State of the Industry Snapshot:

Bullying and harassment at sea

Wellness at Sea
FROM SAILORS' SOCIETY

Sailors' Society

"As a junior engineer on board a cargo vessel I had to report repeated verbal abuse from the chief engineer. He often used degrading language, shouted aggressively, and frequently undermined my work for no reason. The toxic environment escalated over several months, resulting in me developing anxiety, insomnia, and emotional distress."

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Foreword by Arsenio Dominguez

Secretary-General, International Maritime Organization (IMO)

On the Day of the Seafarer 2025, the International Maritime Organization supports Sailors' Society's crucial report on bullying and harassment in the maritime sector, aligning closely with our global campaign: "My Harassment-Free Ship".

Seafarers are the lifeline of international trade, yet they continue to face unacceptable levels of bullying, harassment, and discrimination, significantly impacting their mental health, safety, and career progression.

The data presented in this comprehensive report from Sailors' Society paints a troubling picture. Bullying and harassment remain distressingly prevalent, with clear regional and gender disparities: women and active seafarers consistently experience higher rates of abuse compared to their counterparts.

Equally concerning is the pervasive culture of silence, driven by fear of retaliation, mistrust in reporting mechanisms, and skepticism about meaningful resolutions.

IMO's "My Harassment-Free Ship" initiative aims precisely at addressing these systemic issues. By promoting proactive industry action, accessible reporting channels, and robust accountability mechanisms, we seek not merely to respond but to prevent.

Encouragingly, Sailors' Society identifies practical solutions such as stronger enforcement of anti-harassment policies, committed leadership, and continuous on board education.

These actions resonate deeply with IMO's vision of a respectful and inclusive maritime industry, where dignity and human rights are paramount.

I urge governments, shipping companies, maritime institutions, and seafarers themselves to engage actively with our campaign and Sailors' Society's recommendations.

It is only through collaborative effort and unwavering commitment that we can dismantle harmful practices and nurture a culture of zero tolerance towards harassment.

The launch of IMO's Interactive World Map exemplifies our collective commitment to providing seafarers with vital resources and support wherever they are. Similarly, amplifying seafarer voices through influential online platforms ensures the message of respect and dignity reaches every corner of the maritime community.

Let us embrace this call for urgent action and pledge to make every ship harassment-free. Our seafarers deserve nothing less than a safe, inclusive, and supportive workplace. It is within our collective power to transform maritime culture and secure a brighter, safer future for all who navigate the seas

Arsenio Dominguez

Welcome to this State of the Industry Snapshot

Using unique data gathered from Sailors' Society's 2024 global cadet conferences, our Peer-to Peer Support Groups, Helplines and our MyWellness e-learning platform, this Snapshot captures the next generation of seafarers' views and experiences of bullying and harassment at sea.

As a data driven charity, we have exclusive access to wide-ranging facts and figures from seafarers. At our most recent cadet conferences, which drew 10,000 cadets and ratings, 2,171 cadets from 26 different countries responded to a series of questions covering their perceptions and real-life experiences of bullying and harassment. A database of 4,500 seafarers that we have reached through our e-learning also provides a unique opportunity to delve into specific wellness-related issues, and we are fortunate to have more than 200 Peer-to-Peer Support Groups where we can ask group members questions about particular topics.

Alongside this current data, we have gathered commentaries and extra data from a range of organisations and individuals who work in this field.

Together they highlight to the wider maritime industry the challenges it faces in retaining and attracting seafarers when bullying and harassment at sea is a critical concern for future employees.

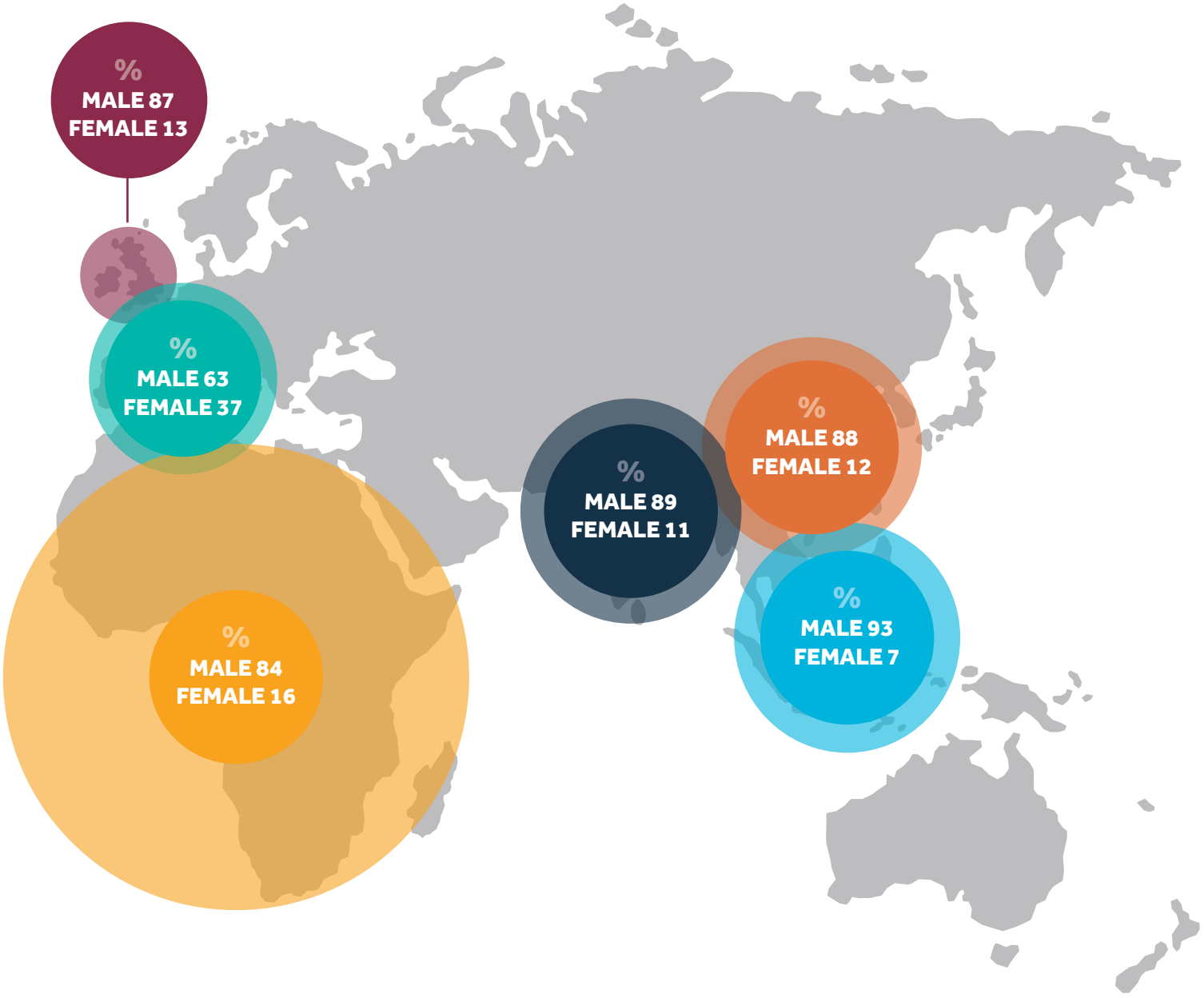
But this Snapshot also provides simple solutions that can help foster an inclusive and respectful culture that ensures a safe and welcoming environment for seafarers.

CASE STUDIES

A seafarer on Sailors' Society's 24/7 helpline reported the Captain drinking heavily and that he was abusive and aggressive to the crew. He had altered the alcohol record to hide his consumption. The crew had increased stress and requested Sailors' Society inform the ship company for investigation and action. Contact was made with the company and the case was handed over to them.

An experienced seafarer who joined ship reported bullying from other crew members, escalating to him fearing for his life and wanting to leave. A member of Sailors' Society's Crisis Response Network spoke with him, assessed his state of mind and advised repatriation.

Cadet conference demographics



NORTH ASIA

Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka

AFRICA

Ethiopia, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa

SOUTH EAST ASIA

Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam

EUROPE

Algeria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Poland, Spain, Turkey

UK

UK

CHINA

China

Data is collected through our four cadet conferences, except in the case of China where it has been captured through companies.

Cadets and ratings have their say

Experience of bullying and harassment

Have you ever experienced or witnessed bullying and harassment? Did you report it?

M v's F

		Overall	Male	Female
N ASIA	Experienced	13%	14%	7%
	Witnessed	13%	13%	13%
	Reported it	48%	50%	45%
AFRICA	Experienced	9%	9%	19%
	Witnessed	10%	11%	12%
	Reported it	28%	27%	38%
SE ASIA	Experienced	17%	15%	30%
	Witnessed	23%	22%	10%
	Reported it	43%	41%	100%
EUROPE and UK	Experienced	EUR 30% UK 28%	18%	*
	Witnessed	EUR 23% UK 28%	24%	*
	Reported it	EUR 25% UK 56%	36%	64%
CHINA	Experienced	17%	10%	*
	Witnessed	9%	14%	*
	Reported it	66%	50%	*

*Sample size too small to make meaningful conclusion

It is clear from the data that gender and regional differences significantly influence the prevalence and reporting of bullying and harassment. Females in many regions are disproportionately affected. For instance, in Africa, the percentage of females experiencing bullying is more than double that of males. Similarly, in South East Asia, females are twice as likely to experience bullying compared to males. And female reporting rates often exceed those of their male counterparts, particularly in South East Asia and the UK.

Gender disparities in witnessing bullying are less pronounced, but still evident. Reporting remains a critical area of focus, with regions like China and the UK leading in willingness to address incidents, setting a benchmark for others.

Comparing experiences of those who have not been at sea with active seafarers

		Have been to sea	Have not been to sea
N ASIA	Experienced	23%	13%
	Witnessed	20%	12%
	Reported it	22%	56%
AFRICA	Experienced	29%	8%
	Witnessed	9%	8%
	Reported it	*	28%
SE ASIA	Experienced	58%	5%
	Witnessed	7%	28%
	Reported it	30%	48%
EUROPE and UK	Experienced	42%	13%
	Witnessed	18%	29%
	Reported it	38 %	37%
CHINA	Experienced	15%	*
	Witnessed	15%	*

*Sample size too small to make meaningful conclusion

These statistics paint a damning picture of the seafaring industry. Active seafarers in different regions are two, three or even 10 times more likely to experience and witness bullying compared to those who have never been to sea. This glaring disparity is a black mark on the very system that should be safeguarding its workforce. It reveals an industry environment where bullying is not only pervasive but seemingly normalized within the confines of seafaring life.

Equally alarming is the stark gap in reporting between active seafarers and those who have not been to sea. Despite facing significantly higher rates of bullying and harassment, active seafarers are far less likely to report these incidents. This troubling trend suggests a culture of silence, fuelled perhaps by fear of retaliation, lack of support, or a belief that reporting will lead to no meaningful action.

Those who have experienced or witnessed bullying and harassment categorised the type of abuse/bullying and harassment as follows:

	N Asia	Africa	SE Asia	Europe and UK	China
Verbal abuse (insults, threats)	70.2%	75.0%	82.5%	61%	50%
Physical abuse (hitting, pushing)	21.1%	13.3%	15.9%	28%	15%
Social exclusion	27.7%	24.2%	27.8%	50%	30%
Cyberbullying (through social media or messaging)	10.5%	13.3%	23.8%	26%	40%
Sexual harassment	6.4%	13.3%	7.1%	11%	15%

Our respondents reveal widespread issues of verbal abuse, physical aggression, social exclusion, cyberbullying, and sexual harassment in the maritime industry, varying by region. These challenges highlight a deeply ingrained problem that compromises safety and wellbeing. Immediate action is needed to foster a respectful and inclusive culture, enforce policies, and ensure accountability across all levels.

"I am in my pre-sea training. I haven't gone through such experiences, but after hearing experiences of other people I believe it's something to be addressed."

Reasons for not reporting

	North Asia	Africa	SE Asia	Europe and UK	China
Handled it myself	39.7%	46.2%	33.1%	17%	10%
Fear of retaliation	18.5%	17.1%	36.2%	26%	15%
Belief that nothing would change	18.2%	29.0%	29.1%	34%	15%
Lack of clear reporting channels	12.9%	13.3%	16.5%	21%	20%
Didn't know how to report	8.9%	10.0%	9.4%	6%	15%

The data highlights significant barriers to reporting bullying and harassment in the maritime industry, revealing a troubling reliance on individuals handling incidents themselves rather than seeking formal resolutions. Fear of retaliation and a widespread belief that reporting would lead to no meaningful change indicate a systemic failure to build trust and accountability within the industry.

A lack of clear reporting channels and knowledge about how to report further exacerbates the issue, leaving many seafarers feeling isolated and unsupported. These challenges highlight an urgent need for robust reporting mechanisms, greater transparency, and a cultural shift to empower seafarers to speak up without fear or scepticism. Without these changes, the industry risks perpetuating a cycle of silence and inaction.

Outcomes of reported incidents

	North Asia	Africa	SE Asia	Europe and UK	China
Issue resolved effectively	55%	71%	52%	23%	58%
Issue acknowledged but not fully resolved	14%	17%	28.0%	45%	21%
Issue ignored	31%	12%	20%	32%	21%

It is highly concerning that the number of reported issues being fully resolved is alarmingly low across the maritime industry. In several regions, a significant proportion of reported incidents are either only partially addressed or entirely ignored. This indicates a systemic failure in effectively handling cases of bullying and harassment, which can erode trust in the reporting process and discourage seafarers from coming forward in the future. The lack of satisfactory resolutions not only perpetuates harmful behaviours but also undermines efforts to create a safe and supportive working environment. Immediate action is necessary to strengthen response mechanisms, ensure accountability, and restore confidence that reporting will lead to meaningful change.

"I was frequently subjected to inappropriate comments from male colleagues. A senior officer made unwanted advances and pressured me to spend time alone with him under the pretext of 'training' – I'm a female cadet on board a container vessel. When I refused, he spread false rumours that I was incompetent".

Suggestions for addressing bullying and harassment

The majority of cadets across all the regions felt that stronger enforcement of anti- bullying and harassment policies and strong leadership was the way forward. They placed this above more education and clearer policies. Cadets and ratings from South East Asia , China, the UK and Europe all felt the least helpful suggestion was support groups or counselling, while North Asia and African cadets felt the least helpful suggestion was anonymous reporting.

SUGGESTION	North Asia	Africa	South East Asia	Europe and UK	China
Stronger enforcement of policies	24.2%	29.7%	33.8%	35%	33%
Strong leadership culture	25.3%	21.5%	30.9%	47%	19%
More education and training	21.6%	26.5%	16.9%	35%	5%
Clear policies and consequences	13.8%	14.0%	12.5%	42%	19%
Support groups or counselling services	8.2%	4.3%	1.5%	18%	5%
Anonymous reporting mechanisms	6.9%	3.9%	4.4%	45%	19%

"Given the fact that we can have platforms like Sailors' Society provides, I feel there should be an awareness on this as part of the on board drills so that the topic is constantly discussed on board..."

"During my short time at sea, I have experienced varying forms of discrimination and harassment as a female seafarer, including verbal and physical. The majority of what I have experienced has been in the form of sexist, overly sexualised, or discriminatory comments. I feel that I haven't had the same opportunity to learn and focus on my training as my male peers did due to certain situations that occurred throughout my training."

Peer-to-Peer Support Group members have their say

This unique global network of Peer-to-Peer Support Groups is designed to provide seafarers with a safe, confidential space to connect, share experiences, and support one another. These groups are tailored around areas of shared identity or experience, including nationality, rank, and specific wellbeing needs.

214 GROUPS
2,869 MEMBERS

"They said it's normal, this happens on every ship. You'll learn about it with time. To which I say, someone has to break the chain."

Group members reported that the bullying and harassment they experienced took the form of intimidation, verbal abuse and deliberate exclusion or isolation. Some also said they experienced hierarchical bullying from more senior officers or their company.

The following disclosures were taken from messages between seafarers and our moderators in these groups.

Verbal abuse:

"As a trainee, you're bound to make errors/ mistakes, the idea is to teach us. But instead I was showered with verbal abuses often involving cuss words. The entire team was Indian on board and the cuss words were from our language."

A cadet said he was insulted and cursed when making a mistake due to inexperience. The cursing was in his mother tongue and made it more personal and hurtful. However, he said it was viewed as acceptable behaviour by the all-Indian crew he was working with and that their view was that he just needed to 'toughen up'.

Physical intimidation:

"I lost hope and was on the verge of losing myself. My junior officers couldn't do anything either as they were waiting for promotions and didn't want to be a part of this."

One seafarer said he had experienced mental torture and this took the form of non-verbal hostility.

A trainee seafarer said he was forced to sign an extension to his contract when he didn't want to.

Deliberate exclusion/isolation:

"Since I'm a trainee, I'm not supposed to talk too much to seniors. And since I'm a trainee officer, I'm not supposed to sit with the crew or talk to them. They'll give you work where you have to work on deck separately, so I don't mingle with others. This is how I was being excluded."

A young trainee reported he was ordered to work separately from others on the deck for long hours, often in dangerous conditions. He felt that if something happened to him on deck, nobody would hear him call for help.

In a witness account, another seafarer saw how there was discrimination against other nationalities on the ship.

Hierarchical bullying:

"I requested sign-off when my time was up. I wrote a request letter but the Captain withheld my request because he wanted me to extend contract, so we could all go home together. I was forced to sign an extension of contract."

A trainee officer said that he was silenced when he questioned officers about dangerous working conditions. He was also forced to sign an extension to his contract.

A third officer said that there were delays with salaries and extra working hours assigned that were more than the contract prescribed, often leading to dangerous situations.

One Peer-to-Peer Group member said he was forced to sign off without a 30-day notice period.

Another officer reported that he did not receive his salary. After two months at sea, he was forced to sign off due to excessive demands by seniors.

Many more members said they were forced to extend their contracts.

LGBTQ+ experiences at sea: Insights from Sailors' Society's Peer-to-Peer Support Groups

Recognising the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ seafarers, we have established dedicated groups specifically for this community. Currently, four such groups are active. They serve not only as vital sources of support, but also as platforms for listening, learning, and gathering insights to drive positive change in the industry.

Members of these groups shared their experiences of bullying and harassment with us.

Have you ever experienced bullying or harassment on board as a direct result of your sexual orientation or gender identity?

66.7% Yes, occasionally	**19%** No, but I have witnessed it	**14.3%** No, never
0% Yes, frequently	**0%** Prefer not to say	

Did you experience your sexuality or gender identity as a barrier to entering the maritime industry?

42.9% Yes, to some extent	**23.8%** Yes, it was a significant barrier	**19%** No, not at all
14.3% I'm not sure	**0%** Prefer not to say	

How open are you about your sexual orientation or gender identity with your fellow crewmates?

52.4% Not open at all	**28.6%** Somewhat open - only with selected people	**14.3%** It depends on the crew/voyage
4.8% Completely open	**0%** Prefer not to say	

Have you ever hidden your sexuality or gender identity out of fear of discrimination or exclusion on board?

47.6% Yes, occasionally	**42.9%** Yes, always	**4.8%** Not applicable
4.8% Prefer not to say	**0%** No, never	

How would you describe the overall attitude towards LGBTQ+ individuals on board your vessels?

- **28.6%** Indifferent or neutral
- **28.6%** Generally respectful but with occasional insensitive comments
- **23.8%** Hostile or discriminatory
- **19%** Varies widely from vessel to vessel
- **0%** Very accepting
- **0%** Prefer not to say

Do you feel your company or training institution has adequate support and protection mechanisms for LGBTQ+ seafarers or students?

- **42.9%** Some support exists, but not enough
- **42.9%** No, very little to no support
- **14.3%** I'm not sure
- **0%** Yes, definitely
- **0%** Prefer not to say

Have you ever felt pressured to conform to traditional gender roles or expectations at sea?

- **61.9%** Yes, frequently
- **23.8%** Occasionally
- **9.5%** Not sure
- **4.8%** No, never
- **0%** Prefer not to say

Would you feel comfortable reporting an incident of bullying or harassment related to your sexuality or gender identity?

- **57.1%** Maybe – it would depend on the situation
- **33.3%** No, I would not feel comfortable
- **4.8%** Yes, definitely
- **4.8%** I'm not sure how to report
- **0%** Prefer not to say

*21 members of the LGBTQ+ Peer-to-Peer Support Groups responded in this survey

Analysis: LGBTQ+ experiences at sea – key relationships and insights

The insights into LGBTQ+ seafarers reveal interconnected patterns that highlight a complex and often challenging experience at sea.

Visibility vs. Vulnerability

There is a strong link between levels of openness and perceived safety. While more than half reported not being open at all about their identity on board, almost every respondent had hidden their identity (42.9 per cent doing so always and another 47.6 per cent occasionally). This widespread concealment underscores the sense of vulnerability felt by LGBTQ+ seafarers. The fact that 66.7 per cent experienced bullying or harassment and the same percentage felt pressured to conform to traditional gender roles suggests a direct connection between invisibility and survival.

Cultural Climate and Conformity

Perceptions of on board attitudes reflect inconsistent and often unwelcoming environments. Under a third described their vessels as generally respectful, while another 28.6 per cent reported indifference, 23.8 per cent experienced hostility, and 19 per cent said attitudes varied widely. These ambiguous climates likely contribute to why the overwhelming majority, 81 per cent of respondents, said they were either partially or completely not open at all about their identity while on board and why the majority feel unsafe being visible.

Barriers to Entry and Institutional Trust

More than half of the respondents said their sexuality or gender identity was a barrier to joining the maritime industry—either significantly (23.8 per cent) or to some extent (42.9 per cent). Mirroring this, the overwhelming majority (85.7 per cent) reported that their company or college offered little or only partial support, with none feeling fully supported. The lack of adequate systems is further reflected in the 61.9 per cent who would not feel fully comfortable reporting harassment, and another 4.8 per cent who don't even know how to report.

Witnessing vs. Experiencing

While 66.7 per cent of respondents experienced harassment, another 19 per cent had witnessed it happening to others, meaning over 85 per cent of respondents have observed or endured such treatment firsthand. This strongly indicates that the issue is systemic and widely visible, not isolated to a few individuals or events.

Conclusion

While the sample size is relatively small and should not be interpreted as representative of the entire maritime industry, the findings offer a compelling snapshot into the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ seafarers. The consistency and clarity of the responses point to recurring patterns of exclusion, fear, and inadequate institutional support that should not be overlooked.

The data suggests a maritime culture in which many LGBTQ+ individuals feel compelled to hide their identities and navigate environments that are, at best, indifferent and, at worst, discriminatory. The links between concealment, harassment, and lack of trusted reporting mechanisms highlight the need for urgent action.

This insight reinforces the importance of safe spaces like Sailors' Society's LGBTQ+ peer support groups. These groups provide community, raise visibility, and offer a critical platform to gather feedback and shape meaningful interventions. Going forward, the industry must respond with inclusive training, visibly supportive leadership, and credible protections, ensuring that all seafarers, regardless of identity, feel safe and valued at sea.

Captain Thomas Lindegaard Madsen, Maersk Captain and Employee Elected Member of the Board of Directors of the A.P. Moller - Maersk Group.

'The only one who should not feel safe is the perpetrator'

I have learnt that seafarers can be quite open-minded and inclusive. This is because they have seen so many ways of living on their voyages. What matters is how you perform your job, and that is how you earn your respect.

I started sailing in 1992 as a cadet. I was afraid I would be bullied if it came out that I was gay. But when I did come out on board, nothing happened and I can honestly say, I have never had a word spoken against me on board.

However, recently I have experienced very challenging pushback from colleagues via social media. Nowadays, it seems the harasser does not need to be physically on board. Instead, social media provides them with distance and that makes the harasser feel safe to say anything.

In Maersk, we have a zero-tolerance policy against discrimination, bullying and harassment, because the safety of our people is our first priority, both physical and psychological safety.

In maritime, we tend to focus on our physical safety and things we can see. You might have done everything according to the safety checklist, but if your mind cannot focus on the job, there is a risk you will make a mistake and not only compromise your own safety but also the safety of your colleagues. If you are being bullied and harassed, you will not feel psychologically safe and your mental health deteriorates. You might lose your sleep and your ability to stay concentrated and focused. That is why physical and psychological safety go hand in hand.

In 2022, Maersk embarked on a Cultural Transformation journey with the 'On Our Respect Radar' campaign, which aims to cultivate a fair, inclusive, and safe environment on board our vessels. We launched the campaign with our commitment to create a physically and psychologically safe work environment all over Maersk, at sea and ashore. The cultural transformation also includes initiatives like 'Leading as ONE' - a leadership program for senior officers aimed at building the vocabulary and understanding required to foster a workplace of respect and inclusion.

On board the ships, we regularly conduct 'Respect Radar' sessions where all crew are divided into smaller groups and given different scenarios and discuss whether it is a respectful scenario, just an awkward situation, or if it is harassment. These sessions have helped us define what is okay and what is not okay and build a vocabulary when discussing it.

It may be a journey that never ends, but now we feel better equipped for it. We all have to take personal responsibility and create a speak-up culture, where all crew can feel psychologically safe to raise any concerns and complaints without fear. We know the company and our leaders have our backs. We know there are means in place to handle cases very efficiently. I have seen it work in my case, where I had full support and this had consequences for the harasser.

The only one who should not feel safe is the perpetrator.

Captain Thomas Lindegaard Madsen

David Hammond AFNI, Executive Director, Human Rights at Sea International

A lived experience and a changed life

Being asked to contribute to this important Snapshot means a lot to me. I can share the life-long impact of being on the receiving end of bullying.

It is the first time I have publicly spoken about this but I wish to thank Johan Smith for convincing me to articulate the life-changing effects that this issue can have.

I speak with lived experience. I was bullied as a cadet at sea. The experience had a negative impact at the time and should have affected me even more badly than it did, but I have been able to turn that negative experience into a longer-term positive.

At the time, it was seen by some as part of the ritual of training, part of the process which was considered as the norm. It should not have been. I was a young and impressionable individual on board a ship with nowhere to go other than a tiny six-berth cabin. What I now know is that to have been bullied by those in positions of power undoubtedly impacted on my life.

But I refuse to see myself as a victim. Instead, this damaging experience has defined my outlook to ensure that I seek justice for those who cannot speak up for themselves. It has given me the moral courage to step in at whatever cost and to never walk past bullying and harassment in any guise.

Today, the impact of what happened in my earliest adult years at sea has driven me to become a more compassionate person. It led me to create the charity and advocacy platform, 'Human Rights at Sea', dealing with the very topic of the protection of human rights of people at sea. It led me to become a lawyer in the maritime human rights field, a founder and a CEO in civil society organisations and now, to investigate abuses of others within a dedicated team.

It also provided me with the experience to be able to be a mentor for the next generation enabling them to be better aware of what conduct is acceptable and what is not. It has enabled shared empathy. It has enabled the strength to challenge when it seems you are one of the few voices. I hope it has made me a better parent.

However, bullying and harassment undermine personal confidence, they prevent the full development of the person, they can take an individual down the road of substance abuse and self-harm and, at worst, considerations of suicide.

At 53, I am not a 'snowflake' as some may describe those who speak about their personal challenges. I have had a demanding and exciting career in the military, have seen the world, have experienced the worst and best in people, and lived alongside humanity in action both at sea and on land.

What happens in our formative years and later on does shape our lives and the lives of those closest to us. It is, therefore, up to all of us to ensure that where we can we step in when necessary to help positively shape the lives of others. Sometimes, the simplest action of genuinely asking the question "how are you?" could make the difference.

My lessons learned - do not walk by nor turn your head if you can step in when matters are not right. You could, quite literally, save someone's life.

David Hammond AFNI

Human Rights at Sea International continues to operate after the closure of its charitable arm - Human Rights at Sea. While the charity's main focus was public advocacy, Human Rights at Sea International focuses on paid consultancy and behind-the-scenes investigations of abuse. It supports new initiatives and directs funds into the protection of human rights at sea.

Heidi Heseltine, Founder, Diversity Study Group

Diversity equality and inclusion data benchmarking

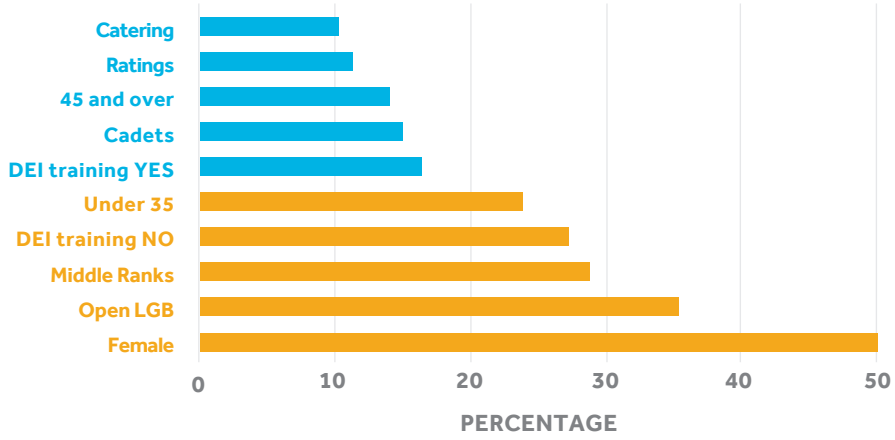
In 2024, with Sailors' Society as an official supporter, the Diversity Study Group launched its seafarer Diversity Equality and Inclusion (DEI) data benchmarking, alongside the shore-based employee data benchmarking, which has been running since 2018.

Providing a physically and psychologically safe working culture and environment for our seafarers is crucial, not just because it is the right thing to do but also to address the challenges the industry faces in retaining and attracting seafarers. Embedding a culture of inclusion on board ships minimizes the risks of incidents, boosts engagement and contributes to enhanced wellbeing, as individuals look out for each other as well as themselves.

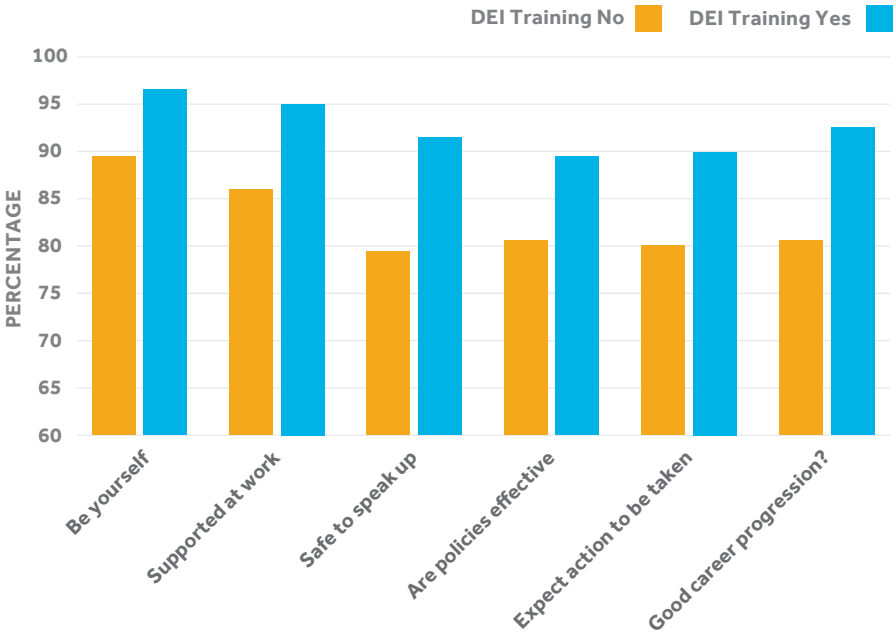
Our aim within our global annual seafarer DEI data initiative, and that of our Corporate Membership Community, is to use the qualitative and quantitative data that comes directly from the seafarers to understand their experience on board, identify what is working well and highlight areas where focus and action is needed.

With more than 5,000 seafarers participating in our first survey, we gained some extensive insights into their engagement, experience and sense of belonging and, critically, areas that make a positive difference.

Top and bottom five categories for experience of psychological harassment (seafarer respondents)



Awareness matters



Our data found that one in five people have experienced some kind of psychological harassment such as bullying. Some 50 per cent of women, 35 per cent of LGBTQ+ and 29 per cent of middle-ranked seafarers top this list. Caterers and ratings are least affected.

The most junior ranks tended to be least likely to have faced this problem; among middle ranks – where perhaps there is more responsibility for on board performance – the incidents were much higher. But being a woman or LGBTQ+ is where the most negative results can be seen, not only are these groups more likely to face harassment, but they are much less likely to feel it is safe to speak up and to consider DEI policies are effective.

A quarter of all women in the survey reported having experienced sexual harassment. Of those, 38 per cent said it happened more than twice. Just over one per cent of men suffered some form of sexual harassment, where nearly 40 per cent of cases were a single occasion and 28 per cent more than twice.

We wanted to try and understand if there were any emerging themes indicating why some people have a more positive experience than others.

Here our data showed some interesting results when we looked at those individuals who have had some form of DEI training, and we found a clear correlation between those who have had DEI training and how they are feeling.

Possible explanations for these differences include the idea that the training raises awareness of issues and empowers seafarers to be themselves and reject exclusionary practices, or the idea that training was crew-wide, and helped shipmates understand how their behaviours might have been negatively affecting their colleagues.

It is important to also note that this gap extends to experience, not just feelings. Those who have not had DEI training are 25 per cent more likely to have experienced sexual harassment, 67 per cent more likely to have felt psychologically harassed – and more than twice as likely to have felt discriminated against.

The data in our surveys are rarely this clear-cut which indicates that this is an area deserving of much more detailed study and action. We are encouraged to work with a number of organisations where this is a priority focus area, providing seafarers with an environment that promotes physical and psychological safety and wellbeing, with clear accountability and zero tolerance for actions and behaviours that do not align with company values and culture.

Heidi Heseltine

The Diversity Study Group Ltd (DSG) was formed in 2018 and is the first organisation dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace across the global shipping and maritime sectors.

Utilising its unique blend of maritime and DEI expertise, it offers global DEI consulting, benchmarking and networking opportunities for all organisations operating within the shipping and maritime community, including shore-based and seafaring employees.

Toni Frost, Operations Manager, Safer Waves

Supporting seafarers: How Safer Waves is turning the tide on sexual violence

The maritime industry is built on resilience, but for too many seafarers, the challenges go beyond the physical demands of life at sea. Sexual violence and harassment remain persistent issues, and finding support isn't always easy, especially when working in remote environments with limited resources.

The Facts and Figures

Understanding the reality of sexual violence at sea requires more than just conversation - it demands thoughtful, data-informed insight. While a comprehensive prevalence study was not possible due to the challenges of random sampling in the maritime sector, illustrative research provides vital insight into the nature and impact of these offences.

To this end, a team of researchers from Winchester University conducted an anonymous, voluntary survey in collaboration with Safer Waves. Open to UK seafarers and those with experience on UK-flagged vessels within the past five years, the survey was promoted via social media and maritime networks. The sample was self-selecting and not intended to be representative of the wider seafaring population. However, the findings offer critical insight into experiences and, in particular, the patterns of reporting related to sexual violence and harassment.

"The existing data suggests that sexual harassment and gender discrimination are fairly widespread within the seafaring community, and shows that sexual offences of increased severity, such as rape, also occur at sea. Victims and witnesses rarely report any of these offences, and reporting infrequently results in a satisfactory outcome for them. Given the unique challenges faced by seafarers in attempting to obtain support of any kind after a sexual offence, the present study highlights the need for tailored resources that provide such victims the opportunity to obtain psychological and legal advice and assistance."
- Waterhouse et al., 2025, p. 2

The table highlights the percentage of victims and witnesses who reported incidents - either formally (e.g. to authorities or companies) or informally (e.g. to a colleague):

Offence	% of victims who reported	% of witnesses who reported
Rape	**42.1%**	**69%**
Sexual Assault	**46.9%**	**64%**
Assault by Penetration	**37.5%**	**63.3%**
Controlling or Coercive Behaviour	**24.5%**	**38.1%**
Sexual Harassment	**35.6%**	**54.2%**
Gender Discrimination	**30.3%**	**43.8%**
Child Pornography	**0%**	**48.6%**
Domestic Abuse	**25%**	**55%**
Stalking	**33.3%**	**57.4%**

These findings reinforce a troubling reality: reporting rates remain low, even for the most serious offences. Addressing this requires not only better reporting pathways, but also greater trust in the outcomes of those processes, and dedicated resources that reflect the realities of life at sea.

Creating a Safer Future at Sea

We are dedicated to creating a safer maritime industry, offering direct support to seafarers while driving real change through education, training, and public speaker services. Our confidential email support service provides a safe, anonymous space for seafarers facing sexual violence or harassment, no matter where they are in the world.

Beyond support, we equip the industry with the tools to create safer workplaces. Our **training and education programmes** help companies, cadet colleges, and industry leaders understand the realities of life at sea, tackle safeguarding issues, and create cultures where seafarers can work with dignity and respect. Through our public speaking services, we challenge outdated mindsets, raise awareness, and advocate for real, lasting change.

With a global reach, Safer Waves is dedicated to ensuring no seafarer feels alone. Interwoven into everything we do is the **wellbeing of seafarers** whether through our anonymous support service, educational resources, or industry-wide training. We are committed to making maritime careers safer, fairer, and more inclusive for all.

Sexual violence and harassment have no place in the maritime industry. Every seafarer deserves to work in an environment where they feel safe, valued, and supported. Whether you need confidential support, expert-led training, or guidance on creating a safer workplace, Safer Waves is here to help.

Toni Frost

Safer Waves was set up in 2019 to provide support to merchant seafarers who have experienced sexual violence, sexual harassment or gender discrimination on board and so we are delighted to be able to contribute to this Snapshot into the state of bullying and harassment in the maritime world.

CASE STUDIES

A shipping company emailed Sailors' Society to ask for support for a female deck cadet who had suffered harassment on board. She had suffered sexual harassment while in the ship's elevator. She reported to officers, who in turn reported to the Captain. The Captain immediately reported to the company to be dealt with. The cadet continued work after being supported by the CRN team and fellow members of the Peer-to-Peer Support Group she joined.

A young female seafarer on her first voyage reached out through a Sailors' Society Peer-to-Peer Support Group to say she had been assaulted by a senior officer on board. She was suffering emotional and physical trauma and her family, who knew what had happened, were also distressed. She was referred to our CRN team for specialist help.

Sato Lipponen COO at PsyFyi

Bullying and harassment - a sample survey

Satisfaction and feeling safe

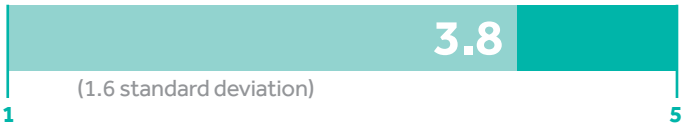
The following data was collected from vessels with crews that were 20 per cent female, who operated in a controlled and diverse environment, with employers who were focused on best practices - and this reflects their satisfaction scores.

The results here may seem surprising with non-officers and females clearly scoring higher than officers and males for feeling safe from bullying and harassment But the female seafarers and non-officers polled for this survey appear to have recognised that more resources were being focused towards them, creating a better environment for them.

This allowed them to score higher than officers and males when it came to feeling safe from bullying and harassment. The resources offered clearly had less of an impact on the male seafarers and officers and this is reflected in their satisfaction scores.

Question: Feeling safe from bullying and harassment

SATISFACTION:



SATISFACTION BY RANK:

4.1 NON-OFFICER

3.4 OFFICER

SATISFACTION BY GENDER:

4.1 FEMALE

3.7 MALE

The next stage was to unpack what allows all members of the crew (male and female, officer and ranks) to feel safe from bullying and harassment on board.

Why do crew feel safe from bullying and harassment?

	Overall	Rank		Gender	
		Non-Officer	Officer	Female	Male
Respect of other people	29%	22%	30%	17%	34%
Strong company policies and training	23%	32%	15%	42%	17%
More female seafarers on board	18%	27%	25%	33%	15%
Good colleagues and leadership	15%	5%	10%	8%	17%

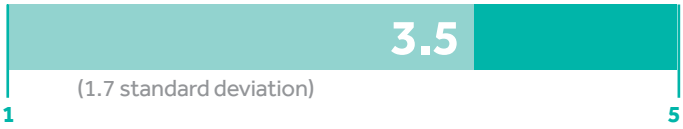
It is clear from the data that those polled for this survey felt having more female seafarers on board (18%) can bring attention to bullying and harassment and that having supportive colleagues and leadership helps crew feel safe.

But the highest scores came from a sense of respect amongst the crew (29%) and having strong company policies and training (23%).

Interestingly, there was yet again a divide between non-officers and females and male crew and officers, the former put more emphasis on the strong company policies and training, whereas seasoned, more experienced male seafarers (often at officer level) believe that the most effective way to tackle issues on board is by being respectful and considerate. The latter rated simply respecting others as the best way to help them feel safer.

Question: Actions to prevent bullying and harassment

SATISFACTION:



SATISFACTION BY RANK:

3.7 NON-OFFICER

3.3 OFFICER

SATISFACTION BY GENDER:

3.4 FEMALE

3.6 MALE

The satisfaction scores for action to prevent bullying and harassment score lower than those for feeling safe. This suggests the crew polled had not seen any specific actions that focused on prevention.

What actions have been taken to prevent bullying and harassment?

	Overall	Rank		Gender	
		Non-Officer	Officer	Female	Male
Discussing company policies around bullying and harassment regularly on board	44%	50%	35%	40%	46%
Training on bullying and harassment	30%	30%	29%	27%	31%
Strong company policies	26%	20%	35%	33%	22%

Bullying and harassment - a sample survey continued

When this sample group was asked about the actions that have been taken, the highest scores (35-50%), across all ranks and genders, were around discussing company policies and guidelines in regular meetings.

In addition, there was common agreement (27-31%) that training helps to address bullying and harassment on board.

Finally, the officers in particular (35%) saw company policies as a key tool in preventing bullying and harassment.

Analysis

Employers should take note that non-officers, who might be younger and less experienced, along with female seafarers, who are more prone to experiencing bullying and harassment, both benefit greatly from strong company policies and support.

As they respond better to more systematic processes which are office and company-led, regular training, robust company policies and clear guidance on behaviour are recommended for these groups.

However, the divide between the groups highlights that there is a need to curate a variety of different methods to tackle bullying and harassment. The male and officer group respond more effectively to a more personal approach such as 'treating each other fairly'.

At present, most companies are addressing bullying and harassment through company policies and training and based on the data this seems to work for some of the crew. But the data also shows there is a large group of seafarers who seem to respond better to the behavioural aspect.

Companies should consider other ways of fostering respect among the seafarers than merely through training and processes and recognise the effect that will have on bullying and harassment.

Sato Lipponen

PsyFyi is an advanced data collection and analytical company focused on the human element. PsyFyi assists owners and operators in identifying positive and negative trends which are developing on board in real-time using their innovative data collection tool - **SeaQ**. This is done by asking the seafarers anonymous, critical-thinking questions aimed at assessing risk. **SeaQ** offers customisable questions, while the interactive dashboard and regular reporting are tailored to support each company in driving change that boosts safety and profitability.

Toon van de Sande, Research and Project Development at PsyFyi

What's behind the data?

Nowadays "data" is an oft-used concept to understand all kinds of processes. It provides new insights. But when we collect data about human behaviour, we should be very careful.

When I was reflecting on the challenging data from Sailors' Society's cadet conferences and MyWellness e-learning platform provided in this excellent snapshot, I had to resist dealing only with figures, percentages, maximum minimum. I had to look beyond this, to gain insight into the people themselves and their experiences.

Behind the presented data are unique individuals with a specific past, with hope, experiences, drives, shortcomings, education, friendships, parents and ideals. These individuals have shared with us very personal experiences. Every data-point is the result of an individual's experience and thinking.

I try to imagine the process in the respondents' minds when they were asked difficult questions like, "Have you experienced or witnessed verbal or physical abuse, social exclusion, cyberbullying or sexual harassment?" Did they then ask themselves questions like: "What do they mean? What do I remember? Was it abuse? Did I consider the behaviour of others as part of the game? When and how did the mentioned practices start? With misplaced so-called jokes? Am I childish when I feel that I was hurt?

I also assume that the feeling gained through going through those questions was something like "what I experienced or witnessed is not as it should be." "This was not as it should be".

And therefore, for each of them, CHANGE is needed and they start this by reporting it.

A process of change usually consists of four phases that continues in a process like a spiral and throughout "how it should be" stays at the heart.

The process starts with an emotional awareness that "this was not as it should be". Phase two sees the collecting of more memories and stories about similar experiences. Phase three involves reflection and analysis of these stories and memories. In Phase four, hopefully, we see suggestions and ideas for betterment forming, which can be put into practice later.

When we reflect on the outcomes we see above, we should ask ourselves a question too - "Are the witnessed or experienced actions valued the same by all cadets?"

We can observe a common growing or developing global awareness, but there are significant differences in the outcomes when we consider gender and the different cultures involved.

Each respondent will experience the pain of their experience differently and what made me think most was the relation between the percentage of having experienced and witnessed harassment and bullying and the intensity of the assault.

And if we are to make changes, as we analyse this data in this report, we also need to hold this process in our minds. The key, for us, will be the issues that provoke the feeling - "this is not how it should be!" and the question this feeling prompts should be " how can we change this?"

The answer and what needs to be done now - systematic change!

Toon van de Sande

A former sailing pastor, Toon was a member of the advisory board of Human Rights at Sea (HRAS) until 2024. He wrote the White Paper "Empowering People working at Sea from Training to Justice; Some thoughts to better develop a Culture of Care and increased empowerment in the maritime environment."

He was involved in the setup of the Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme. He is an accredited trainer for the Wellness at Sea Programme and a first mate in inland shipping. He now works in research and development at maritime data analysts, PsyFyi.

James Ng, Loss Prevention Officer, Britannia P&I Club Tindall Riley

Addressing harassment incidents on board ships

As a P&I Club, we are well aware that addressing harassment, including sexual harassment, on ships is a critical concern. One that requires an organised strategy.

That the maritime community is already implementing initiatives to combat harassment, reduce unconscious bias and create gender-neutral work environments, is a real positive. The community also has guidelines to tackle violence and harassment in the sector, provided by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

With this in mind, what are some basic approaches that can be adopted by all companies now to help prevent bullying and harassment incidents on board?

Comprehensive Training

Training should not only cover harassment policies but also include modules on gender sensitivity, communication skills and conflict resolution. It is crucial that training programmes are mandatory for all crew members, regardless of rank or position. Participants should learn to recognise early warning signs of bullying, harassment, and bias, including behavioural changes, isolation, and diminished morale.

Implementing a buddy system that pairs crew members can also encourage mutual support and companionship. This system can be particularly beneficial for individuals who may be experiencing distress or isolation, providing both emotional support and conflict mediation.

Promoting diversity and inclusion

A diverse crew, reflecting various cultural backgrounds, can occasionally face misunderstandings that, if ignored, may escalate into conflict. By creating a culture of respect for different backgrounds and encouraging cultural sensitivity through team building exercises and conflict resolution strategies, the risk of conflict can be reduced and promoting diversity and inclusion within the maritime workforce helps prevent bullying and harassment.

The IMO's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly SDG-5 on gender equality, alongside the Women in Maritime programme, supports gender visibility and empowerment. This initiative includes training and career development opportunities specifically for women, aiming to establish professional associations and enhance visibility in the industry.

Clear Reporting Channels

Confidential and secure reporting processes are vital if we are to encourage victims and witnesses to speak up. Anonymous hotlines, email addresses, and digital platforms should be easily accessible, with crew members informed during onboarding. Many ship managers have introduced anonymous email systems or letterboxes for reporting. Reports should be directed to the Designated Person Ashore (DPA) to ensure confidentiality, following the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) guidelines.

Support Networks

Establishing support networks, including access to the DPA, welfare officers, mental health resources, and peer support groups, helps crew members feel safe. A trained individual should handle complaints and escalate serious cases when necessary. Independent third-party welfare organisations offering 24-hour confidential helplines can provide additional support to crew members facing harassment.

Prompt Investigations

All harassment reports must be investigated promptly and fairly, ensuring confidentiality and impartiality, in line with MLC requirements. Investigators should conduct confidential interviews with the victim, witnesses, and accused while maintaining a respectful and unbiased approach.

Regular Policy Review

Management should implement clear policies within the Safety Management System, defining harassment and grievance procedures. Regular policy reviews ensure alignment with legislative changes and crew feedback.

Open Communication

Encouraging open dialogue helps prevent harassment. Regular meetings where crew members can raise concerns foster an inclusive work environment.

At Britannia P&I Club we believe that by fostering an inclusive and respectful culture, the maritime industry can work towards eliminating harassment and ensuring a safe environment for all crew members.

James Ng

Britannia P&I Club is the oldest P&I Club in the world, providing Protection and Indemnity insurance (P&I) and Freight, Demurrage and Defence insurance (FD&D) to shipowners and charterers. The Britannia Group's core values are Mutuality, Trust, Integrity, Expertise and Excellence. Britannia P&I is one of the market leaders in the International Group of P&I Clubs.

Conclusion

This State of the Industry Snapshot offers a sobering and deeply concerning view of bullying and harassment at sea. From the experiences shared by cadets and ratings to the data contributed by key organisations, the evidence is clear: Bullying and harassment continues to harm the safety, dignity, and wellbeing of far too many seafarers. Some contributors have gone so far as to suggest that these behaviours are endemic - an entrenched issue within the very fabric of the maritime industry. For anyone committed to building a safer and more inclusive sector, this must be a wake-up call.

Yet, it is also important to pause and acknowledge just how far we've come. A mere decade ago, bullying and harassment were not openly discussed; it was whispered about in corridors, dismissed as part of the job, or hidden behind a veil of silence. It was one of the industry's open secrets. Today, this has changed. Seafarers are speaking up with courage. Captains, cadets, and crew are saying "enough is enough". Regulatory bodies like the IMO are taking notice and demanding action. Companies are engaging meaningfully - reviewing policies, providing training, investing in wellbeing programmes, and working with external partners to bring about cultural change. A shift is happening.

Yes, we still have a long way to go. Systemic change does not happen overnight. But when we reflect on the growing momentum - from the IMO Secretary-General lending his voice to this report, to the lived experiences courageously shared by industry leaders and young seafarers alike - there is cause for hope. The loud voices calling for reform, and the genuine efforts being made by organisations around the world, tell us that we are on the right track.

In the midst of statistics, graphs, and policy reviews, we must remember the individuals behind the data - those still suffering the consequences of bullying and harassment today. The young female cadet isolated in her cabin, the LGBTQ+ seafarer facing exclusion, the junior officer afraid to speak up. While we influence and reshape the broader industry, we cannot lose sight of the people who remain at risk because change has not reached them yet.

To them, we owe not only action - but urgency. And to every organisation, charity, union, training institution, and company working tirelessly to create a maritime world free from prejudice, bullying, harassment, and assault - we offer our deepest respect and gratitude. This report is not just a snapshot of a problem; it is a tribute to the growing movement determined to fix it. Let us stay the course.

Johan Smith
Head of Wellness
Sailors' Society

Wellness at Sea
FROM SAILORS' SOCIETY

CADET CONFERENCES 2025

Safe, Seen, Supported - Seafaring in a Changing World

These unique and highly acclaimed virtual events exploring the all-important subject of wellness and mental health are designed especially for the current intake of cadets.

With a focus on key and current issues facing today's seafarers and the maritime industry, there will be interactive sessions and practical advice as well as presentations from key regional and global maritime leaders and influencers.

"These cadet conferences created a unique platform for exchanging knowledge that can help shape the future of the field for the best."

2024 Africa Cadet Conference participant

SAVE THE DATE

NORTH ASIA: 4 September

AFRICA: 18 September

SOUTH EAST ASIA: 18 October

UK AND EUROPE: 20 November

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Sailors' Society

Our services

Our award-winning Wellness at Sea programme provides the tools to help cadets, seafarers, and their companies, to thrive.

WELLNESS AT SEA FUNDERS

EURONAV® The ocean is our environment

WEST.

Sailors' Society

Working at sea can bring all kinds of challenges.

But we're here to get seafarers Sea Ready.

We provide valuable Sea Ready training to help all seafarers, regardless of rank, feel more prepared before they join their ship.

Available as:

- A new section in our MyWellness e-learning app - thanks to support from Baltic Exchange Charitable Foundation
- A one-hour Sea Ready training session delivered by Sailors' Society

Sea Ready gives an overview of how to look after yourself and others on board.

This ensures everyone arrives on your vessel with a basic toolkit to help them thrive at sea, knowing where to go if they need support and how to spot signs of deteriorating mental health in themselves and their crew mates.

SEA READY E-LEARNING SUPPORTED BY

Baltic Exchange Charitable Foundation

Wellness at Sea
FROM SAILORS' SOCIETY

sailors-society.org

Sailors' Society

We work with shipping companies, maritime schools and unions all over the world, supporting cadets, seafarers and their families.

To find out more about Sailors' Society's Wellness at Sea, please contact our Head of Wellness Johan Smith at jsmith@sailors-society.org or visit sailors-society.org/wellness

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