

SUB-COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL
BEING OF SEAFARERS

HTWF/2
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Origin: English

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING OF SEAFARERS:

**Addressing the mental and physical
challenges in maritime conditions.**

Submitted by team F-2

SUMMARY

Executive summary: This document highlights urgent concerns regarding the mental health and well-being of seafarers. Persistent challenges include prolonged isolation, fatigue, harassment, inadequate living conditions, lack of reproductive health provisions, and underreporting of suicide and harassment cases. The paper underlines disparities by rank, vessel type, and gender, evaluates the role of NGOs, and considers innovative measures such as telemedicine and AI-based monitoring. It concludes that binding international standards, institutionalized NGO partnerships, and integration of mental health into STCW and MLC frameworks are necessary for long-term solutions.

*Strategic direction,
if applicable:*

Output:

Action to be taken: Paragraph 16 and 19

Related documents: MSC.109/5/1; HTW 9/INF.4; Seafarers Happiness Index (2024 – 2025); Cardiff University Seafarers' Mental Health Report; ISWAN (2024) Mentally Healthy Ships; Mission to Seafarers SHI Reports.

Introduction

1 This document is submitted in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 6.12.5 of the *Organization and method of work of the Maritime Safety Committee and the Marine Environment Protection Committee and their subsidiary bodies* (MSC-MEPC.1/Circ.5/Rev.5). It draws attention to the growing crisis of mental health in the maritime industry and the urgent need to integrate binding protections into the work of the IMO and its relevant conventions.

Background

2 Seafarers are indispensable to global trade yet often work under conditions that compromise their well-being. Recent surveys, including the Seafarers Happiness Index (2024–2025), report only modest improvements since the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Key factors affecting mental health include isolation, long contracts, poor amenities, harassment, and the absence of confidential support systems.

4 NGOs such as ISWAN, Mission to Seafarers, Sailors' Society, and Stella Maris provide vital welfare services, but their impact remains fragmented without formal integration into international regulatory frameworks. Additionally, women seafarers face disproportionate challenges due to inadequate sanitary provisions, sexual harassment, and the lack of gender-sensitive policies.

Discussions

5 Challenges

- .1 **Isolation and lack of contact with family:**
Long contracts, limited shore leave, and poor internet access keep seafarers cut off from their families and the outside world. This long separation often leads to sadness, loneliness, and anxiety.
- .2 **Long working hours and tiredness:**
Many seafarers work beyond safe limits with little rest. Continuous fatigue reduces alertness and increases the chance of accidents and mistakes.
- .3 **Unstable jobs and money problems:**
Delayed wages, short-term contracts, and fear of losing jobs create constant stress. Many seafarers hesitate to talk about mental health issues because they worry it might affect their employment.
- .4 **Stigma and lack of awareness:**
In many crews, talking about mental health is still seen as a weakness. Because of this, problems often stay hidden until they become serious.
- .5 **Bullying, harassment, and discrimination:**
Seafarers—especially women and junior crew—often face unfair treatment, verbal abuse, or harassment on board. The fear of reporting these issues adds more stress and isolation.

- .6 **Poor access to support and medical care:**
Most ships do not have trained mental health officers, private counselling areas, or reliable systems to report problems safely. Medical staff on board usually receive little training in handling psychological issues.
- .7 **After-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:**
During the pandemic, many seafarers were stuck on ships for months without crew changes or shore leave. This caused extreme emotional strain and showed that the current system is not ready for such emergencies.

Outcome

6 The comprehensive review of the STCW Convention and Code, alongside continued implementation of MLC 2006, provides an opportunity to embed mental health as a core human element priority. In this regard, the following actions are identified:

- .1 **Mandatory Training and Awareness**
Mental health should be incorporated into maritime training curricula. This includes formal modules, counselling support in maritime colleges, seminars, and annual refresher training under STCW. Such provisions would raise awareness, destigmatize mental health, and ensure that seafarers are equipped to manage stress at sea.
- .2 **Technological Support**
The adoption of AI-based mental health monitoring, telemedicine, and reliable satellite internet onboard must be standardized. These tools can help identify stress or fatigue early, provide timely remote medical care, and ensure uninterrupted communication with families. IMO-backed infrastructure and collaboration with developed nations and satellite providers can help raise the necessary funding and ensure equitable access.
- .3 **NGO Partnerships**
Non-governmental organizations such as ISWAN, Stella Maris, and Sailors' Society already deliver welfare services including helplines, counselling, and emergency support. Formalizing these partnerships under IMO guidance would make these services available to all seafarers as a matter of right, with multilingual, 24/7 accessibility.
- .4 **Gender-Sensitive Reforms**
Women seafarers face specific challenges such as harassment, lack of sanitary provisions, and absence of private health facilities. Confidential reporting systems, gender-sensitive welfare policies, and reproductive healthcare infrastructure should be made mandatory under MLC 2006 to ensure equity and safety.
- .5 **STCW & IMO Amendments**
The STCW framework should be amended to include mandatory modules on wellbeing and fatigue management, with periodic audits to ensure compliance. These should be integrated into Safety Management Systems (SMS) to ensure continuous monitoring of mental health standards on

board.

.6 **Dedicated Mental Health Officers**

Vessels over 500 GT should be required to appoint a trained mental health officer or focal point, responsible for offering immediate support, maintaining confidentiality, and coordinating with external welfare services when needed.

.7 **Pandemic Preparedness Annex**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted systemic failures in crew change, repatriation, and welfare access. A dedicated annex should be developed under IMO conventions to ensure binding global protocols for such crises, including crew relief mechanisms, mental health provisions, and emergency medical access.

Action requested of the Sub-Committee

7 The Sub-Committee is invited to:

1. **consider the issues** outlined in paragraphs 10–15 of this document as core human element concerns affecting seafarers globally;
 2. **acknowledge mental health** as a critical factor in maritime safety, requiring equal importance alongside technical training and physical safety;
 3. **examine the feasibility** of amending STCW and MLC to include mandatory training, fatigue management, confidential reporting systems, gender-sensitive reforms, and pandemic protocols
 4. **support the integration** of NGO-led welfare initiatives and technology-driven tools (AI, telemedicine, satellite communication) into binding IMO frameworks; and
 5. **develop coordinated programmes and policies** that make seafarers' mental health a long-term priority across IMO activities, encouraging Member States and industry partners to allocate dedicated funds and share best practices for sustainable welfare improvement.
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