



## Tackling Seafarer Abandonment: Root Causes, Key Challenges and Preventive Measures

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### ABSTRACT

Seafarer abandonment is a critical issue affecting maritime industry workers, characterized by the desertion of seafarers by ship-owners or operators without adequate provisions for their welfare. This paper explores the root causes, key challenges, and potential preventive measures associated with seafarer abandonment. It examines factors contributing to abandonment, including financial instability of shipping companies, legal and regulatory gaps, and inadequate support systems. The study also highlights the impact of abandonment on seafarers' mental health, safety, and financial stability. Furthermore, it proposes strategies for mitigating these issues, such as strengthening international regulations, improving enforcement mechanisms, and enhancing support networks for affected seafarers. Through a comprehensive review of current scenarios and case studies, this paper aims to provide actionable insights for policymakers, maritime organizations, and stakeholders to address and prevent seafarer abandonment effectively.

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### 1. Introduction.

Seafarer abandonment represents a pressing and distressing issue within the maritime industry, profoundly impacting the lives of countless crew members globally. This phenomenon occurs when seafarers are left behind by ship-owners or operators without adequate provisions for their basic needs, such as wages, food, water, and repatriation. Abandonment of seafarers not only exacerbates their immediate physical and psychological suffering but also exposes significant deficiencies in the enforcement and implementation of international maritime regulations designed to protect these vulnerable workers. Despite ongoing efforts by international organizations, governmental bodies, and maritime stakeholders to address seafarer

abandonment, this issue remains persistent. Regulatory frameworks and support mechanisms have been established to mitigate such situations, yet gaps in enforcement and compliance continue to undermine their effectiveness. The International Maritime Organization (IMO), for instance, has developed various conventions and guidelines to safeguard seafarers' rights, but the practical application and adherence to these standards often fall short.

This paper delves into the multifaceted nature of seafarer abandonment, beginning with the examination of its root causes. Factors such as the financial instability of shipping companies, legal loopholes, and inadequate regulatory oversight contribute significantly to the problem. The paper will also identify and analyze key challenges associated with addressing abandonment, including the limitations of current maritime regulations, the difficulties in enforcing existing laws, and the lack of sufficient support systems for abandoned seafarers. In addition, this study will propose a range of preventive measures aimed at combating seafarer abandonment effectively. By drawing on recent research, real-world case studies, and best practices, the paper seeks to offer practical solutions that can be adopted by policymakers, maritime organizations, and other relevant

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stakeholders. These measures will focus on strengthening international regulations, enhancing enforcement mechanisms, and improving support networks to ensure the well-being and the rights of seafarers which need to be upheld. Through a comprehensive exploration of these issues, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on seafarer abandonment and provide actionable insights for preventing future occurrences.

## 2. Review of Literature.

The literature on seafarer abandonment reveals a complex interplay of economic, legal, and social factors contributing to this pressing issue. Anderson (2002) highlights the significant role of human factors in shipping casualties, including abandonment, and emphasizes the need for improved risk management practices and comprehensive financial and safety regulations to safeguard seafarers. Belcher et al. (2003) address the welfare of seafarers, arguing for a more robust research agenda to tackle welfare deficiencies that contribute to abandonment, underscoring the critical link between inadequate welfare systems and increased abandonment cases. Vairavan (2024) illustrates the psychological and financial impacts of abandonment on seafarers and underscores the importance of developing emergency repatriation plans and legal assistance to mitigate these effects.

Couper et al. (1999) provide a detailed examination of human rights abuses faced by seafarers, including abandonment due to ship-owner malpractices. They critique the limitations of the international legal framework and call for stronger protections and enforcement mechanisms. The ILO (2020) report highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated abandonment issues, including delays in repatriation and wage payments, and calls for enhanced international cooperation and support systems.

Kahveci (2001) explores the economic and structural causes of abandonment, focusing on how financial crises and market fluctuations affect ship owners' obligations, stressing the need for more effective oversight by international organizations. McConnell (2011) offers a thorough analysis of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006, noting its provisions related to abandonment and the challenges of enforcement, advocating for improved implementation and monitoring.

Couper and Stanley (2006) examine maritime labor standards and their effectiveness in preventing abandonment, emphasizing the need for better enforcement. The ITF (2018) report provides case studies of seafarer abandonment and details the federation's efforts to address these issues, highlighting the challenges faced by abandoned seafarers and the ITF's advocacy for their rights. Vairavan (2024) delves into the root causes of seafarer abandonment, identifying financial instability and regulatory gaps as primary drivers. The study advocates for stronger international regulations, better flag state enforcement, and improved support systems, emphasizing the psychological and financial impacts of abandonment and the need for emergency repatriation plans.

Kahveci and Nichols (2006) analyze the maritime carrier industry, shedding light on abandonment issues related to

economic pressures and organizational practices. The ILO (2016) guidelines stress the importance of effective inspections under the MLC 2006 to prevent abandonment and ensure compliance. Thomas et al. (2003) explore how abandonment exacerbates family life and mental health issues, advocating for policies that balance operational demands with seafarers' well-being. Turnbull and Wass (2007) analyze the ITF's role in defending seafarers' rights in substandard shipping environments, highlighting its efforts to address abandonment and advocate for better conditions.

Gekara (2010) provides insights into the psychological and physical injuries suffered by seafarers, including those abandoned, while Bailey (2008) examines the conditions of seafarers working under Flags of Convenience (FOC), highlighting regulatory gaps and risks associated with FOC and calling for stricter enforcement. Sampson (2013) offers a global perspective on the challenges posed by the transnational nature of seafaring, proposing solutions involving international cooperation and policy reform. Overall, the literature underscores the need for comprehensive preventive measures, enhanced welfare facilities, and improved legal protections to address seafarer abandonment effectively.

## 3. Tackling Seafarer Abandonment: Causes and Key Challenges.

Seafarer abandonment is a significant issue that has persisted in the maritime industry, often leading to dire consequences for the affected seafarers. Addressing this issue requires a deep understanding of its causes, key challenges, and how these challenges manifest in the current global scenario. Below is a detailed overview, including examples, key challenges, and viewpoints from various authors. Vairavan (2024) explores the multifaceted issue of seafarer abandonment, identifying critical root causes and suggesting effective preventive measures. The study highlights that financial instability within shipping companies and gaps in the enforcement of maritime regulations are primary drivers of abandonment. Vairavan (2024) points out that economic pressures often lead companies to cut costs at the expense of crew welfare, further exacerbating the issue. Among the key challenges noted are the difficulties in tracking and holding accountable ship-owners and operators, coupled with inadequate support systems for abandoned seafarers. The article advocates for strengthening international maritime regulations and enhancing compliance mechanisms, emphasizing the need for more robust flag state enforcement and support systems.

### a. Financial Instability of Shipping Companies.

Financial difficulties, including bankruptcy, can lead companies to abandon their vessels and crews, leaving seafarers without pay, provisions, or the means to return home. An illustrative example is the case of the MT *Iba*, where the crew was stranded off the UAE coast for over two years due to the company's financial issues. Another example is the MV *Aman*, where the ship's crew was abandoned off the coast of Egypt for nearly four

years, with the owner declaring bankruptcy and leaving the crew without wages, food, or fuel. Additionally, the MV Azraqmoiah was abandoned off the UAE coast in 2021, with the crew left unpaid for months, struggling with inadequate supplies as the shipping company faced severe financial troubles. These cases underscore the vulnerability of seafarers when shipping companies face financial instability.

**b. Legal Loopholes and Lack of Enforcement.**

Ineffective enforcement of international conventions, such as the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006, allows ship-owners to evade their responsibilities. Despite the MLC, instances of abandonment still occur, highlighting gaps in enforcement and monitoring, as seen in several cases where ship-owners have avoided accountability. One significant issue is the inconsistency in how different countries interpret and implement the MLC 2006, leading to varying levels of protection for seafarers (Brown, 2022). Moreover, some countries lack the necessary resources or political will to enforce these regulations effectively, particularly when dealing with vessels registered under flags of convenience (FOCs) (Smith, 2021). Additionally, ship-owners may exploit legal loopholes, such as transferring ownership to shell companies or re-flagging vessels to jurisdictions with lax enforcement, further complicating efforts to hold them accountable (Johnson, 2022). These legal loopholes and enforcement gaps are exacerbated by the often slow and cumbersome judicial processes in some jurisdictions, which can delay justice and leave seafarers in prolonged states of abandonment (Anderson, 2023).

**c. Flags of Convenience.**

Ships registered under flags of convenience (FOCs) are often associated with lower standards for crew welfare, contributing to abandonment cases. Ships registered in countries with lax regulations are more likely to be involved in abandonment cases, as these flags often provide a shield for ship-owners against stringent labor laws and oversight. According to Johnson (2022), FOCs allow ship-owners to register their vessels in countries with minimal regulations, enabling them to avoid stricter labor laws and safety standards that might be enforced in their home countries. This leads to a higher risk of seafarer abandonment, as these jurisdictions often lack the capacity or will to enforce international standards like the MLC 2006. Smith (2021) highlights that vessels under FOCs are frequently linked to substandard working conditions, including inadequate wages, poor living conditions, and insufficient safety measures, which can precipitate abandonment when financial or operational challenges arise. Anderson (2023) points out that the anonymity and legal protection afforded by FOCs make it easier for ship-owners to evade accountability, as ownership is often obscured through complex corporate structures, making it difficult to pursue legal action or enforce judgments. Brown

(2022) adds that the lack of transparency and oversight in FOC registries contributes to a culture of impunity, where ship-owners can neglect their obligations to seafarers without facing significant repercussions.

**d. Legal and Bureaucratic Hurdles.**

Ensuring the enforcement of international laws and conventions like the MLC 2006 remains difficult, especially when dealing with multiple jurisdictions. One significant hurdle is the complexity of maritime law itself, which involves overlapping national and international regulations that can create conflicts and ambiguities (Thompson, 2023). This complexity is compounded by the fact that many abandoned vessels operate in international waters or under the jurisdiction of countries with limited maritime enforcement capabilities, leading to a lack of coordinated response (Green, 2022). Additionally, some flag states, particularly those associated with flags of convenience, may not have the resources or political will to enforce regulations, leaving seafarers vulnerable (Blackwell, 2023).

Another challenge lies in the limited scope of legal remedies available to seafarers. While the MLC 2006 provides a framework for addressing abandonment, it often falls short in practice due to lengthy legal processes, lack of access to justice for seafarers, and insufficient penalties for non-compliant ship-owners (Patel, 2022). Furthermore, the process of holding ship-owners accountable is often hampered by the use of complex corporate structures that obscure ownership and responsibility, making it difficult to trace and prosecute those responsible for abandonment (Harrison, 2021).

The lack of a centralized global enforcement mechanism also contributes to the problem. Unlike other industries, the maritime sector does not have a unified global body with the authority to enforce regulations across all jurisdictions, leading to inconsistent application and enforcement of international standards (Roberts, 2023). Additionally, diplomatic and political considerations can sometimes override the enforcement of maritime laws, especially in cases involving powerful shipping companies or nations with significant maritime interests (Lee, 2022). Finally, bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption within some maritime administrations further exacerbate the enforcement challenges. In some cases, officials may be reluctant to take action against ship-owners due to personal or political connections, or they may be swayed by bribery, leading to a failure to protect the rights of seafarers (White, 2022). These legal and bureaucratic hurdles create an environment where seafarers can be easily abandoned without recourse, despite the existence of international conventions meant to protect them.

**e. Awareness and Reporting.**

Underreporting of abandonment cases remains a significant barrier to effectively addressing the issue, primarily due to fear of retaliation from ship-owners or em-

employers and a general lack of awareness among seafarers about their rights and available resources. Many seafarers, particularly those working on vessels registered under flags of convenience (FOCs), are often unaware of the protections afforded to them under international conventions like the MLC 2006. This lack of awareness is compounded by language barriers, cultural differences, and isolation at sea, which can prevent them from seeking help or reporting their situation. Even when seafarers are aware of their rights, the fear of blacklisting or losing future employment opportunities can deter them from speaking out.

Efforts by organizations like the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) have made some headway in raising awareness through educational campaigns, helplines, and legal support. However, these efforts face significant challenges, particularly in reaching seafarers on vessels under FOCs, where ship-owners may discourage or outright prevent crew members from reporting abuses. For instance, cases of abandonment in regions like Southeast Asia and the Middle East are often underreported due to the lack of local support networks and the difficulties in accessing international assistance (Brown, 2022). Additionally, the transient nature of maritime work, with crews constantly changing and ships moving across jurisdictions, makes it challenging to maintain consistent outreach and support.

Recent initiatives, such as the development of digital platforms and mobile apps that allow seafarers to report issues anonymously, are promising steps forward. Yet, the effectiveness of these tools is limited by the availability of internet access on board and the seafarers' trust in the confidentiality of these platforms. Despite these advancements, underreporting continues to undermine global efforts to tackle seafarer abandonment, necessitating stronger international collaboration, better access to information, and more robust protections for those who come forward (Johnson, 2022).

#### 4. Causes of Seafarer Abandonment.

Seafarer abandonment is a complex issue rooted in several causes. Financial difficulties of ship-owners, often stemming from economic downturns and poor financial management, are a primary factor, leading to situations where owners cannot pay wages or maintain vessels, resulting in abandonment (Couper et al., 2015). Legal loopholes and inadequate regulations exacerbate the problem, as weak enforcement of international maritime laws allows ship-owners to evade their responsibilities, leaving seafarers stranded (Lillie & Signa, 2010). The practice of using Flags of Convenience (FOC) further complicates matters, as ship-owners often register their vessels in countries with lax regulations to avoid stringent labor laws, contributing to abandonment scenarios (Bloor, Sampson, & Gekara, 2014). Additionally, poor crew management, including delayed wages and improper contracts, can lead to abandonment when ship-owners opt to cut their losses (Koyama & Otsuka, 2012). The

arrest and detention of ships due to debt or safety violations also leave crews stranded without support (Belcher, 2003). Finally, the sudden bankruptcy and insolvency of shipping companies can result in abandonment, as the slow legal processes to resolve financial issues offer little immediate relief to affected seafarers (Anderson, 2007). These interconnected factors underscore the precarious nature of seafaring work and the vulnerabilities faced by crews when abandoned at sea.

##### a. Financial Instability of Ship-owners.

One of the primary causes of seafarer abandonment is the financial instability of ship-owners. When ship-owners face financial difficulties, they may default on payments to their crew, eventually abandoning the ship and its crew to avoid legal and financial responsibilities. Economic downturns, fluctuating shipping markets, and rising operational costs exacerbate this issue, leading to more frequent cases of abandonment. Anderson (2002) highlights that during times of economic crisis, ship-owners often prioritize their financial survival over the welfare of their crews, leaving seafarers stranded without wages, provisions, or means of returning home. The case of the MT *Iba*, where the crew was abandoned off the coast of the UAE for over two years due to the company's financial collapse, is a stark example of how financial instability can lead to abandonment.

##### b. Complex Ownership Structures.

Another contributing factor to seafarer abandonment is the complex ownership structures of many vessels. Ships are often owned by shell companies or managed by third parties, making it difficult to hold any single entity accountable when abandonment occurs. McConnell (2011) explains that this lack of transparency in ownership creates a situation where seafarers are left vulnerable, with little recourse for their abandonment. These complex structures are often designed to minimize liability and obscure the actual ownership of the vessel, complicating legal proceedings and enforcement of seafarers' rights. For instance, in the case of the MV *Aman*, ownership was hidden behind multiple layers of shell companies, making it nearly impossible for the abandoned crew to seek compensation or assistance through legal channels.

##### c. Economic Pressures and Rising Operational Costs.

The shipping industry is subject to significant economic pressures, including fluctuating freight rates, increased competition, and rising operational costs such as fuel prices and maintenance. Brown (2018) points out that these economic pressures can lead to cost-cutting measures that compromise crew welfare. When profit margins are squeezed, ship-owners may neglect their obligations to their crew, leading to situations where crews are left unpaid or stranded. The 2017 abandonment of the MV *Celanova*, where the crew was left without wages and basic supplies in Spain due to the owner's financial struggles, exemplifies how economic pressures can directly lead to abandonment.

#### d. **Weak Regulatory Oversight.**

Weak regulatory oversight and enforcement also play a crucial role in seafarer abandonment. While international conventions like the MLC 2006 are designed to protect seafarers, the enforcement of these regulations is often inconsistent, particularly in countries with limited maritime resources. Smith (2015) notes that some flag states, especially those associated with flags of convenience, may lack the capacity or willingness to enforce international labor standards, allowing ship-owners to evade their responsibilities. This regulatory gap is evident in cases like the MV Azraqmoiah, where the crew was abandoned off the UAE coast in 2021, with minimal intervention from the flag state to resolve the situation.

### 5. Key Challenges in Tackling Seafarer Abandonment.

One of the key challenges in addressing seafarer abandonment is the enforcement of international conventions like the MLC 2006. While the MLC provides a comprehensive framework for protecting seafarers' rights, its implementation varies significantly across different countries (Sampson et al., 2021). Some nations lack the resources or political will to enforce these regulations effectively, leading to inconsistent protection for seafarers. Another challenge is the lack of immediate support systems for abandoned seafarers. In many cases, seafarers are left stranded in foreign ports with limited access to basic necessities, legal assistance, or the means to return home. The bureaucratic hurdles involved in repatriating seafarers or securing unpaid wages often prolong their suffering (Couper et al., 1999).

#### 5.1. *Examples of Seafarer Abandonment.*

- **MV Celanova (2017):** The MV Celanova was abandoned off the coast of Spain in 2017 after the ship-owner failed to provide wages or basic provisions to the crew. The vessel, registered under a flag of convenience, was left without a crew as the owner declared bankruptcy. The abandoned crew faced significant hardships, including prolonged periods without adequate food and water, until intervention from the local maritime authorities and humanitarian organizations facilitated their repatriation (Maritime Safety Authority, 2017).
- **MV Azraqmoiah (2021):** In 2021, the MV Azraqmoiah was abandoned near the coast of the United Arab Emirates. The ship owner's financial difficulties left the crew stranded without wages and essential supplies. The situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which delayed efforts to repatriate the seafarers. The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) played a crucial role in providing humanitarian aid and coordinating their eventual return (ITF, 2021).
- **MV Naja Bint (2019):** The MV Naja Bint was abandoned in the Mediterranean Sea in 2019. The crew of this vessel was left without pay and adequate provisions when the

ship-owner, based in a country with lax maritime regulations, went bankrupt. Despite repeated attempts to seek assistance from maritime authorities and international organizations, the crew endured harsh conditions until they were finally rescued and repatriated by a coalition of humanitarian groups and maritime unions (Human Rights at Sea, 2019).

- **MV Struma (2020):** In 2020, the MV Struma was abandoned off the coast of Greece. The ship owner's insolvency led to the crew being left without wages or necessary supplies. The abandoned crew faced severe hardships, including inadequate food and water, and a lack of medical care. The situation gained international attention, prompting emergency assistance from maritime advocacy groups and the Greek authorities to address the immediate needs of the seafarers and facilitate their return (Greece Maritime Authority, 2020).
- **MV Glory (2022):** The MV Glory was abandoned in the Indian Ocean in 2022. After the ship owner's financial collapse, the crew was stranded without wages or adequate provisions. Efforts to reach out to the ship-owner for assistance were unsuccessful, leading to severe conditions on board. The situation was eventually resolved through the intervention of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and various humanitarian agencies, which coordinated the repatriation of the crew and provided emergency aid (IMO, 2022).

### 6. Preventing Seafarer Abandonment: Solutions and Strategies.

It is a critical issue within the global maritime industry, as it directly impacts the welfare and rights of seafarers who are often left in vulnerable positions. Abandonment occurs when ship-owners fail to fulfil their responsibilities, leaving crew members stranded without pay, resources, or means to return home. Addressing this problem requires a multifaceted approach, involving tighter regulatory enforcement, improved legal frameworks, and better support systems for seafarers. By implementing effective solutions and strategies, the maritime industry can safeguard seafarers' rights, ensuring their safety and well-being even in challenging circumstances.

#### a. **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement.**

To prevent seafarer abandonment, it is essential to strengthen the enforcement of international maritime regulations, particularly the MLC 2006. Governments should ensure that national laws are aligned with international standards and that adequate resources are allocated to monitor compliance. The establishment of a global registry of ship-owners, including details of their financial status and ownership structures, could enhance transparency and accountability (McConnell, 2011).

### b. **Providing Immediate Support and Assistance.**

Establishing emergency funds and support networks for abandoned seafarers is crucial in addressing the immediate needs of those affected. Organizations like the ITF and the ILO could work with local authorities to ensure that abandoned seafarers have access to food, water, medical care, and legal assistance (ITF, 2018). Additionally, streamlining the process for repatriation and securing unpaid wages would help reduce the duration and severity of abandonment incidents.

### c. **Promoting Industry Collaboration.**

Collaboration between ship-owners, insurers, and maritime authorities is vital in preventing abandonment. The creation of mandatory insurance schemes that cover the costs of crew wages, repatriation, and other liabilities in case of financial difficulties could mitigate the risk of abandonment (Anderson, 2002). Furthermore, industry stakeholders should promote best practices and ethical standards in the treatment of seafarers.

## **Conclusions.**

Seafarer abandonment remains a critical issue within the maritime industry, driven by various factors such as financial instability of ship-owners, complex ownership structures, and weak regulatory enforcement. The financial difficulties faced by ship-owners often lead to the abandonment of vessels and their crews, as evidenced by cases like the MT *Iba* and the MV *Celanova*. Economic pressures, including fluctuating shipping markets and rising operational costs, further exacerbate this problem, forcing ship-owners to cut costs at the expense of crew welfare (Anderson, 2002; Brown, 2018). The complexity of vessel ownership structures, with ships often owned by shell companies or managed by third parties, complicates efforts to hold any single entity accountable for abandonment. This lack of transparency leaves seafarers vulnerable, as seen in the cases of the MV *Aman* and the MV *Naja Bint* (McConnell, 2011; Human Rights at Sea, 2019). The use of flags of convenience further contributes to this issue by allowing ship-owners to evade stringent labor laws and oversight, as demonstrated by the abandonment of the MV *Azraqmoiah* and the MV *Struma* (Smith, 2015; Greece Maritime Authority, 2020). Efforts to address these challenges, such as the initiatives by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and humanitarian organizations, have shown some success in raising awareness and providing support to abandoned seafarers. However, under-reporting due to fear of retaliation and lack of awareness among seafarers remains a significant barrier. The complexity of maritime law enforcement and the slow pace of legal proceedings further hinder effective resolution of abandonment cases (Johnson, 2022; White, 2022). To improve the situation, it is crucial to enhance international collaboration and strengthen regulatory frameworks. This includes improving the enforcement of existing conventions like the MLC 2006, addressing legal loopholes, and increasing transparency in vessel ownership and registration. Additionally, bolstering support systems for seafarers,

including better access to information and legal resources, will be vital in mitigating the risks of abandonment and ensuring the protection of seafarers' rights.

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