



## Prisoners at sea: The psychosocial effect that the Covid-19 pandemic had on seafarers

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to analyse and discuss the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on seafarers globally. Moreover, this research's focus is on the psychosocial distress that the seafarers experienced, and continue to experience, since the declaration of pandemic. The paper's premise is that these psychosocial stressors in the maritime industry are not new, but it was exacerbated since the onset of the pandemic. Methodologically netography will be used as the primary source for the collection of data and first-hand contact with seafarers on social media platforms, of which one is a Facebook group, 'Seafarers Forum' managed by the author. In addition, with the permission of seafarers' missions, this data was extracted from their social media platforms. This data was compared with existing scholastic research that focused on pre-existing psychosocial conditions that exist and are at work in the maritime industry.

### 1. Introduction.

The maritime industry is not only deemed as the most stressful industry to work in, but also the most overlooked (Carol-Dekker and Khan, 2016). Mindful of this, one should consider that globally, up to 90 percent of all goods are transported by sea and that this must surely identify it as essential to the global economy. The very nature of this industry demands a workforce that is on duty 24 hours, 7 days a week. These stringent working hours are only possible if the crew is rotated on a regular basis. These regular crew change overs, are necessary to allow seafarers time to rest both mentally and physically by spending time with their significant others away from the demands of this high stress environment (Cotton, 2021). If these human element problems are not addressed properly it can result in mental and physical fatigue (ITF Seafarers, 2022).

Mental and physical fatigue in the maritime industry is regarded as human element issues which can endanger the lives of seafarers and put the safety of the ship at risk (Graham, 2019). Although the causal effects of accidents at sea are complex, up

to 96 percent of all accidents at sea, from minor to major incidents, are due to the human element causes (Paolo et al., 2021). Paolo et al. (2021) identified human elements factors that influence safety at sea as fatigue, health, and stress which in turn influence situational awareness, effective communication, and decision making.

Stressors at sea which are aggravated by physical and mental fatigue have many causes of which some are cited as being: lack of regular contact with loved ones due to poor or no internet connections, limited or no shore leave, long contracts, poor working conditions, and in some cases ship and crew abandonment by the ship owners or operators (Allianz, 2022, Graham, 2019, ISWAN, 2021, ITF Seafarers, 2022, Nautilus International, 2015, Oldenburg et al., 2012). The already existing human element problems in the maritime industry have increased multifold since the Covid-19 pandemic (Cotton, 2021).

From the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, seafarers were rendered *persona non grata* in the majority of countries, and as result countries closed their sea and land borders which prevented crew changes (Cotton, 2021). Consequently, the crew becomes physically and mentally overworked. This in turn can lead to psychosocial distress, which is manifested in anxiety, depression, and in the worst-case scenario, even suicide (Paukztat et al., 2022). The restrictions placed on the maritime in-

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dustry effectively imprisoned seafarers at sea (Cotton, 2021).

## 2. Methodology.

For the purpose of this research a qualitative research methodology will be utilized, additional data will be derived from netography due to the international nature of the research topic. Further qualitative data will be gathered through personal contact with individual seafarers, mostly through an online platform as the targeted participants will be working offshore. It is important to keep in mind that majority of South African seafarers work in international waters and that the issues experienced are globally situated, therefore the aim will be to include South African seafarers as a part of the participant pool where possible.

The data for this research will be acquired by communicating with seafarers through social media where they expressed their distress over the Facebook group 'Seafarers Forum' and by consulting pastors of several seafarers' missions globally. Furthermore, pre-existing literature was consulted which highlighted the historic problems at sea.

This preliminary research has been broken down into six categories, and a similar thematic approach will also be utilised for the master's thesis. These categories were derived from pre-Covid-19 pandemic literature, literature of the Covid-19 pandemic, websites and scholastic literature that highlighted seafarers' distress and its root causes. The last category was dedicated to seafarers' direct communication with the author and via different seafarers' missions. Each of the following issues are discussed in depth: The coronaviruses (nCoV), Covid-19 hotspots, mental health concerns, mental and physical fatigue, historic maritime problems that degenerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, and suicide, all in the maritime industry context.

## 3. The Coronavirus (nCoV).

The Coronaviruses are labelled as a large family of viruses which can result in various illnesses which range from the common cold to more severe and fatal illnesses. The Covid-19 virus is a coronavirus which has been identified as a novel coronavirus or nCoV which is a new strain not previously identified in humans (WHO, 2021). The nCoV virus or as now commonly known as the Covid-19 virus was first reported by WHO in December 2019. This strain of coronavirus outbreak originated in Wuhan, China and was reported to cause cold, flu like symptoms to more serious respiratory infections. The Covid-19 infection was initially spread by global travellers who in turn locally infected their counterparts and was declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2021).

## 4. Covid-19 Hotspots.

Tourism initially has been identified as one of the means by which this virus is spreading. One of the hotspots that was identified for the spread of the virus was cruise liners and cargo

ships since passengers and crew of such vessels are global travellers. To place the cruise line industry in perspective, Kennedy (2019) explained that this industry is patronised by at least 30 million people annually. However, these statistics fail to reflect the 1,108,676 crew members who work and live on these 'floating hotels' at any given time (Kennedy, 2019).

The first cruise liner that came into the spotlight at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic was the *Diamond Princess*, after passengers were tested positive for the Covid-19 virus. This resulted in at least 922 infected passengers and crew members and two deaths on this vessel. Infections were also reported on four of the largest cruise liners namely the *Carnival Corp*, *Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd.*, *Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings*, *MSC* as well as several other smaller cruise liners. At least 54 cruise liners, which is about one-fifth of the global cruise lines, had Covid-19 infected passengers and crew on-board (Dolven et al., 2020). Regardless of the warnings of these high-risk floating holiday resorts, tourists continued to book their holidays on cruise liners with the result was that the maritime industry was declared as a major risk factor for spreading this virus (Yeginsu, 2022).

As the seriousness of the Covid-19 virus was realised, global travel restrictions were set in place and international land and sea borders were closed. As a result, cruise liners were refused entry to all major ports, leaving passengers and crew stranded at sea (Rex, 2020). The *Diamond Princess* reported the first Covid-19 case on 1 February 2020 and all 2,666 passengers were only allowed to disembark on 27 February 2020 after sequestered for 39 days. This repatriation process excluded the crew members (Brueck, 2020). The crew was left in limbo not knowing when they would be able to disembark and allowed to return home. Furthermore, the crew was also required to self-isolate themselves in their cabins after passengers were allowed to disembark (Lanz et al., 2020, Mundell, 2020).

The *Diamond Princess* crew was not the only seafarers stuck at sea, it was estimated that 100,000 seafarers, in the cruise line industry alone, were held 'prisoners at sea' for the better part of 2020. This figure excluded seafarers working on merchant ships (McCormick, 2020). To bring this into perspective one should note that there are more than 50,000 ships in the world today of which 5,150 are container or cargo ships. Each cargo or container ship has an average of 22 people on board, this equates to over one million seafarers at sea at any given time (Whitehead, 2020).

## 5. Mental Health Concerns.

Mental health in the maritime industry has been in the spotlight for a few decades and has been cited as a major safety risk for individuals, other crew members, and ships (Carol-Dekker, 2017). Numerous factors have been cited for the causes of the deterioration of mental health among seafarers. These factors include fatigue; the feeling of loneliness and isolation due to poor online communication with family and friends; bullying and harassment. Bullying and harassment come in different shapes and forms, this can either be interpersonal or organisational (Carol-Dekker, 2017). Although these factors have been

tagged as major concerns, the Covid-19 pandemic has expedited the risk of the seafarers for developing mental health concerns (Vaughan, 2020).

## 6. Mental and Physical Fatigue.

Warnings about the consequences of fatigue of seafarers has been tabled for many years (Carol-Dekker, 2017, ITF Seafarers, 2022).

The IMO defines fatigue as:

*A state of feeling tired, wary, or sleepy that results from prolonged mental or physical work, extended periods of anxiety, exposure to harsh environments, or loss of sleep. The effects of fatigue are impaired performance and diminished alertness. (ITF Seafarers, 2022)*

Fatigue not only harms the physical and mental wellbeing of a seafarer, but also puts the rest of the crew and the safety of the ship at risk as fatigue is cited as the number one reason for human error incidents and accidents at sea (Carol-Dekker, 2017, ITF Seafarers, 2022). Human error accidents at sea account for up to 96 percent of cases, these accidents range from personal injury to major ship accidents. These accidents come at a cost of over \$1.6Bn of losses, and therefore the causes of human error incidents cannot be taken lightly (Allianz, 2022, Paolo et al., 2021).

ITF Seafarers (2022) points out that one should not discount mental fatigue as physical and mental fatigue often goes hand-in-hand. Where physical fatigue is usually due to overwork and long and irregular hours which result in lack of sleep, mental fatigue is usually due to loneliness, lack of communication with loved ones, the feeling of isolation, repatriation delays after the completion of contracts and, in some cases the non-payment of wages. Mental fatigue can lead to anxiety, stress, depression and in worse case scenarios suicide (ITF Seafarers, 2022).

A seafarers reported on the effect that Covid-19 had on him said:

*... most of the crew onboard are now well overdue on our contracts. The officers onboard have 10-week rotation contracts. Most of us have now been onboard for six months. Some far more. It is even worse for the crew. Their contracts are nine months and I have one engine rating who has been onboard for 15 months. The main difficulty we are facing is crew change. We sail mainly in the Middle East and Asia and currently most countries in this region have very strict regulations that make crew change near impossible. (IMO, 2022)*

Fatigue often causes burnout syndrome. Mental and physical burnout have been expedited among seafarers since the start Covid-19 pandemic (Oldenburg et al., 2012). Oldenburg et al. (2012) stated that burnout syndrome occurs among seafarers with long contracts and is due to their “reaction to chronic work-related stress”. Physical and mental fatigue and burnout often lead to depression and anxiety.

Pauksztat et al. (2020) wrote a report regarding the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has on seafarers. The report found that half of the seafarers interviewed experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety on a regular basis. These seafarers linked their mental health deterioration directly to the feeling that they are ‘locked up’ on board of their ships over extended periods with limited access to shore leave (Pauksztat et al., 2020). This ‘locked up syndrome’ has been reported by the captain of the crew ship *Norwegian Escape* when a crew member died on the cruise ship due to secondary Covid-19 health problems, this occurred after his isolation period ended. The captain explained that crew members who tested positive are placed in isolation for 10 days without fresh air and sun in the windowless crew cabins, with limited contact with the other crew members (Crew Center, 2022). The captain’s main concern is his crew’s mental wellbeing and urges that the cruise line company considers the psychological and physical effects of all restrictions which they have imposed since the beginning of the pandemic:

Our mental health after 6 months onboard is deteriorating. This feels like we are in jail, and their excuse for all restrictions placed on us is that outside is pandemic and it’s for our safety. We are not scared of the virus; the symptoms are mild. We are more concerned about all these restrictions which have a devastating effect on our well-being. The way they deal with this situation is unacceptable. (Crew Center, 2022)

These stress levels aggravate the already historically challenged lived experience on board ships.

## 7. Historic maritime problems degenerated during Covid-19 pandemic.

Historically the mental and physical health of seafarers have been on the radar of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and International Transport Federation (ITF) for a long time, as poor mental and physical health put the seafarers and the ship at a significant risk (Allianz, 2022, Carol-Dekker, 2017, Graham, 2019). Graham (2019) further stated that there is much discussion around fatigue as a cause for human element accidents at sea, but these discussions do not include how mental health can contribute to maritime accidents. Other issues cited as being problematic at sea are: poor or no internet connections; lack of support from the company; poor working and living conditions; abandonment; feeling of loneliness and isolation from the outside world; lack of social interaction; interpersonal problems among a multicultural crew; bullying; harassment (sexual and other); just to mention a few (Alderton et al., 2004, Carter, 2005, Dimitrova, 2010, Radic et al., 2020). Although all of the above mentioned issues have been red flagged by the IMO, ITF and other organisations this section will only concentrate on the stressors which directly have had an impact on the seafarer’s life aboard their ships during the Covid-19 pandemic namely: the availability of internet access which in turn is linked to the feeling of loneliness and isolation; Abandonment and poor working conditions which is directly linked to the lack of support from maritime companies; which all can lead to anxiety, depression and in some cases suicide.

## 8. Internet Access.

Internet access and satellite phones are essential for communication between land and sea, however, even though majority of ships have internet and satellite phones these is not readily available to crew members (Nautilus International, 2015).

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic Nautilus International (2015) surveyed the availability of internet connectivity of seafarer, and argued that one of the seafarers rights is that there should be a “reasonable access to ship-to-shore telephone communications, email and internet facilities. . .”. In the Nautilus International (2015) whitepaper regarding the availability of internet communication for seafarers it was stated that 88 percent of the participants indicated that although they do have some internet access that it is very limited and that some shipping companies charge the crew for the privilege to have internet access. Companies stated that the main reason why internet connectivity is limited or charged to the crew is due to the high cost to provide this service (Nautilus International, 2015).

Pauksztat et al. (2022) proposed that general internet access and the quality of the internet access (speed and reliability) has a direct influence on the crew’s mental health and mental fatigue as it helps to alleviate the concerns that the seafarer has regarding his/her family’s wellbeing and in turn the seafarers can receive mental support from their family (Pauksztat et al., 2022). The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) stated that reasonable internet access facilities are a basic human right for seafarers, where available (Kennedy, 2019, Watson, 2016).

The statement of ‘where available’ can become problematic when companies state that the availability is provided in port and/or at seafarers’ missions. Seafarers’ missions provide local sim cards and free internet connection within their facilities to seafarers to allow phone and social media contacts with their loved ones (Durban Seafarers Mission, 2022). The question this paper would like to pose is do maritime companies defer their responsibilities to provide internet connection to outside charitable organisations rather than making it a company priority?

The relegation of internet access and emotional support by maritime companies to Non-Government Organisations (NGO) and Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) is problematic thus giving maritime companies a ‘legitimate’ way out of their responsibility towards their crew. Seafarers Missions, as NPOs, play an important role in assisting seafarers to connect to their loved ones, especially during the difficult times that the Covid-19 pandemic imposed on crew members (SAMSA, 2022). However, during the strict lockdown measures, the majority of seafarers missions had to close and suspend some of their services, such as internet provisions and face-to-face interactions. Most seafarer’s missions made virtual pastoral counselling available to crew who had access to social media and video calling (The Mission to Seafarers, 2022). Through observation the author noted that the physical and emotional support was only available for seafarers who have had the privilege to have internet access and those who did not have were unintentionally marginalised by the seafarer missions.

## 9. Abandonment and poor working conditions.

The abandonment of crew and poor working conditions has been at the forefront for decades. Abandonment at sea have been defined by the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 as:

A seafarer has been abandoned if the shipowner:

1. \_Fails to cover the cost of the seafarer’s repatriation, or
2. Has left the seafarer without the necessary maintenance and support, or
3. Has otherwise unilaterally severed their ties with the seafarer including failure to pay contractual wages for a period of at least two months. (ISWAN, 2021)

With the IMO and The International Labour Organization (ILO) interventions, most maritime organisations have counter-signed the MLC 2006. However, there are still 90 countries who have not yet ratified the MLC 2006 which stipulate the rights of seafarers (ILO, 2018). Therefore, there are still too many seafarers at risk of being maltreated or abandoned on foreign shores (ISWAN, 2021). Abandonment during the Covid-19 pandemic has brought a new wave of concerns.

Ha and Stanley (2020) equated ship abandonment to non-seafaring people as being comparable to “if your employer went bankrupt and left you locked in a rapidly deteriorating office for the foreseeable future”. Ha and Stanley (2020) continued by highlighting the plight of seafarers who are trapped on ships which are under the control of foreign ports. Where ships cannot be sold the seafarers have to stay on deteriorating ships with dwindling supplies to keep the crew and ship liveable. These seafarers can be trapped for months or in some cases years (Ha and Stanley, 2020).

The abandonment of ships has increased by 90 percent, during the Covid-19 pandemic. There are ship owners who have gone bankrupt or have used the Covid-19 pandemic as a means to rid themselves of unwanted ships (Henderson and Roberts, 2021). A seafarer stated “we have done nothing wrong. How can they hold us like prisoners?” (Ha and Stanley, 2020).

Mr Sibusiso Rantsoabe, SAMSA Manager for Occupational Health, Safety and Seafarers’ Welfare, responded to the case of an abandoned ship in Durban, South Africa:

*As an ex-seafarer, it pains me to know that there are still seafarers who are being treated even worse than during the pandemic by unscrupulous ship owners and managers. Administrations should stand up across the world and say enough is enough. If these seafarers were airline crew, the world would stand up and listen, so why are we not affording seafarers the same respect. Seafarers have truly become the forgotten few (SAMSA, 2022).*

One should keep in mind that abandonment, be it physical or emotional, can lead to mental health deterioration (Safety4Sea, 2019). All the above discussed scenarios can create a breeding ground for depression and suicide.

## 10. Suicide.

Suicide in the maritime industry is cited as being the second highest of all industries, only surpassed by the veterinarian industry (Hand, 2017, Mellbye and Carter, 2017). It has also been noted that suicide rates in the maritime industry are vastly under reported due to the fact that death at sea are often attributed to ‘accidents’ or ‘man overboard’ mostly because the mental wellbeing of seafarers are often not recognised as a risk factor. It has been estimated that up to 15 percent of deaths at sea is often ascribed to suicide (Hand, 2017). Furthermore, Safety4Sea (2020) stated that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic that 25 percent of seafarers interviewed had indicated that they are severely depressed, but this figure has dramatically increased since the Covid-19 outbreak.

Safety4Sea (2020) discussed some the trigger points of why some seafarers contemplate suicide:

*A lack of Wi-Fi access on board some ships leave seafarers feeling even more isolated from friends, family and loved ones at home, particularly during a pandemic when they may have family members suffering from COVID-19. (Safety4Sea, 2020)*

In a recent (2022) case of abandonment in Durban, South Africa a seafarer said:

We are living like animals, said Nabiyevev. We are all depressed. We are all stressed and have health problems. Some talk about killing themselves if we are stuck here longer. One morning, Nabiyevev said, he found a noose hanging on the deck. (SAMSA, 2022)

Scholastic research only gives a partial glimpse of the plight of the seafarers, therefore, to gain a holistic view one should give seafarers a platform to express their lived experiences on board a ship.

## 11. Facebook communication with seafarers.

Social media often give seafarers a platform to discuss their problems, concerns, and observations. Communication with seafarers in the author’s research Facebook group, Seafarers Forum, and seafarers’ missions, and IMO’s reported welfare cases:

*I have a question pls give me advice, we are anchored in Panama, and we are already 14 months onboard, and we want to go home but our company always makes an alibi that every port we have been to [that it] was not always convenient for a crew change. We didn’t sign any more extension contracts and most of us decided to refuse to work. (Carol-Dekker, 2022)*

*I’m very tired emotionally mentally and physically, I emailed the ITF and [they] responded very quickly. (Carol-Dekker, 2022)*

*[I] Just want to give thanks to all the members and staff of ITF, for helping me to go home and be with my wife and future baby. Hope you continue to help other seafarers like me, most of*

*the company now are very abusive and don’t care for the well-being of the crew on board. They only care about money and their personal interest, sad but it’s the reality. (Carol-Dekker, 2022)*

*we’ve been through all the emotions to be honest. A lot of anger in the beginning as we had to watch all the borders close. However, we knew the health risk and we could understand why it was happening. We tried to remain hopeful but as time has passed it seems like little has changed. Personally, I feel let down and disheartened that little seems to be being done. There is a lot of talk but no action. (IMO, 2022)*

*[it is] hard, really hard. I mean I’ve done long contracts before, but this is different. It has a psychological effect as there is no end in sight. So, it affects family life a lot more. Some days people [crew] are upbeat and then the next depressed. We have tried to form a tight group to watch out for each other. Some of the people onboard are finding it harder than others so we have to keep a close eye on them. (IMO, 2021)*

A 33-year-old seafarer from the Philippines had been at sea for 12 months, without any shore leave:

*I am tired, exhausted, and hopeless... I am trying to show a brave face every day. [the pandemic causes] strain on our mental health. Our minds are in different worlds. It’s like walking on thin air. (IMO, 2021)*

## Conclusions.

With the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, Covid-19, most of the focus was placed on the effect it has globally, but the effect that the pandemic has had and continues to have on seafarers has mostly been overlooked and even ignored even though seafarers play a huge role in the tourism and transport of goods globally. The media has singled out a few maritime Covid-19 hotspots but mostly focused the impact it has had on the tourist industry but has failed to acknowledge the physical and mental effects that the pandemic has had and continues to have on the seafarers. The effects, discussed in this article, highlights the mental and physical toll the Covid-19 pandemic has had and is taking on seafarers. These issues are not new, but the spread of the pandemic has heightened the historic problems such as physical and mental fatigue; feeling of isolation and loneliness due to extended work contracts; lack or poor internet access which increases their feeling of isolation and loneliness; abandonment of crews on foreign soil, which all can lead to anxiety and depression. Historically, suicide among seafarers has always been a concern, but over the last two years a spike in suicides cases has been reported. The one concern of this paper is the tendency of maritime organisations to negate the mental health of seafarers to NPO and NGO organisations such as Seafarers’ missions, rather than to assume responsibility themselves. The actions and reactions to the plight of seafarers are historically rooted, and although maritime organisations such as the IMO and ITF have taken it seriously, much work still

needs to be done to combat the current situation and assuage future problems in this industry.

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