



FRAMING PAPER

Advancing human sustainability

Labour conditions pose long-term risks to a maritime industry under increased scrutiny

With roughly 90 percent of all trade transported by sea, the world's approximately 1.9 million seafarers play an indispensable role in global supply chains. However, continuous cost-cutting over the past five decades has led to deteriorating working conditions, long hours, short-term and unpredictable contracts, and standards that do not prioritise mental and physical safety. As a result, the industry faces a labour shortage and difficulty attracting new talent while pressure from regulators, customers, and financial institutions to improve conditions is mounting.

A threat to seafarers and trade

The shipping industry is in the midst of a labour crisis. Officer shortages are at an all-time high, threatening not only companies' ability to staff their ships but also the reliable flow of global goods. With just 1.89 million seafarers handling \$14 trillion in global trade, fatigue, mental and physical overload, and staff shortages pose increased risks to supply chains already under duress from geopolitical strife, port congestion, and weather-related disruptions.

Today's seafarers are often forced to accept working conditions that would be unacceptable in most other sectors. In a 2024 [study from the World Maritime University](#), seafarers reported working 74.9 hours per week on average. This is some 70% higher than the [average global workweek](#) of 43.9 hours. The study also found that seafarers often rest less than ten hours between shifts, and over 78% of respondents did not have a single day off during their entire contract period.

These conditions don't just impact the individual workers. They also create high-risk environments. When seafarers are physically overworked or struggling with their mental health, they are unable to safely and effectively do their jobs – as evidenced by at least 75% of safety incidents being [linked to human error](#). Fatigue is a particular problem, [accounting for 25% of marine casualties](#).

The 2021 Seafarer Workforce Report from BIMCO and the International Chamber of Shipping warned that the industry would need nearly [90,000 additional officers by 2026](#) to operate the global merchant fleet. Similarly, a 2023 report from global shipping consultancy [Drewry revealed a 9% officer availability gap](#), the highest it has found since it started analysing the seafarer labour market nearly two decades ago.

Cost-cutting prioritised over well-being

From the 1970s oil crisis, the consolidation of the 1980s and '90s, the 2008 financial crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry has been under continuous cost pressure for 50 years. The effort to cut costs has led to larger vessels, reduced crew sizes, and more seafarers on short-term contracts. Combined with increased workloads and shorter rest periods, these developments have negatively affected seafarers' mental and physical health and made life at sea less attractive.

The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) adopted in 2006 introduced a minimum standard for employing

seafarers. Adherence, however, is not universal. While the crew change crisis of the pandemic brought calls for better seafarer protections and rights, underlying structural challenges have yet to be solved.

The underrepresentation of women, who make up just 2% of the global seafaring workforce, and gender discrimination remain significant problems. In a forthcoming maritime employability survey, 29% of female respondents identified gender discrimination as a major career obstacle, compared to just 0.4% of men.¹ Additionally, certification hurdles, systemic bias, nationality discrimination, and pay disparities continue to hinder women's job opportunities and career progression.

The All Aboard Alliance report '[15 key pain points for women at sea](#)' revealed that a lack of family planning options is one of the biggest employment challenges facing women. Seafarers who become pregnant while working at sea typically have no appropriate onboard facilities, and many are forced to disembark without pay immediately after disclosing their pregnancy.

If the industry is to address its gender imbalance and historically high seafarer shortages, it needs to make a career at sea more attractive for both women and men. Otherwise, it risks alienating current and future generations of seafarers who are increasingly unwilling to work in environments that endanger their mental and physical health.

External pressures

Calls for change are emerging on multiple fronts, with investors, regulators, and shipping customers pressuring the industry to prioritise seafarer well-being.

- **Investors:** A recent [report](#) from consultancy Woodrow highlighted growing concerns about the maritime sector among UK senior finance professionals. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents said they are considering divesting from the shipping sector over environmental, social, and governance (ESG) risks. A slightly higher number (66%) indicated that the maritime sector carries more ESG-related financial risks than other industries. Specific areas of concern include worker conditions and safety, and a perceived lack of transparency in the industry.
- **Legislation:** The EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) makes large companies operating in Europe accountable for any human rights violations and environmental impacts within their supply chains. While many companies are already conducting some form of sustainability due diligence, it often focuses on the first link in the supply chain, overlooking human rights and environmental issues further downstream. With the CSDDD, companies must integrate due diligence practices into their policies, prioritise and address risks, engage relevant stakeholders, and ensure transparency through public reporting. The directive entered into force in July 2024, with EU member states required to adopt it into national law by July 2026.

The combination with the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) from 2023 means that more than 50,000 companies worldwide, including large non-listed companies and subsidiaries of non-EU companies operating within the bloc, are now subject to reporting requirements.

With this new legislation, companies will be expected to address the impacts of negative human rights and labour law practices, making safeguarding well-being and safety a mutual responsibility throughout the supply chain. The legislation's public reporting element will put pressure on maritime companies to improve labour practices, both from their partners and customers.

¹ The results are part of a Global Maritime Forum report, 'Employability in maritime: Four key challenges facing women seafarers', produced in collaboration with TURTLE due to be published in early October 2024.

- **Customers:** As increasing numbers of charterers and shipping customers will now be required to report on the working conditions and monitor possible human rights violations in their supply chains, they are likely to pressure shipping companies to improve transparency and demonstrate good practices.

Lessons learned from Diversity@Sea pilot

Rather than waiting for external pressures or coming legislation, there are encouraging signs that the shipping industry is taking action to improve human sustainability. One such example is the Diversity@Sea pilot, a collaborative effort of the All Aboard Alliance launched at last year's Annual Summit in Athens.

Twelve leading shipping companies have committed to having at least four female crew members on board, establishing proper conditions for menstrual needs and private hygiene, providing 24/7 wifi access, and ensuring inclusive personal protective equipment on one pilot vessel each.

Since November 2023, the Global Maritime Forum has been engaging daily with more than 400 seafarers onboard the 12 involved vessels to learn how to best create a more inclusive work environment – one free from abuse, harassment, and bullying and accommodates more flexible work-life planning.

Initial data collection has revealed seven key focus areas that would bring meaningful change to the lives of men and women working at sea. These areas are:

- Zero-tolerance policy for abuse, harassment, and bullying
- Flexible work contracts
- Internet access and social connectivity
- Guaranteed helpline access
- Parental support
- Inclusive personal protective equipment
- Transparent training and appraisal systems

The pilot's long-term ambition is to create a new set of shared standards for the maritime industry. The full learnings, recommendations and guidelines from the pilot will be published in March 2025.

Key questions

- How can the industry collaborate to meet stakeholders' rising expectations about how the workforce is treated across its supply chains?
- What lessons can we learn from the first-mover companies that have succeeded in significantly improving working conditions at sea?
- Which options does the industry have to improve work conditions and workplace attractiveness in the face of continued cost pressures?
- Can AI and automation reduce seafarers' workload or will new technologies displace the maritime workforce?

Further reading

- [Improving seafarer well-being: Preliminary findings from the Diversity@Sea pilot](#) (Global Maritime Forum, 2024)
- [Quantifying an inconvenient truth: Revisiting a culture of adjustment on work/rest hours](#) (World Maritime University, 2024)
- [All Aboard Alliance Insights](#) (Global Maritime Forum, 2023)

- [Seafarers Happiness Index, Quarter 2 2024](#) (The Mission to Seafarers, 2024)
- [15 key pain points for women at sea](#) (Global Maritime Forum, 2023)