

Chivalry at sea a 'myth', Swedish study shows

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Mikeal Elinder and Oscar Erixon, economists at Uppsala University north of Stockholm, have studied 18 of the world's most famous maritime disasters since 1852 and found that men have nearly about

double the chance of surviving a ship wreck as women.

"There is this [popular culture](#) myth promoted through the Titanic film and others, where women and children are led to the lifeboats and the men stand back," Erixon told AFP Thursday.

But in reality, he said, "it really doesn't usually go well for women in ship wrecks".

Out of the 15,142 people onboard the 18 ships sailing under eight different national flags when they went down, only 17.8 percent of the women survived compared to 34.5 percent of the men, the two researchers explain in their 82-page study titled: "Every man for himself -- Gender, Norms and Survival in Maritime Disasters".

Case in point: when the Estonia passenger ferry headed from Tallinn to Stockholm suddenly sank in the middle of the icy [Baltic Sea](#) in 1994, 852 of the 989 people onboard perished, with only 5.4 percent of women surviving, compared to 22 percent for men.

"I was shocked when I saw the numbers from Estonia," Erixon said.

In fact, out of the 18 maritime disasters studied, Erixon and Elinder found that while the [survival rates](#) were about the same for men and women in some cases, women survived to a higher extent in just two cases.

The most famous maritime catastrophe of them all -- the Titanic -- is one of the exceptions to the rule: 70 percent of the women survived that tragedy compared to just a 20-percent survival rate for the men, according to the study.

The other exception was the 1852-wrecking of the British Birkenhead

off Danger Point outside Cape Town, South Africa, where all the women survived but only 33.5 percent of the men did.

"The Birkenhead is where the myth originated, this idea of women and children first," Erixon explained.

In both those cases, however, the captain had given orders to get women and children out first, and most significantly, in both cases, men onboard were threatened by armed crew members to keep them away from the lifeboats.

Erixon brushed aside the suggestion that more chivalry might be shown on British vessels, pointing out that overall "women have lower survival possibilities on British ships than ships of other nationalities".

"That fact sort of busts the myth about the British gentleman," he said.

The study, he said, shows that while there are a number of examples of people acting heroically in the face of catastrophe, in most cases the survival instinct kicks in and it is "every man for himself".

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