



The Inverness Oran (NS)

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Women at the Strait Area NSCC are captaining change in marine workforce

Beverley Phillips

Less than two per cent of seafarers are women, and Theresa Laaroussi wants to change that.

Laaroussi teaches technical writing to the marine engineering students attending the Nautical Institute at the Strait Area Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC), and she is the lead of the A'paqt Project. It's a program sponsored by Transport Canada, and they want to see a more diverse makeup of the seafaring workforce. For short-term courses, they will cover 90 per cent of tuition, while for longer core programs, they will cover 100 per cent of tuition and provide a daily allowance for women and Indigenous students "Our tagline," Laaroussi said, "is we're going to pay you to go to school and you're going to go to school for free. There is no better opportunity. It's unreal."

The marine training programs have gone from having hardly any female students just five years ago to being over 40 per cent female in both the engineering and navigation programs.

Laaroussi said women still face discrimination, and it is a challenge, but she

tells her students, "Don't be afraid to be in a space that women traditionally weren't. Now is the time. If not now, when?" There has been progress over the years and getting more women into the industry will continue to change the culture.

"It's really exciting. I'm so proud of our students, and I love being part of the change," she continued.

Her advocacy for women can be traced back to when she was a young girl in the late 1980s. Her mother went back to school to study information technology (IT), and it inspired her to see how hard her mother worked in the male-dominated industry.

Later on, one of her professors, Professor Benita Bunjun, explained to her that feminism is for everyone, including men, marginalized people, and people of colour. "It opened my eyes as a young person," said Laaroussi. "Yes, maybe we are all women, but what if you are a woman and you are of Mi'kmaw descent, or a Black woman? It made me realize, 'wow, we need to work together in this world we live in. 993 And as she has gotten involved in the marine industry, she has come to know Cindy Brown, a

Cora Kehoe of Port Hawkesbury is a fourth year student and is practicing her navigation skills on the state-of-the-art training modules at the Strait Area NSCC. She has enjoyed her time in the Marine Training Program, and this summer she will be an officer working on the Great Lakes.

master mariner. Laaroussi said, "She's a very strong woman in the industry, and there aren't a lot of women in her position at this time. She has proven that women belong at sea."

To young women looking for a path, she gave this advice: "Don't be afraid to take the first step and see if it's something you enjoy. There are courses as little as three or four days to let you get a taste of it. But having a strong will and determination is key in this industry. The women I have spoken to have said they have to work twice as hard to prove themselves, but I think this attitude is still everywhere. So don't be afraid. Go for it, if it is what interests you. The careers at sea are amazing. You work six months of the year, get great salaries, and have great opportunities. Our graduates are in such demand. There are so few graduates from these types of programs, and then if you are female, you are more likely to get a job because

companies are looking to diversify.”

For more information on the programs and support offered at the Nautical Institute of the NSCC’s Strait Area Campus visit:www.nsc.ca/campuses/nautical-institute.

Figure:

Olivia Ferguson from Musquodoboit Harbour has sailed for many years on tall ships, fishing, boats, and research vessels. She has travelled to the Arctic and the Hudson Bay, and she came to the NSCC because she thought she should turn her passion into a career. “It’s not easy,” she said, “but someone needs to pave the way.”

Theresa Laaroussi would be more than happy to talk about their Marine Training Program, the A’paqt Project, to anyone looking to learn more about it or what a career at sea is like.

For Lucy Woodill of Antigonish, studying at the NSCC is a career move. She had been in real estate and the restaurant industry, but she didn't feel like she was getting ahead. Someone thought this would be a good fit, and it has been. She has been working as an officer since 2022.