



# HOW THE PANDEMIC IMPACTS SEAFARERS

**The Covid-19 pandemic has put seafarers around the world in precarious situations and they need help, support and solutions for the difficulties they run into. Several important maritime organisations have asked seafarers which problems they face and to give suggestions to improve the situation on board ships and on shore. Various actions have already been taken to support seafarers around the world.**

**T**he World Maritime University (WMU) conducted a world-wide survey in which 671 seafarers on board ships were questioned about their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic [4]. Another 134 seafarers on board ships and on shore were questioned about their well-being during Covid-19 by Lloyd's Register (LR) in collaboration with the UK Chamber of Shipping, the Mission to Seafarers and Safety at Sea [1]. Both surveys were conducted to understand the impact of the pandemic on seafarers and the effect of the support measures that have been put in place.

## **Crew changes and ship-shore interactions**

The results of the WMU survey show that especially crew changes and ship-shore interaction were affected by the pandemic [4]. About 400,000 seafarers were stranded on ships due to Covid-related travel restrictions. Some could not leave their ships, had to be quarantined on board for more than fourteen days without getting paid or were not even provided urgent medical assistance. Some have been on board vessels for seventeen months on end, far over

the eleven-month contract limit set out in the Maritime Labour Convention. Others could not get to their ships and had to stay home, unable to provide for their families. In some cases, their contracts were terminated [5]. These problems had and still have a serious impact on seafarers and on the supply chain.

## **Key workers**

Key findings of the Lloyd's Register survey are that many of the seafarers feel undervalued and unacknowledged for their essential role during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the seafarers remarked: 'We work for each and every one of you to have food, water, fuel, cars, etc. We need support in these tough times, but we have been forgotten and abandoned by everybody' [1].

Seafarers need to be acknowledged as key workers by as many governments as possible to make crew changes possible. By mid 2020, seafarers were recognised as key workers by 42 countries. India, the Philippines, Dubai and Singapore reopened their ports to allow crew change and Australia even detained ships whose crews had worked longer than their contract required. But these examples

*Photo: Due to the pandemic, some seafarers have been stuck on their ships much longer than contractually required (by LauraHayes7751, Wikimedia).*

represent a minority and that is why some seafarers feel neglected by governments [3]. Complicated regional travel restrictions still make crew changes difficult and political and public pressure needs to be applied [2]. Current rules and policies are sometimes hard to comply with in these new situations and can even make crew changes impossible. [4]

### Governments need to work together

There is a big role for governments in improving the situation of seafarers by providing a framework of protocols to ensure safe crew changes and travel during the coronavirus pandemic. Next to recognising seafarers as key workers, shore leave should be allowed and access to shore-based services provided. Compliance of vessels with international laws and regulations must be ensured. Solutions can only be found through a continuous cooperation between social partners and should include consultation with seafarers or their representatives to ensure all safe options are considered. [4]

Protocols have been developed for safe transport of seafarers that are recognised by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Unfortunately, these protocols have not been consistently implemented across all relevant jurisdictions or by all relevant stakeholders [7].

To improve the situation now and in the future, regulations have to

be designed with a long term perspective and progressive actions can be taken. Nationality-blind crew relief policies can help reduce nationality-based disembarkation discrimination. A global information-sharing portal on health guidelines can provide seafarers with

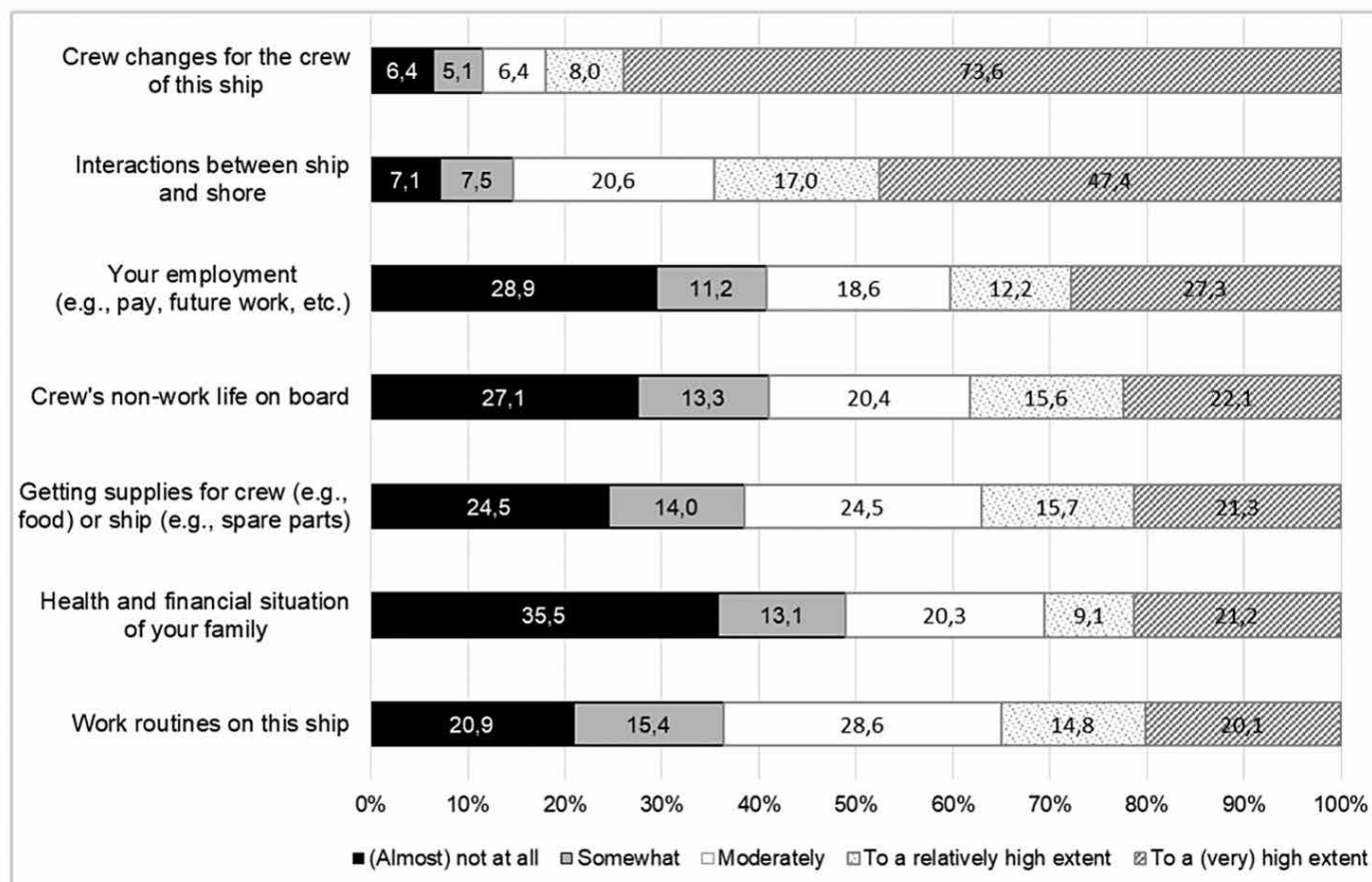
continuous updates on relevant health and visitation information. In collaboration with national and international partners, an emergency fund could be developed to financially safeguard vulnerable seafarers [8].

### Effects on mental and physical health

Following the survey, the WMU states that 'almost half of the respondents reported an increase in

workload in comparison to their workload prior to the pandemic. On average, respondents felt less safe in port than at sea. Over forty per cent of the respondents indicated that they had experienced symptoms of depression several times, almost every day or every

## Many seafarers feel undervalued and unacknowledged for their essential role during the pandemic



Effects of Covid-19 according to seafarers [4].

day during the past seven days, whereas over half reported symptoms of anxiety. Moreover, on average, respondents had experienced symptoms of exhaustion between “once” and “several times” during the past seven days. Feeling exhausted, tired and having sleeping problems were most common, and were experienced by over half of the respondents “several times” or more frequently during the past seven days’ [4].

Serious concerns have been raised over seafarer mental health, communications and disease management. Due to the pandemic, crew have not been receiving regular visits from shoreside personnel. They felt their health and safety was not being balanced appropriately with operational demands. A lot of seafarers felt they were not being helped actively to manage stress and fatigue during the pandemic. In the Lloyd’s Register survey, more ship than shore staff said they had access to a professional care worker through their job; someone who could provide personal advice and support. Still it was only a minority that used these professional services and sought help: only thirty per cent of ship staff and seventeen per cent of shore staff. Reasons ship staff gave for not seeking help was the

stigma surrounding mental health and its potential impact on employment. Others said they felt there was no need to or that they did not think it would be effective [1].

### A role for shipping companies

Some seafarers felt that there is a lack of support from the shipping company, such as lack of information, conflicting information, or high demands and pressure. The WMU survey also mentioned challenges related to expired or extended contracts or to financial problems and job insecurity. Sometimes companies even extended contracts instead of offering timely crew changes because of the crew changing problems.

Shipping companies can improve the situation by ensuring viable repatriation plans and making sure that seafarers have access to essential supplies and support. Examples are effective protective measurements, medical care, mental health support, essential goods, a good internet connection and possibilities for shore leave. Adjusting protocols and a fatigue risk management system can further support these measures [4].

### Help from angels

A lot of actions have been taken to provide seafarers in problematic situations with suitable support. The IMO has established the Seafarer Crisis Action Team (SCAT) to help resolve individual cases. SCAT assists by contacting representatives from national governments, NGOs, trade unions or relevant associations to find solutions. In 2020, SCAT has dealt with cases involving thousands of individual seafarers. For example, they helped a fatigued seafarer on an offshore support vessel, who had been offshore for more than 100 days, to go home, they helped a British seafarer to go home to be able to assist her vulnerable relatives and they enabled an emergency evacuation of a seafarer who suffered from a stroke [5]. As a response to the Covid-19 situation, the Mission to Seafarers has recently launched the Flying Angel Campaign, to support with vital services. They provide technological solutions like digital chaplaincy, the Seafarers’ Happiness Index App and MiFi Internet Units for onboard communications. They also provide support in ports such as by providing PPE globally, minibus adaptations, a Seafarer-safe Centres Fund and legal assistance to seafarers. The pandemic has impacted all seafarers and other maritime personnel. Although this continues to be a fast-moving and evolving situation, support will continue to be needed for some time to come [6].

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