

# Tackle harassment head-on

Why urgent action is needed to change the culture of seafaring



BY REZA ZIARATI

Historically, there has been a lack of support for seafarers to address their needs to manage stress at sea and virtually no system in place when they face bullying or harassment at sea. That said, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has had some positive impact on the

IMO when it comes to considering seafarers' wellbeing.

In their latest attempt, the two bodies established a tripartite working group (JTWG) to identify and address seafarers' issues and the human element without clearly specifying key mental health issues or bullying and harassment at sea. They have mandated the group to establish guidelines for Port State

Control and flag States as to how to deal with seafarer abandonment cases and fair treatment of seafarers detained on suspicion, and develop recommendations and draft provisions in connection to these.

At Maritime Safety Committee 105, the ILO/IMO JTWG took the decision to consider sexual assault and harassment in the maritime sector, with a view to providing



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the Seafarer Crisis Action Team. A review of current developments at the IMO shows there is a great deal more to do when considering the challenges seafarers face at sea, which has been made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In several papers and reports, I have highlighted that stress and tiredness cause misery and accidents at sea and that the extent of bullying is greater than perceived by those working in the shipping industry. To improve the wellbeing of ships' crews – and hence also safety at sea – a project, PROMoting MENtal HEalth at Sea (PROMETHEAS), has been initiated by the Centre for Factories of the Future (C4FF) and its partners.

Seafarers who are bullied, harassed and/or suffer from fatigue or stresses are often deprived the opportunities of job satisfaction or career progress. I have studied the definition of mental health and concluded that every seafarer must be given the opportunity to work productively and fruitfully without any undue stress or fear of being belittled.

#### **Social isolation**

A series of videos produced by C4FF as part of the PROMETHEAS project proved that seafarers often work for very long hours, far from their relatives, while isolated, in a multicultural, highly hierarchical micro-society. Seafarers suffer from social isolation and are away from their family in some cases for several months, often having limited access to the internet to communicate with people ashore. Combined with the multinational nature of crews, this leads to a sense of loneliness.

Research has shown that seafarers represent one of the


most 'at-risk' employment groups for committing suicide, with perhaps the most obvious cause of drowning. Szymanska et al (2006, in Iverson, 2012) studied suicide trends among Polish seamen from 1969 to 1999. The researchers found that out of "324 total deaths there were 33 suicides – 10.2% of seafarer deaths, which was significantly higher than the incidence of suicides among the male Polish population over 20 years of age". Mental stress and bullying were noted to be two of the reasons for seafarers taking their own life.

The Australian National Centre Against Bullying defines bullying as "an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm".

It is widely known in the shipping industry that the captain's word is final. Kravets (2018) states: "On land, a manager refusing his employer's instructions could be fired. But on-board, the captain's word is law – even having more power than the ship's owner." Therefore, this offers potential of opportunity for bullying. There is a quote that reads: "One believes himself the master of others..." which refers to the captain of the ship. The same quotation concludes: "...who nevertheless is more a slave". This quote arguably sheds a distinctive light onto the division of power in the shipping industry.

Barlow and Iverson (2005, page 81, in Nielsen et al, 2013) suggests that "job satisfaction and intent to leave among employees is especially influenced by occupational stressors related to: safety, organisational leadership, characteristics of the job and the organisation", while Feijó et al (2019) found that "authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership styles were positively associated with bullying".

Further, the rise of multinational crews creates a language barrier, making it difficult to form a collective



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recommendations for future steps to address them and with the intention of changing the maritime culture regarding this. This is in addition to developing guidelines for the medical examination of fishing vessel personnel in the context of the intended revision of the STCW Convention to complement cooperation during the Covid-19 pandemic through



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group and become accustomed to each other's values and norms. This has shown to lead to cultural isolation and also affects the happiness and mental welfare of the crew.

### Support for seafarers

The best method of overcoming bullying in the workplace is through having a constructive and resilient management system. However, research has shown (Ziarati, 2022) that an independent system is needed to give a 'last port of call' for victims of bullying and harassment. One solution would be to access help through the central helpline such as SeafarerHelp, which is a great source of support for seafarers. It offers a free, confidential, multilingual helpline for seafarers and their families available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

The International Chamber of Shipping recently produced a report titled *Guidance on eliminating shipboard harassment and bullying*. The document provides advice for seafarers and their families on the definitions of harassment and bullying, and what to do if a seafarer feels they are experiencing either of those issues.

Meanwhile, the following is a shortened version of Bullard's (2019) advice for overcoming bullying, which could serve as a source of aspiration for the IMO:

- Set out clear policies and procedures for dealing with harassment and bullying and communicate these to everyone on-board;
- Organise awareness programmes, training sessions, campaigns, videos, conferences and other media on how to notice bullying and or harassment and report a complaint;
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality to encourage disclosure;



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- Establish clear job roles, expectations and responsibilities by applying fair and transparent processes for allocating tasks, job roles, etc;
- Educate everyone for early-warning signs, such as when a seafarer looks sad, lonely, scared, isolated, not motivated, low performance, complains of physical symptoms, avoids social interactions, etc;
- Encourage self-awareness, social awareness and conflict resolution and organise team-building sessions, inspirational leadership trainings and cultural diversity working groups by focusing on activities which promote social interactions on-board.

The PROMETHEAS interviews clearly demonstrated that no matter how sophisticated the process and procedures are for reporting bullying, most seafarers find it daunting to report cases of bullying or harassment, especially if the

bullying is carried out by a more senior member of crew.

Thus, the IMO has a long way to go to improve seafarers' mental wellbeing. Reviewing sexual harassment alone is not enough. What my research has shown is that there is a direct relationship between good practices, leadership, safety and mental wellbeing.

PROMETHEAS includes two studies, one on mental health, and the other on bullying and harassment, at sea. Examining the factors that directly impact mental health from physical, psychological and behavioural points of view has identified a whole range of causes and symptoms for consideration. There are both organisational and non-organisational factors and the project offers solutions for them. The emphasis is placed on relevant and practical solutions, but also on prevention and the support seafarers need to rise up to the challenges of facing up to bullying and harassment, and improving their mental wellbeing. ■

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Seafarers can be away from their families for several months, leading to a sense of loneliness