

A full-length portrait of Birgit Liodden, a woman with brown hair pulled back, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a sleeveless, knee-length dress with a black and white geometric pattern and a thin black belt. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is a solid orange color.

# **I want to inspire young women to pursue careers in the maritime sector”**

— *Birgit Liodden*

Birgit Marie Liodden is always on her toes. An energy-exuding workaholic supermom who has been on the go ever since she was sixteen, Liodden recalls how, when she first became a parent, she took along her infants to negotiations, board meetings and trips around the world.

Liodden is best known as the driving force behind YoungShip. However, her background also includes Wilh. Wilhelmsen, consultancy for the OECD and Sea Trucks (Nigeria) and much more. She is a board member of the Norwegian Sea Rescue Academy, Ocean Industry Forum (Oslo region), and of WISTA Norway. She also chairs two commercial real estate companies.

Liodden has certainly made her mark as a passionate shipping environmentalist and business activist. She challenges the maritime industry on a regular basis, on issues related to leadership, diversity, sustainable development, entrepreneurship and innovation. She received the WISTA Leadership Award in 2012 for her work to promote shipping and female role models. She frequently contributes as a speaker and panellist, both within and outside the maritime industry, and has served as a jury member for several international maritime awards.

As Director of Nor-Shipping, Liodden is not a newcomer, having played an important role in 2011 when she headed up the recruitment initiative Nor-Shipping campus (renamed Ocean Talent Camp in 2013).

Needless to say, Birgit Liodden is a tremendously busy woman. But **Nishit Doshi** and **Nandita Mahajan** of Maritime Matrix Today managed to catch Liodden for a quick chat, in her first ever cover story in an international magazine based in India.

### **Tell us about Nor-Shipping.**

The leading maritime event week, Nor-Shipping brings together 35,000 delegates and 1000 exhibitors from 80 countries biannually in Oslo, Norway. Spanning across the entire maritime value chain, this is the arena to explore the future of our industry alongside leading ship owners and key global executives. It also features arenas for the next generation. Our conferences are a benchmark for the industry, and they are attended by thought leaders and key commercial players. Nor-Shipping is, without doubt, one of the industry's biggest and most influential global events.

### **Where do you see NOR-Shipping headed in the next five to ten years?**

The topic of 2017 is "Catalyst for Change", representing our key drive to support the industry to tackle huge ongoing changes. As long as I have the board's trust and some good contributions to make, I plan to stay in this position. We have an extremely strong team so I am not in any way irreplaceable, which is a good thing for a leader.

Taking the helm at Nor-Shipping, I knew I had to link its strategic focus to my core values and what I believe is important for the industry. This was something I needed to motivate myself and enable this amazing maritime week to fulfil its tremendous potential.

Prior to taking on the role of Director, I was on the advisory board, so I've worked in several roles connected to Nor-Shipping, developing some of the concepts already introduced in the previous years.

The maritime industry needs to be prepared to think outside the box and adapt cross-industry collaborations. It needs bold leaders, and our ambition is to facilitate this on a global scale. We have an entrepreneurial mindset and ability to form and nurture cross-collaborative bands







both within and outside our industry — this is what makes us different from other arenas. But we never stand still; we are always reinventing ourselves.

**Women are scarce in the shipping industry. Do you have any advice for your fellow women in the field?**

Work hard, and don't be afraid to voice your views and opinions. Don't make a big deal out of the gender issue; just prove yourself as a professional resource. The great thing about being both female and young in a male-dominated industry is that it's easier to stand out from the crowd, even though you may have to go through extra lengths to prove yourself before given chances.

Always, always make sure to be better than what people expect. Get mentors. Join WISTA and accept invitations to speak in front of people if you get the chance.

And make sure to find a guy who supports your career choices. Before starting a family, discuss how you will share your responsibilities. The wrong partner can be a real career killer.

**You are quite tech-savvy. Do you owe it to your generation or your liking for the digital world, or both? What makes you champion the cause of digitization?**

Well, my affinity for technology is definitely partly due to my generation, but we had almost no computer training until after I left school, so most of it has to do with how technology can make our lives easier.

I have always been interested in technology because I love anything new. For almost five years I worked with global Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) and process systems with the Wilhelmsen Group across

seventy-three countries, and I experienced how important technology is to all of us.

Maritime professionals would be wise to read, learn and use new digital technology as much as possible. Digital competence will be just as important to companies as financial, operational and legal competence is today. I recently took this interest quite far, as we decided to create the very first silo-breaking and cross-fertilizing collaboration arena for actors within technology, energy and ocean industries, as an accelerator project from Nor-Shipping.

**We've observed your keen interest in India-Norway ties, will it translate to Nor-Shipping?**

Yes! Indian and Norwegian authorities have a joint working group which aims to explore possible areas of cooperation, such as energy efficient ship design and building. They last met in India in 2016, and now our government has extended an invitation for the Indian government to visit during Nor-Shipping.

Major players from the Indian maritime community are involved and they are planning an Indian delegation to Nor-Shipping. We especially look forward to let them explore the many efficient and low-emission innovative short-sea vessels and ferries coming out of Norway, optimal for clean operations in the rapidly growing Indian coastal cities.

High profile Indian shipping luminaries are also expected to speak at Nor-Shipping.

**Would you like to enter politics — as a shipping minister, or anything else — if given the chance?**

I have great respect for politicians but I just wouldn't have the patience.

I left school and started working at age sixteen, and have a practical and entrepreneurial approach. Quite simply, I lack the political correctness. I'd be too direct and outspoken to thrive in politics.

There have been, in fact, several parties that have tried to get me into politics, but I prefer to cooperate with both Norwegian and international politicians from within the industry. I believe that business is the key engine and catalyst for creating the change we need in our world, and so I've decided to use my work efforts every day to try and make a positive impact.

It's amazing to see how much focus there is on developing a greener, cleaner and financially sustainable approach. That has been a huge change in only a few years; that really brings my business-activist hopes up for our shared future.

**Please talk about your involvement with the real estate companies.**

While I came from a family-business background,

I'd decided to pursue my own career without leaning on family networks; so for many years, I wasn't really involved with the real estate companies.

I had funded my own consultancy and was four years into that when my father suddenly passed away from cancer.





Within three months, I took over the family business, handled all legal and financial practicalities related to my father's death, and at the same time discovered that I was pregnant with my first child. Starting in 2012, we went through a solid clean-up journey in the real estate companies, which were in quite a mess due to the 80% contract losses within a year, market drops and a huge lag on renovations and critical projects. Luckily, we have managed to turn this around somewhat, and I have returned to taking on a more ordinary role as chairperson, with a 99% focus on my maritime commitments.

When my kids were younger I did what most women in small villages do — I took my kids to work with me. Negotiations, finance meetings, and board meetings with top executives and ship owners were all done with a baby in the room. My oldest son has met two US Senators when he was two months old!

**Please tell us about your respective associations with the Norwegian Sea Rescue Academy, Ocean Industry Forum, YoungShip and WISTA Norway. On what basis did you join these organizations and what are your goals for them?**

I volunteer professional work within maritime organizations. It's an opportunity to get involved and contribute to the industry, and I make sure to prioritize such work when asked.

The Norwegian Sea Rescue Academy links my dedication to competence with crew safety perspectives. The academy is owned by the Norwegian Sea Rescue Society, a unique organization which, through a mix of volunteers and professional crew, provides a substantial part of the SAR capacity in Norway.

As for YoungShip, I took this organization for young maritime professionals from a local Norwegian level to a global NGO. The key focus here was on the potential of the next generation, building bridges between generations and stimulating professional development. The Shipping Professional Network in Mumbai (SPNM), which branched out from London's SPNL, was inspired by the YoungShip initiative.

And with WISTA, I have been on board for five years now, since I won Shipping Personality of the Year 2012 in Norway. I want to inspire young women to pursue careers in the maritime sector, and to bring extraordinary female leaders into the spotlight. Here in Norway, I help coordinate the female mentorship program in shipping, which we started through a cooperation between WISTA and YoungShip.

**Does your busy schedule leave you any time for yourself and if so, how do you like to spend it?**

When I have a little bit of time I read or practise yoga. I also enjoy writing. When I travel for business I mostly travel alone, and that's also an excellent chance to enjoy some time to reflect and relax, as I'm completely disconnected for some hours.

**Please tell us a bit about your family.**

I have two sons aged two and four, who have practically grown up in business because I integrated work and kids extensively for some years. My older son Knut had fourteen countries on his passport at age fourteen months, and Erik was only two months old when I took him on a two-and-a-half-week round trip to UK, Cyprus, Abu Dhabi and Singapore. As a result, they're really easy-going and adaptive.

I have been blessed with a very modern partner who doesn't travel for work and who took almost five months' paternity leave when we had our first son. He definitely takes on a bigger role than I do at home. He's baked more birthday cakes than I have, while I am the one who changes light-bulbs and fixes the plumbing. It's an untraditional setup which works great for us!

**What's your wish list for 2017?**

Personally I wish for the family to stay healthy and happy. I also hope that the ongoing level of protectionism and far-right movements within Europe and the US change for the better, and that we can work towards a warmer, better and more sustainable society.

Professionally, I aim to deliver the best Nor-Shipping Week ever with the team!

MMT

## Favourites

- **Cuisine:** Lamb Korma.
- **Drink:** White wine and loads of café latte.
- **Travel Destination:** Our mountain cabin for recharging and solitude.
- **Author and Book:** Half of a Yellow Sun by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.
- **Car:** My brand new hydrogen car, a Toyota Mirai. Noiseless and with great acceleration, design and comfort.
- **Sport:** Sailing.
- **Music:** Anything with a good beat; I enjoy music from different cultures and styles.
- **Movies:** Italian and Bollywood. I always watch Indian movies on flights between work, and am a big fan of Salman Khan, Katrina Kaif, Hrithik Roshan and Kareena Kapoor. The new generation of Indian movies address so many relevant and important topics; challenging our norms, gender stereotype, prejudice and injustice.

