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Evaluating Bullying Effect on the Happiness and Performance of the Ship's Crew

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 30 December 2020

Accepted: 20 January 2021

Published Online: 30 March 2021

Keywords:

Bullying

Job satisfaction

Life at sea

Conducts

Mariners well being

ABSTRACT

Bullying is rampant and has severe effects on the health and wellbeing of the employees. Additionally, it also undermines job satisfaction and performance, thus affecting productivity. Bullying among seafarers is widespread, and their isolation from the rest of the people while at sea can enhance aggressive behaviour. Bullying is widespread among seafarers and severely affects them in core areas of their life. There is a significant effect of bullying on mental health. However, the Omani seafarers are loyal to their jobs and claim to be happy at sea despite the challenges and hardships. While there are different forms of bullying in the workplace, verbal abuse is the most rampant. The study seeks to highlight the impact of bullying on seafarers' happiness and job satisfaction who work in a shipping company. A questionnaire with nine questions was prepared based on the authors' experience and sent by mobile phone to fifty officers and crew members working onboard. More insight into workplace bullying among seafarers is essential in formulating adequate law, thus improving seafarers' health and safety.

1. Introduction

Health and safety are essential requirements for on-shore work environments. On the other hand, occupational safety in offshore environments is even more critical since it deals with the unique challenges of working at sea. The shipping environment is a challenging workplace because people who have never met before are required to suddenly start working together as a cohesive unit, establish common communication channels and conduct day-to-day operations all while living removed from the rest of the world. In such an environment, ergonomics and human health have increasingly gained concern in recent years. Among seafarers' issues, bullying and harassment are critical ergonomic concerns^[1].

Bullying at work is the continuous and prolonged verbal or psychological against an individual by his co-worker or a group of co-workers in such a way that it negatively impacts and isolates the individual^[2]. For the individual, bullying results in loss of self-esteem, lack of confidence, fear, psychological and mental distress, and performance loss. It is also a significant safety risk because the cognitive effects of bullying cause the victim to lose alertness while at work, leading to errors and catastrophic accidents. It is equivalent to the loss of one worker to the team since the worker performance and the team cohesiveness are affected. It may even result in musculoskeletal disorders.

Additionally, in a complex and enclosed environment,

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it is challenging to gain privacy or anonymity to respond appropriately to research attempts by those on the mainland.

Inner peace, mental health, and happiness are essential to sustain the individual's good performance and the entire unit, at sea or otherwise. It is crucial to study the extent, effects, and controls of bullying to prevent and improve work quality.

There is an excellent risk of seamen bullying because they are already under significant psychological stresses due to the job demands, which adds to the loneliness and separation from home, letting them lose good moral behaviours and act aggressively against each other. Bullying was mentioned to have humiliating effects on the victims and led to untreatable symptoms. Workplace bullying causes loss of productivity and performance and stress, depression, insomnia, and anxiety^[3].

Additionally, it can also lead to financial compensations to cover any losses sustained by the victim or resolve harassment cases. The shipping industry recognizes the impact and likelihood of bullying, but we need to thoroughly investigate its effects.

A researcher investigated the impact of various factors related to the occupational environment on job satisfaction and intention to leave the job. They carried out the study by marking the difference between European and Filipino workers. Harassment was one of the work environment factors considered a characteristic that could influence employees' job satisfaction^[4]. The effects of harassment directly cause decreasing job satisfaction and an increasing intent to leave the job. This study was conducted by specifically surveying employees working in the maritime industries.

Bullying at sea is strongly related to the loss of happiness and other long-term effects, regardless of the scenario. Since the victim is out of sight of supporting individuals at sea, the impact may seem more severe. Bullying is known to have detrimental effects on the health and well-being of the individual. Ultimately, bullying results in safety concern for entire units, dangerous in high-risk marine environments. Studies related to bullying at sea, the consequences, and controls are minimal, especially related to the Omani work scenario.

Understanding aspects of bullying can lead to better regulations and better management of such concern, thereby enhancing the overall health and safety onboard the ship.

2. Literature Review

A study referred to bullying as “covert aggression” as it is not immediately apparent and can cause a more

severe impact on the victim^[5]. Bullying at the workplace includes all sadistic and unreasonable work practices directed at an individual or group of individuals that negatively affect their self-esteem and mental health. Bullying impacts the psychological well-being of humans. The growing recognition of health and safety in workplaces has revealed the hidden issue of bullying and its impact, including sadistic comments veiled behind jokes frequently aimed at individuals or groups at workplaces. However, there is also a misconception that physical assault and resulting trauma have a more significant negative impact on health and well-being than verbal bullying or other covert forms of occupational violence. The investigated the same by surveying over eight hundred employees in Australia. The authors proved that bullying resulted in mental health impacts that were equivalent to the trauma from being physically assaulted.

Bullying frequency, causes, and impact were investigated in the context of restaurants and commercial kitchens. They conducted an extensive literature review to determine why workers, especially chefs, in commercial kitchens are subject to a lot of bullying while working. They further found very little information published regarding the causes and effects of bullying in commercial kitchens^[6].

Seafarers are exposing to high levels of risks due to the challenging work environments and the constant hazards of work at sea. Additionally, the demanding and isolating work environments introduced several stress factors in workers at sea that are detrimental to their mental health.

Shipping work environments are strife with psychological stress factors, which have been considered by the authorities and recommend acting by the Maritime Labour Convention held in 2006^[7].

This event introduced the Psychological General Well-Being Index (PGWBI) questionnaire that effectively measures maritime workers' psychological well-being in stressful scenarios. They conducted a study to establish the questionnaire's effectiveness and compare the mental effects on various groups of maritime employees such as engineer officers, deck officers, catering, ratings, etc. The study established the PGWBI questionnaire's suitability as a reliable tool for the assessment of stress and anxiety among seafarers. They found that stress levels were higher among engineer officers than to deck officers and other lower-level workers. When management levels go higher, the stress level rises. This increase could be because of the increasing responsibilities in challenging atmospheres and possibly challenging behaviours from subordinates. The psychological general well-being index was, however, not explicitly developed for Maritime workers^[8].

2.1 Effects of Bullying

A study measured the impact of bullying among health care workers to determine whether short-term or prolonged bullying resulted in increased chances of cardiovascular diseases and depression. The authors surveyed nearly six thousand hospital workers and found that bullying was strongly related to the incidence of depression in health care workers^[9].

Bullying leads to an increase in anxiety. Extreme anxiety is one of the tougher affective mediators of the relationship between psychosocial aspects of work and musculoskeletal disorders^[10].

Bullying at the NHS Trust workplace was investigated and reported by utilizing a survey^[11]. The survey, which received a seventy percent response rate (one thousand one hundred and ten employees), revealed that most of the respondents had either experienced bullying or had witnessed someone bullied. The results indicate the perpetrator was a superior or manager and the victim was a subordinate. Sadly, support systems at the chosen workplace were inadequate. The results recommend providing good support facilities at workplaces for victims of bullying.

Another research covers bullying among nurses in Portugal and the effects of bullying on the relationship between various mental health disorders and bullying. One out of six participants experienced bullying in some form or the other in a study period of six months. Those bullied were forced to do menial tasks, stripped of appropriate responsibility, or replaced with unpleasant tasks and overburdened with heavy work^[12].

One-fourth of the maritime respondents experienced bullying or harassment in some form or the other at sea^[13]. They conducted a study to determine seafarers' work environments in terms of ergonomic, health and safety, and psychosocial risks. Analysis of psychosocial factors began with the issue of harassment encountered on board. The seafarers ignored, not taken seriously, or experienced ridicule and patronizing at co-workers or superiors' hands. While a significant number of men had experienced harassment, the frequency was twice as high in women as in men.

Most men refused to accept women in superior positions from a Greek seafaring group survey^[14]. While they were able to get that women in similar jobs had performed just as good as them, they did not view women as capable of reaching high positions in the maritime industry. This attitude can motivate men to demonstrate covert aggression against their female colleagues or downgrade their performance. Regularly, this translates as nothing but bullying, which can induce depression and stress and low

retention of female employees in maritime jobs.

Sometimes bullying and harassment are even institutional at a company. Systems for appraisal and promotion are routinely unfair to specific employees, and colleagues learn to act negatively as part of the corporate culture. It is all too easy in this environment for some seafarers to abuse the concepts of 'seafaring traditions' and 'shipboard discipline' to make others' lives miserable^[15].

The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) was established in 2013 to present a body of rights for seafarers to avoid or reduce the likelihood of bullying and harassment.

3. Methodology & Data Collection

For this study, we use the quantitative and qualitative research designs allowing numerical data for a given set of parameters.

The way to obtain the data is through the desired survey tool from a selected source or sample population. Quantitative research design helps get hard facts that can enable to achieve conclusive results on a particular subject. Quantitative data are objective, and hence the inconsistencies in subjective opinions are eliminated to a large extent.

Qualitative information utilizes personal views from a selected sample population.

The limitations of this methodology are listed below:

(1) A limited group of people reached out who share similar characteristics regarding cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

(2) While quantitative surveys can get objective responses and definitive answers, the answers cannot be conclusive. There may be many factors beyond the list of options provided for the respondent to answer. Hence, it is always important to support a quantitative study with relevant qualitative research such as an interview.

(3) Since the sample population is surveyed directly within their work environments, their responses can also be less accurate or not honest due to the fear of being identified and reprimanded or identified by the bully and subject to additional attacks and aggressive behavior.

The research investigated bullying effects and happiness onboard ships based on the worker's perspectives. Hence the respondents could include victims of bullying and harassment, bystanders and bullies themselves. The target population for the survey was the crew of the researcher's ship. Most of the respondents were from the deck department. The questionnaire did not investigate the level to maintain complete anonymity.

The selected sample consisted of fifty seafarers on board the same ship as the researcher was. Sample siz-

ing did not follow any criteria and merely reflected the number of workers available for answering the survey. Hence the sampling technique is convenience sampling or non-probability type sampling. The sample population was selected based on the most comfortable access and availability and devoid of any strategic criteria. Permissions were obtained from senior officers on board to survey but by maintaining anonymity. The online tool Survey Monkey administered the survey as all workers had access to mobile phones with Wi-Fi connections and could quickly receive the questionnaire's links. Additionally, this also meant less waste generated.

4. Results & Discussions

In this section, the findings of the survey are analysed by each question.

Figure 1 shows most of the respondents had experienced some form of harassment, bullying, or mistreatment in the last six months.

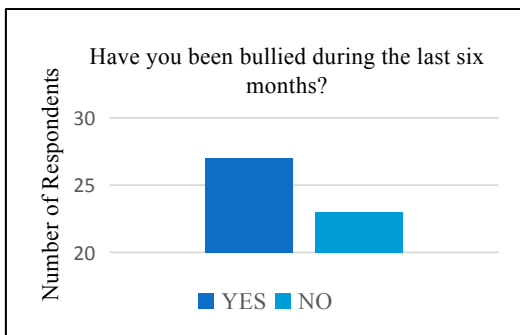


Figure 1. Recently bullied

Figure 2 indicates all the fifty respondents agreed that they had witnessed a colleague getting bullied at least once in their career.

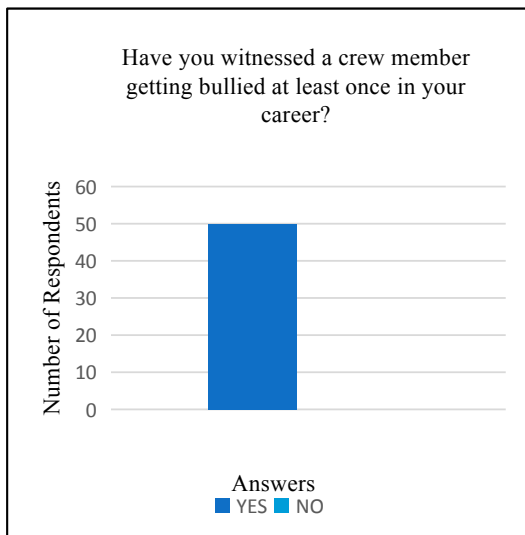


Figure 2. Evidence

Figure 3 indicates thirty-four respondents have experienced bullying or witnessed bullying by those at a higher rank. Others bullied Sixteen crew members at the same level.

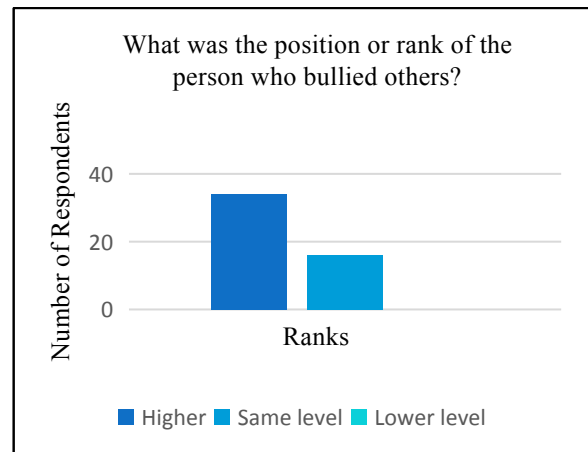


Figure 3. Rank/ Title

Figure 4 shows that verbal abuse (i) is the most common form of bullying activity, identified by twenty-eight respondents. Constant demeaning and humiliation (ii) were experienced by five of the respondents, and Seven respondents had experienced or witnessed isolation or labelling (iii). Undermining professional achievements and status was identified in eight responses (v), and two crew was attacked on workplace relationships (iv).

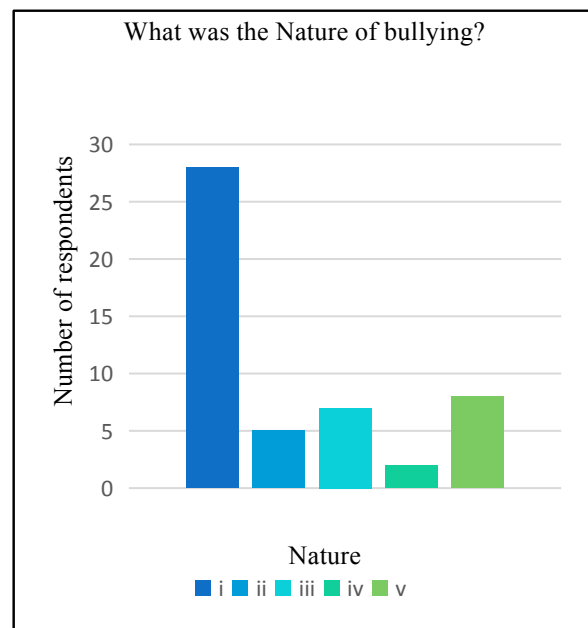


Figure 4. Different types of bullying

The effects of bullying are leave of absence (i), declining morale (ii), low productivity (iii), repeated attempts to change jobs (iv), and considering quitting (v). The respondents could select multiple options.

Figure 5 emphasized that a significant number of respondents displayed some form of dissatisfaction with their current jobs. While most did not go for sick leave, thirteen respondents had taken sick leave due to bullying or harassment effects. Thirty-seven crew faced with declining morale. Twenty-five crewmembers experienced Poor productivity. Half of the surveyed employees had thought of quitting the job, which demonstrates a high level of dissatisfaction with the work environment.

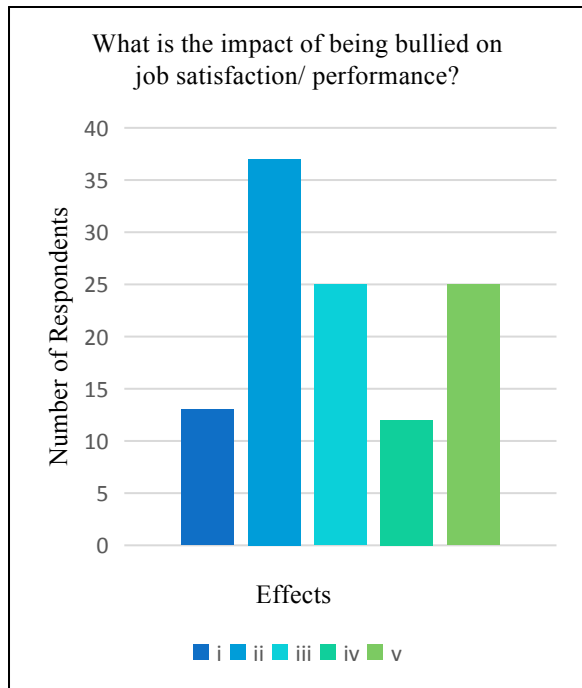


Figure 5. Impact on job

The most important question in the survey was the impact of the bullying act on mental health and happiness as it was directly related to the study's aim. The effects considered are:

- i) Depression,
- ii) Anxiety,
- iii) Fear,
- iv) Insomnia,
- v) loneliness and,
- vi) suicidal thoughts.

Figure 6 shows that anxiety was highest, followed by depression. A significant number of respondents also experienced fear and insomnia. While twenty respondents had experienced loneliness, indicating a lack of adequate support systems in the workplace, three sailors had even thought of suicide. While the results do not mean that other factors may not influence the impact, it throws light on the fact that bullying is common and has a significant effect on the respondents.

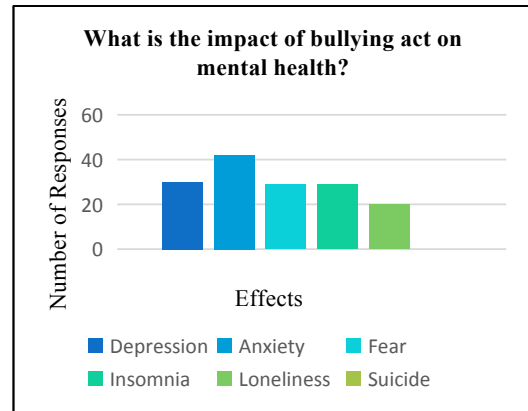


Figure 6. Mental health

As shown in Figure 7, the answers point to slightly higher responses for Yes and a lower number for No. We can see that seafarers are loyal to their jobs despite hardships faced in the middle of the sea.

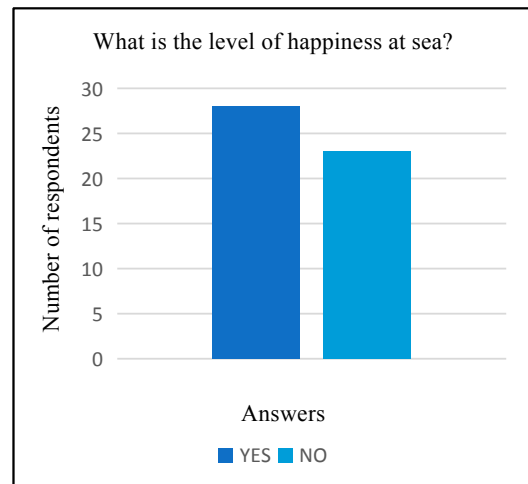


Figure 7. Seafarer's happiness

Figure 8 indicates that only twenty-five percent of respondents reported a possible bullying case. Those who are not saying the case may fear the others to find out or repetition of bullying.

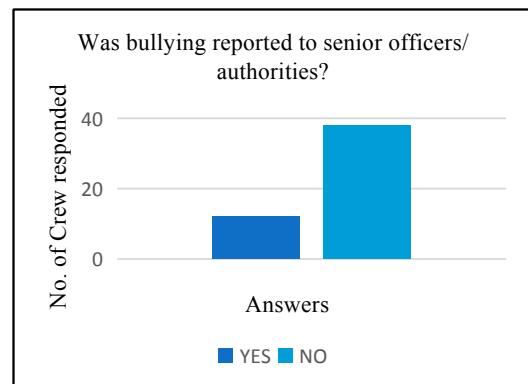


Figure 8. Reporting

Figure 9 shows out of the twelve cases reported, only five issues were taken seriously by the management. It is sad and reveals the lack of enough support systems and policies to prevent bullying.



Figure 9. Management's action

4.1 Interviews Questions

(1) Have you witnessed a crew member getting bullied at least once in your career?

First Interviewee: Yes, once. Bosun was bullying a trainee seaman.

Second Interviewee: Yes, the third engineer, second engineer, and electrical officer used to bully the fourth engineer.

Third Interviewee: Yes, I did. I have witnessed it twice. The first time I noticed it between the third engineer and engine cadet. Both are from the same nationality, but the third engineer uses his rank authority to bully the poor cadet. The cadet should have reported or defended himself, but it looks like he was afraid of him. The second time I have seen it between the cadets of the same nationality. One of them was smart and followed the superior's orders in precise and on time. Still, the other two cadets were lazy and always late. Hence, they start bullying him significantly till the poor deck cadet asked for an emergency sign off without any valid reason.

(2) What is the impact of being bullied on job satisfaction/ performance?

First Interviewee: The Trainee seaman became seriously disturbed. He was unable to concentrate on his job. He was making more mistakes even while carrying out his day-to-day jobs.

Second Interviewee: Performance will be affected, and there will not be job satisfaction even if you perform well.

Third Interviewee: Once you get bullied on your job, it

will always impact your output and performance. For example, every time you join a vessel with high motivation and expectations, you are forced to move away from your goals and vision for future life at sea once you are getting bullied. Getting bullied keep a person isolated and reduces his/ her efficiency.

(3) How is the impact of bullying act on mental health?

First Interviewee: Mentally, a person becomes unstable. He/ she loses his confidence and tries to avoid being in the group and prefers to stay alone, and if this continues, then it is a high chance for that person to go into depression.

Second Interviewee: It may lead to depression if no one acts or supports the person getting bullied.

Third Interviewee: It is a common factor that bullying has an impact on mental health as well as physical fitness. Bullying will keep you isolated from others and not socialize with people and keep your mind in a state where you will always be thinking about avoiding bullying or running from the bullying people.

(4) What is the level of happiness at sea?

First Interviewee: Happiness at sea comes with all small things. A respected, friendly atmosphere is necessary to create joy and happiness. On-board satisfaction and happiness are severe to maintain as personnel are away from their loved ones. However, people are encouraged to laugh and reduce stress by talking about various topics other than shipping.

Second Interviewee: Level of happiness depends on dealing with the other crew and relation between them. If everyone is friendly and helpful to each other, happiness grows, and performance improves.

Third Interviewee: It depends on how you define happiness; the level of joy differs from person to the other. It starts with how you end up in this field, whereby self-wish, and ambition or by luck or just because you forced to end here. It was an ambition to become a mariner and raise the Oman flag and be part of the national organization to reach a high level of success in the marine field where no one has run before. On the other hand, you must make sacrifices for your families and social life to reach your final goals. Life at sea is not easy and not hard, and it depends on how to deal with it.

(5) Did management take any action on receiving a bullying case?

First Interviewee: Unfortunately, nobody reported bullying to the management due to fear of losing the job.

Second Interviewee: On-board management will act only if they care about the crew and their welfare.

Third Interviewee: It is a common factor that bullying has an impact on mental health as well as physical fitness. Bullying will keep you isolated from others and not so-

cialize with people and keep your mind in a state where you will always be thinking about avoiding bullying or running from the bullying people.

(6)Have you done any training to deal with bullying?

First Interviewee: Negative, however self-had been part of Anti Ragging campaign and had taken a position on these types of the seminar.

Second Interviewee: No.

Third Interviewee: I have not done any training on bullying from the company, but I have read some books on protecting yourself and your kids from bullying at school or work.

(7)Do you have a suggestion to avoid bullying?

First Interviewee: Bullying can be stopped or avoided if people on top management assure the officers and crew that they can approach them directly. Top management should take it up personally to check that people are happy. They should stop believing people blindfolded. If any matter comes to them, they should tackle it, approach it with sensitivity and not just plainly ignore it.

Second Interviewee: The Captain and onboard management's responsibility is to take care of their sub-ordinates and encourage all crew to work as a team rather than commitment alone.

Third Interviewee: I suggest making a big campaign among fleet vessels to familiarize them with bullying. Show them the correct way to report to the company so management can act against it. The campaign will also teach people how to protect themselves and overcome bullying.

Many of the respondents experienced bullying or harassment of some kind aboard the ship. However, all the respondents witnessed some form of bullying, either on an officer or on a lower-level sailor.

As expected, most of the bullies or perpetrators of harassment were higher-level employees on subordinate or lower-level victims. It could be a misuse of authority or merely prevention of outperformance by the subordinate. It also supports the literature that higher-level employees tend to bully subordinates, which is a common form of bullying in workplaces.

Verbal abuse was the most common form of bullying. It can impact the confidence or self-esteem of individuals or even instil fear in them.

Our findings indicate a severe bullying effect on job satisfaction. The impact on psychological health was evident.

Management found not to be supportive of bullying victims from the present study. The crew reported only a few cases, and the administration responded to fewer issues. It shows a need for a more in-depth investigation

into bullying aboard the ship and a need for determining the critical control systems to prevent or minimize such actions in the future.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The literature review found that the prevalence of bullying was high in workplaces, especially in demanding shipping work environments. The examination further revealed several impacts of bullying on worker psychological health and well-being, amidst a few studies.

The following recommendations will improve the seafarers' happiness and mental health aboard ships and minimize bullying.

(1)Management should investigate in more detail the extent and negative impact of bullying.

(2)Support systems should be employed to support bullying victims and allow them to act in case of repeated abuse.

(3)A friendly, respected, and disciplined working environment avoids creating an atmosphere of panic or instilling a feeling of being watched.

(4)Motivating seafarers improve cohesion among employees and a sense of belongingness to the work environment.

(5)Consider and adopt bullying as item nineteen of breaches of the code of conduct that could lead to the offender's dismissal.

(6)Maritime colleges to train cadets about bullying. It can be in the human resource management (HRM) module for officers and engineers or short courses for ratings.

(7)To keep a copy of "International Guidance on Eliminating Shipboard Harassment & Bullying" published by the international chamber of shipping (ICS) & the international trade federation (ITF) on board.

(8)To enable the crew to complain about bullying in all ports around the world to ITF.

(9)Add it as a new item in the complaint procedure (in the company manual)

(10)To develop guidelines for filling up the complaint report.

(11)Every flag inspector should have a meeting with the crew to discuss the presence of bullying onboard.

(12)Every class inspector should have a meeting with the crew to discuss such cases.

(13)To inform seafarers of their right to report when bullied by another crew member.

(14)Encourage seafarers to fill up a complaint form and discuss any complaints in the ship management meetings.

(15)To follow recommendations and guidelines from protection and indemnity (P&I) clubs.

(16)Refer to ECSA/ETF (European Community Ship-

owners' Associations/ European Transport Workers' Federation) Guidelines to Shipping Companies on Equality of Opportunity and Diversity in the European Shipping Industry.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support received from the International Maritime College Oman for this research.

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