

Lives in Peril: seafarers health and safety at risk
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“Paraphrasing Winston Churchill’s words, one could say that “never before in the history of mankind have so many owed so much to so few”!” IMO¹



Seafaring remains among the most dangerous types of work. “Lives in Peril: profit or safety in the global maritime industry” is a recent publication by Walters and Bailey (2013), that gets to the core of occupational health and safety issues on board ships; from the risks to the remedies. It concludes that there is a need for political and administrative will to address the neglect of seafarers’ occupational health and safety which is intricately tied to the nature, structure and organization of seafaring work. In 2003 the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) “Global Strategy on Occupational Health and Safety,” also recognized a general need for political and administrative will to actively develop, implement and enforce global occupational health and safety standards. Then Director General of the ILO, Juan Somavia, reiterated the principle that “decent work must be safe work.” In the preamble to the Global Strategy, he said:

Occupational accidents and diseases cause great human suffering and loss. The economic cost is high. Yet public awareness of occupational safety and health tends to be low. All too frequently it does not get the priority it merits. This must change and action needs to be stimulated and accelerated nationally and internationally.

Eleven years hence, that statement remains valid, and strikingly so for the seafaring labour force.

Health and Safety at Sea

Seafarers’ occupational risks result from the nature, organization and structure of seafaring work. As Sampson (2013) reveals in her book looking at close to 15 years of ethnographic research into the lives of seafarers, seafarers work long hours, at times over 18 hour days, 7 days per week. Work on board is demanding and needs constant attention to machinery, navigation, cargo work, and so on. There are safety drills and maintenance duties to be carried out, in addition to emergencies that may arise. Further, there is the paper work to be completed, security arrangements to prevent stowaways and robbery in port and pirates at sea and much more, making for work that places constant demands on seafarers’ physical, mental and psychological faculties. It is therefore not surprising that fatigue is high on the list of major psychosocial risks of seafaring work. Fatigue has been isolated from other risks and given much attention due to studies and casualty investigations linking fatigue to accidents at sea. However, the underlying causes driven by economic and commercial imperatives, coupled with weak regulatory enforcement, remain. As such, any attempt to address fatigue without addressing those factors underpinning poor occupational health and safety arrangements, will be futile.

Additionally, seafarers’ face other equally, if not more serious occupational risks. Heart disease, injuries, stress and overall ill-health have been highlighted by Walters and Bailey, Sampson and others. Suicide figures were found to be high among seafarers for whom such data were available. In the UK

¹ IMO (2008). Go to sea: a campaign to attract entrants to the shipping industry. Available at: <http://www.imo.org/OurWork/HumanElement/GoToSea/Documents/Gotosea!campaigndocument.pdf>

merchant fleet, for example, relative risk of mortality from accidents at work was 26 times greater than for all other workers. Fatal accident rates in the Danish fleet was 11 times higher than for those ashore (Walters and Bailey, 2013). It is believed that these figures may be much higher, moreso for other groups for whom data is not available. Additionally, geo-political hazards of piratical attacks, and criminalization, abandonment, combined with naturally occurring risks from the elements, amalgamate to make for perilous work. While some hazards are intrinsic to the nature of seafaring work, such as natural disasters, others are directly attributed to the lack of arrangements to safeguard seafarers' health and safety. Substantial provisions are in place in the form of international conventions, codes and guidelines, developed and promulgated by the ILO and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) (to a lesser extent), but, how many of these are implemented in practise? Cumulative research covering almost 20 years at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), has revealed that seafarers, as an occupational group, are in dire need of arrangements to safeguard their safety, health and overall welfare. It is encouraging to see that the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006 has come into force. Also attempts to consolidate the work of the ILO and the IMO to promote seafarers' health and safety is noteworthy; it remains for the development of national laws and policies to give complete effect to these provisions.

The Maritime Labour Convention

August 2014 marks one year since the MLC 2006 came into force, having received ratifications in July 2012 to fulfill the entry into force criteria of 30 member States commanding 33% combined share in the global gross tonnage of ships. To date the MLC is in force for 47 countries.²

The MLC is the ILO's instrument which outlines minimum standards for seafarers' welfare including occupational health and safety. It seeks to achieve decent working conditions for seafarers, while securing economic interests through fair competition. The MLC takes a broad definition of seafarers to include all persons working in any capacity on board a ship to which the convention applies. This therefore includes, in addition to the navigating and engineering officers and crew involved in the direct operation of the ship, the hospitality and entertainment staff on passenger and cruise ships as well as yachts.

While it may be early days yet to evaluate any effects of the MLC, the slow pace of ratification is perhaps indicative of the priority placed on issues directly affecting seafarers' occupational health and safety. As the question being asked, is it profit or safety in the global maritime industry? Indeed the response to the MLC, as the "fourth pillar" in the international regulatory regime to ensure safe, secure ships in a clean maritime environment, may be juxtaposed with the response to the other conventions making up this regime. These core conventions of the IMO regulate marine pollution prevention, seafarers' training and the more technical aspects of ship construction and navigation. These represent the more tangible areas of shipping, developed in response to maritime casualties and perhaps explains their apparent priority over the more intangible psychosocial issues manifesting at the individual level.

Heightened Consciousness

Against this background, the ILO's call of 11 years ago warrants reiteration. There needs to be a global heightening of consciousness regarding health and safety at work across all labour markets, and I might add, seafaring is in very urgent need. In response, the ILO has introduced Convention No. 187 – Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health - which has been incorporated into the

² See ILO website -

http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11300:0::no::p11300_instrument_id:312331.

MLC. However, such provisions will only gain purchase when member States demonstrate the political and administrative will by ratification and passing enabling national laws; exercising vigilance in implementing and enforcing port, flag and coastal state arrangements; promoting the standards; and importantly, continue the ILO's tradition of tripartite consultations among government, shipowners' and seafarers' organizations, necessary to ensure all players are on board.

Conclusion

Seafaring is critical to global commerce, but remains one of the most perilous professions. Seafarers' all live and work in the same environment, their lives have been likened to being in a prison, even more adverse in some circumstances. The ILO has sought to strengthen previous provisions on health and safety by including more specific standards in the MLC. These provisions seeking accountability, enforcement and cooperation, should be substantiated by the promotional framework and contribute to bringing seafarers' issues to shore. Seafarers' health and safety is everybody's business. It is said, half the world would starve and the other half would freeze were it not for shipping, but ships do not drive themselves, global commerce owes much to the men and women who labour on board. It is hoped that co-opting land based support and so integrating seafarers' labour issues into general labour issues may assist in more attention given to seafarers' health and safety towards more positive labour market outcomes.

References

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