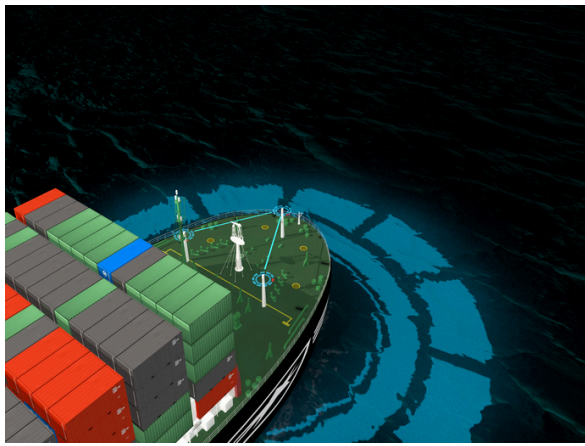


# Not unmanned, but uncrewed

Research into the legal and policy implications of autonomous vessels in international shipping has stumbled on an issue related not to law or security, but gender.



SOCIETY



© videotrinkets, Shutterstock

Autonomous vessels are set to shake up the shipping and maritime security industry. However, as we plunge into the new waters of autonomous shipping, how many of us can say precisely what autonomous means? The fact is, ships without crews can only be called autonomous if their operating systems can make decisions and act on their own. In that case, when referring to degrees of autonomy, what do we call vessels without crews that are remotely controlled?


This is an issue that came to light in recent research supported by the EU-funded STRAITSECURITY project. While analysing the various legal and policy implications of autonomous vessels in international shipping, the research team found another problem, this time related to gender bias. In most of the literature studied – academic, governmental and other – remotely controlled vessels are referred to using the gender-biased term unmanned. As noted in an [article](#) written by Dr Adam Fenton and Dr Ioannis Chapsos of STRAITSECURITY project coordinator Coventry University, the United Kingdom, the term “is entrenched into a number of frequently used acronyms and abbreviations.” Examples cited include “UMV ‘Unmanned Maritime Vehicles’ and the U.S. Navy’s multiple projects in this area for Large Unmanned Surface Vehicles, Medium Unmanned Surface Vehicles and Extra-Large Unmanned Undersea Vehicles.”

## Gender-neutral alternatives

So what is the alternative? The article’s authors support the use of gender-neutral terms such as uncrewed and crewless instead of the gender-biased unmanned in media, academic, government or NGO publications. Such use would be “in line with the UN Sustainable Development goal number 5 for Gender Equality” and would

“recognize the contributions and achievements of non-men in this historically male-dominated sector.”

After all, social stereotypes that only men can work on ships do not reflect today’s reality. The article provides examples: “In the U.S. Navy, women represent 19% of officers and 20% of enlisted personnel and they serve in every rank from seaman to admiral and in every job from naval aviator to deep-sea diver. In a similar vein, in 2019 women were approximately 10% of the Royal Navy’s workforce, and in that year, the Royal Navy was named as one of the UK’s top employers for women.”

One reason why gender-biased terms continue to be used with regard to shipping is that they are found in legal instruments such as the [‘United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea’, or UNCLOS](#) . Therefore, where this document is concerned, the authors suggest that the long-standing debate on the need to update outdated definitions and technologies provided in UNCLOS should be broadened to include discussions on updating its gendered terminology. “And while gender biased terminology like this in international law ought to be amended, until it actually happens, it should not create an obstacle to others to update terminology in their discussions, commentaries and reports,” the authors conclude.

Launched in 2022, STRAITSECURITY (Hybrid threats to Indonesia’s Maritime Security: an assessment of cyber and cyber-physical vulnerabilities in the world’s busiest shipping lanes) is exploring policy and legal challenges in the maritime sector arising from the rapid spread of technology as well as growing threats to cybersecurity. The project ends in 2024.

For more information, please see:  
[STRAITSECURITY project](#) 

## Keywords

STRAITSECURITY, gender, autonomous vessel, shipping, ship, vessel, unmanned, uncrewed, gender bias

## Related projects

# HORIZON 2020

PROJECT

## Hybrid threats to Indonesia's Maritime Security: an assessment of cyber and cyber-physical vulnerabilities in the world's busiest shipping lanes

STRAITSECURITY

29 July 2024

## Related articles



SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

### Putting the zero back into waterborne transport emissions



1 March 2022



SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

### Major step towards sustainable and efficient ship construction



25 August 2020



SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

## How a fully autonomous system can help improve fire safety on cargo ships



7 August 2020



## Towards unmanned cargo vessels for more sustainable maritime transport



25 April 2017



## Robot-assisted ship inspections sail towards certification



22 November 2021

**Last update:** 23 September 2022

**Permalink:** <https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/442165-not-unmanned-but-uncrewed>

European Union, 2025