

- 64% felt "very" or "extremely" valued by their male colleagues.

- 81% felt their contributions were appreciated by their local communities.

However, open-ended responses revealed that experiences vary significantly depending on the station, leadership, and local culture. While some women feel fully supported and integrated into their teams, others experience exclusion, bias, or the need to "prove themselves" more than their male colleagues.

8.2 Challenges faced by women in SAR

Women in SAR reported several key challenges, including:

- Equipment and physical expectations: 48% struggled with ill-fitting gear and equipment, and 27% faced challenges related to physical requirements. Many noted that SAR equipment is often designed for men, creating unnecessary barriers.

- Lack of mentorship and leadership barriers: 35% identified a lack of mentorship as a challenge, and 38% said they had faced barriers in leadership advancement.

- Cultural barriers: 16% cited cultural resistance as a challenge, particularly in traditionally male-dominated teams. Women in leadership roles were often held to higher standards than their male counterparts and faced more scrutiny.

- Work-life balance: 25% reported difficulties balancing SAR commitments with personal or family responsibilities. Many respondents noted that maternity leave, caregiving responsibilities, and unpredictable SAR schedules can make it harder for women to stay engaged long-term.

8.3 Training

While 84% of all respondents felt that training opportunities were equally accessible to men and women, 48% of women reported facing gender-specific challenges in training. Common issues included:

- Being underestimated, overcorrected, or needing to "overperform" to prove competence.

- Exclusion from leadership pathways due to unconscious bias in selection processes.

- Physical challenges in training (e.g., manual handling, casualty recovery) without proper alternative techniques being taught.

- Inadequate PPE and gender-specific facility limitations impacting participation in training.

- Need for increased representation of women as trainers and assessors.

8.4 Gender-based discrimination and inclusivity

- 54% of women reported witnessing or experiencing gender-based discrimination in SAR, compared to only 29% of male respondents.

- Only 23% of women felt that there were enough women in leadership roles, while 67% of men believed female leadership representation was sufficient.

- While some teams have made real progress in inclusivity, others still struggle with "old boys' club" mentalities that exclude or discourage women from leadership.

- Many noted that gender bias is more prevalent in older generations and external interactions (for instance with partner organisations or the public), rather than within their immediate SAR teams.

8.5 Progress over time

Encouragingly, 88% of all respondents agreed that progress has been made in the past four years to increase women's representation in SAR. Key improvements include:

- More women joining SAR teams and taking on leadership roles.

- Better representation of women in recruitment campaigns and media.

- Policy changes related to PPE, uniforms, and facilities.

- More open discussions on diversity and inclusion.

However, despite progress, only 17% of respondents felt that gender inclusivity efforts had exceeded expectations, with 22% saying progress was still below expectations. While many SAR organisations have taken steps toward inclusivity, progress is inconsistent across teams and regions.

To build a truly inclusive SAR environment, organisations need to move beyond conversation and take concrete action in recruitment, training, mentorship, leadership development, and policy changes. These efforts will not only benefit women in SAR but strengthen SAR teams overall by ensuring they are diverse, capable, and equipped for the future.

8.6 Comparison of findings

The findings from both surveys show continuity in certain key challenges while highlighting areas where progress has been made. Some of the issues in which progress has been made between the two surveys include:

- Gender discrimination appears to be more widely reported now than in the past survey (11% vs. 54%). This could reflect increased awareness and willingness to speak up rather than an actual increase in incidents.

- Issues with PPE and facilities persist, but some organisations have started addressing uniform and equipment design for women.

- Discussions about inclusivity have increased, but cultural resistance is still a barrier and implementation is inconsistent.

- The importance of mentorship is now widely recognised, but formal programs are still lacking in many SAR organisations.

8.7 Recommendations

The original survey report also made several recommendations for both SAR organisations and the IMRF. For the recommendations made to the IMRF, the responses can be found below.

Recommendation	Actions
It is recommended that the results of this survey should be shared with the IMO, in support of their own 'Women in Maritime' programme.	The IMRF has communicated the results to the IMO.
The IMRF should consider further research into what their SAR organisation members do to recruit and, especially, to retain staff - including female staff.	The current survey and this report in part answer this recommendation.
As usual the IMRF should share reported experience and good practice among its members and with the wider SAR community.	This is at the core of what the IMRF is doing. The good practices have been shared in several WomenInSAR workshops, trainings and seminars, as well as through the mentoring scheme and posts and podcasts at IMRF website.
The IMRF should seek to establish a mentoring scheme for women in maritime SAR.	The IMRF is running a WomenInSAR Mentoring Scheme. More details can be found at: https://www.international-maritime-rescue.org/Pages/News/Site/womeninsar-all/Category/imrf-womeninsar-mentoring-scheme-home
The IMRF should develop resources to assist SAR organisations to improve the recruitment and retention of women, both as volunteers and paid personnel.	Resources now available include the IMRF WomenInSAR guidance, as well as the EDI Workshop format that the IMRF has developed.

While the IMRF itself does not control PPE provision, recruitment efforts, or local station cultures, it plays a crucial role in fostering knowledge-sharing, best practices, advocacy, and network-building among SAR organisations worldwide. Based on the survey findings and to address some of the challenges presented in this report, in the next few years the IMRF could:

- Expand the IMRF Women in SAR Network by facilitating regional networking groups to connect female SAR professionals across different countries.

- Encourage female instructors, assessors, and trainers by providing training-of-trainers opportunities to increase the number of women in instructional roles.

- Encourage the inclusion of women in IMRF training events, conferences, and expert panels, ensuring that women's voices are represented in SAR policy discussions.

- Host training sessions, webinars, and/or online learning modules on building inclusive SAR teams and tackling unconscious bias

- Use IMRF's international platform to advocate for gender diversity in SAR by sharing success stories and highlighting organizations leading the way in inclusivity.

- Support regional workshops and conferences focused on women in SAR, allowing SAR professionals to discuss shared challenges and solutions.

9. Conclusion

What has improved:

- Increased visibility of women in SAR.

- Greater awareness of unconscious bias.

- More leadership and training discussions focused on women.

- Some progress in PPE and uniform adjustments.

- Growing recognition of the need for mentorship and leadership pathways.

What remains a challenge:

- Sexism and cultural resistance are still present.

- Bias in leadership selection and training opportunities.

- Retention of women remains an issue, particularly around work-life balance.

- PPE and facility limitations are still widely reported.

- Formalised mentorship and career progression pathways remain weak.

The conversation has shifted toward breaking down structural barriers rather than just addressing overt sexism, but true equality in SAR remains a work in progress. The IMRF has a unique opportunity to lead the conversation on gender inclusivity in SAR, support member organisations in adopting best practices, and ensure that inclusivity remains a priority in the international SAR community. At the same time, IMRF member organisations have a responsibility to implement meaningful change locally, ensuring that women are recruited, retained, and given equal opportunities for leadership and advancement.

By working together, the IMRF and its member organisations can create a more inclusive and supportive SAR environment that benefits not only women but all SAR personnel, ultimately strengthening rescue operations worldwide.

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