Rock the boat

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How to contribute to a good organizational and social work environment and prevent bullying and harassment
The occurrence of workplace bullying and harassment in various forms is unfortunately nothing new, and this naturally applies to seafarers as well. Despite this, #metoo became an eye-opener for many when it became clear how extensive these issues are on board and the severity of the cases that occur. Victims of bullying and harassment often suffer physically and mentally and may develop long-term health problems. Additionally, the social isolation on board can make it even more difficult for affected individuals to receive support from family and friends when such incidents occur.

Even though the symptoms of workplace bullying and harassment are primarily visible in the individual, it’s important to remember that preventive efforts need to encompass the organizational and social work environment. Deficiencies and ambiguities in the organization, uncertainties about roles and responsibilities, managers lacking sufficient knowledge and resources, high workloads, and a workplace climate that tolerates a harsh tone and offensive banter are some well-known factors that need to be addressed.

So, what should one do in practice? A system needs to be questioned to function and evolve, and therefore, we need to rock the boat. This means that we need to become better at challenging existing structures and work methods and learn to ask new questions. Both employees and managers need to become better at clearly demonstrating their disapproval when incidents of workplace bullying and harassment occur. Employees can do so by not passively stand by if something happens but instead speak up and offer support - we call it crew courage. Managers must lead the way in defining what is acceptable and actively investigate the work environment, identify risk factors, and take early action on warning signals.

Here, we share what you can do to contribute to a good organizational and social work environment free from workplace bullying and harassment. These tips are based on a research project conducted at Kalmar Maritime Academy, Linnaeus University, during 2019-2021. The project was funded by AFA Försäkring. These examples have been gathered through a systematic literature review and in dialogue with many individuals with various backgrounds and experiences. All results and a more detailed description of the methodology can be found in the final report *Praktiskt arbetsmiljöarbete för en jämställd sjöfart*, by Cecilia Österman and Magnus Boström at Linnaeus University. This report and other publications are available at intejobbadumt.se.
Is seafaring special?

The answer to that question is both yes and no. Yes, there are some differences between the working environments at sea and ashore, but there are also many similarities. Maritime is perhaps the most globalized industry in the world; a ship can have its owner in one country, be registered in another, operated from a third, and crewed by seafarers from several other countries, often through crewing agencies.

What primarily makes seafaring special is that the ship is both a working and living environment where seafarers work and live together, often for many consecutive months. It’s common for the crew to be made up of individuals with different national and cultural backgrounds who communicate in a working language different from their native language. When work and leisure occur in the same place, boundaries become blurred. This makes social relationships especially important, both for the well-being and health of individuals and for onboard safety.

A ship is a high-risk work environment, and just like in the rest of the working world, there is an increasing focus on worker mental health. Studies show a high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts among seafarers. Work on board is characterized to a large extent by insecure employments, conflicting demands for cost-effectiveness and safety, high workloads, and difficulties in obtaining adequate rest. This creates a hotbed for work environment problems that increase the risk of mental health issues as well as workplace bullying and harassment.

The risk is particularly high for women working on board. This is because the maritime industry is male-dominated, and work at sea is masculine coded, meaning it is associated with stereotypically masculine traits. This is a risk that requires special attention.

Safe work

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) develops international rules and recommendations that are implemented at national level. Hence, the rules for work environment and safety vary depending on the flag state in which the ship is registered. Two ships in the same shipping company but with different flags can be subjected to different work environment regulations.

For Swedish-flagged vessels, it is the Swedish Transport Agency that issues regulations for the work environment on board and ensures compliance with regulations. Compared to shore-based workplaces in Sweden, this leads to some differences in, for example, how safety representatives are appointed. Sometimes, it takes time before new work environment regulations apply to onboard employees.

The shipping company’s management has the overall work environment responsibility for all employees. The captain is usually responsible for the work on board. International requirements for safety management systems (SMS) on board and Swedish requirements for the systematic work environment work require that the work environment must be regularly investigated and assessed for risks, and measures must be taken to address and follow up on health and safety risks. This applies to all aspects of the work environment – the physical, organizational, and social – and these aspects often interact. The organizational work environment involves how work is organized, how tasks are planned and resources allocated, how decisions are made and communicated, and the conditions for leadership and employee-ship. The social work environment concerns the social interaction in the workplace, including how we talk to and with each other, and how we influence and are influenced by other people in our environment. These can be colleagues and supervisors but also others, such as passengers, guests, or students.
Workplace bullying and harassment at sea

Workplace bullying and harassment continue to be a significant issue in the maritime industry, despite good intentions and increased legal requirements. This affects the work environment, health, and safety.

Up to 25 percent of all seafarers, and over 50 percent of women seafarers, report that they have experienced workplace bullying and harassment on board.

The primary perpetrators are largely the victims’ managers and supervisors. The second-largest category is colleagues.

The Swedish work environment regulations concerning the organizational and social work environment require employers to ensure that managers and supervisors have knowledge about how to prevent and manage unhealthy workloads and workplace bullying and harassment. Employers must also make sure that this knowledge can be applied in practice. Workplace bullying and harassment includes actions directed towards one or more employees in a demeaning manner, which can result in the affected person feeling unwell or excluded from the social community of the workplace. Examples of such actions include derogatory words, spreading rumours, mockery, sexist jokes or someone being excluded or ignored.

Even though the symptoms of workplace bullying and harassment are primarily observed in the individual, the underlying cause is often linked to the organizational work environment. Therefore, there should be procedures in place for both preventive measures, and how to notice and deal with signals that something is wrong. This work must be recurring and systematic. Efforts and measures at the individual level alone have little prospect of solving organizational problems.
Workplace bullying and harassment continue to be a significant problem in the maritime industry, despite good intentions and tightened legal requirements. Previous research shows that 8–25 percent of all seafarers have experienced some form of workplace bullying and harassment. Among women seafarers, the corresponding figure is over 50 percent. The primary perpetrators are largely the victims’ managers and supervisors. The second-largest category is colleagues.

A significant challenge is to make it clear that workplace bullying and harassment do indeed occur. If more people were aware of the extent and gravity of the problems, it would be easier to bring about change. Unfortunately, underreporting is extensive, and it is common for incidents not to be taken seriously. As a result, policy documents on zero tolerance and reporting procedures often prove ineffective. Even more important is a committed and systematic work to prevent such issues.

Learn more about work environment and applicable rules

The Swedish Transport Agency’s guidance for systematic work environment management in the maritime industry (available in Swedish) describes roles, responsibilities, and tasks from a maritime perspective.

The Swedish Work Environment Authority’s Guide for implementation of the provisions concerning the organizational and social work environment provides support for those who need to understand and use the rules.

The Maritime Work Environment Committee (san-nytt.se) offers basic work environment training in English and Swedish and publishes the Maritime Work Environment Handbook with useful tips for preventive work environment work.

Prevent is a non-profit organization owned by the social partners Svenskt Näringsliv, LO, and PTK, with the aim of helping companies improve their work environment. At prevent.se, you can find checklists, articles with tips, links to training, and much more.
What can you do?

Workplace bullying and harassment have a significant impact on individual well-being. Employees, managers, and company management must be able to address it when it occurs. However, long-term, sustained efforts to prevent workplace bullying and harassment and promote a good work environment at sea require efforts and resource allocation within each individual company and organization. There is also a need for an industry-level review of the working and employment conditions that shape seafarers’ life. To move forward from sympathetic intentions to measurable impact, the gap between policy and practice needs to be bridged, and rules must be translated into practical procedures that make sense.
The employee perspective encompasses individual employees, as well as students who are undergoing their ship-based internships on board. All employees need to have basic work environment knowledge and understand how the work environment works on board. This is necessary to better comprehend the consequences of a poor work environment on one’s own health and to know how an employee can contribute to a good work environment. To reduce the sense of insecurity and strengthen social support among colleagues, we also suggest investing in knowledge about techniques to recognize and respond to uncomfortable situations, known as bystander training. It involves practicing crew courage and creating a sense of security in that colleagues will stand up for a person who is experiencing bullying or harassment without fear of making the situation worse for both the victim and the intervenor.

Standing up for a colleague does not always have to involve direct confrontation. If it feels uncomfortable, perhaps the situation can be disrupted in other ways, such as changing the topic of conversation, spilling a cup of coffee, or doing something else that shifts the focus away from the person being targeted. As a colleague, you can also approach and talk privately with the perpetrator afterward and calmly explain how you perceived the situation. It is also important to show support for the victim. Workplace bullying and harassment often involve guilt and shame. Tell the victim that you saw what happened and that it is not their fault. Offer help with reporting the incident to a supervisor or safety representative afterward. Everyone can also actively choose not to laugh at offensive jokes or spread hurtful gossip and rumours.

Safety representatives on board play a crucial role, both in supporting those who experience workplace bullying and harassment, and in the preventive and promotive work. A good dialogue between safety representatives and their immediate supervisor makes it easier to stay informed about the situation within a workgroup. Many employees often find it easier to turn to their safety representative than directly to a superior with sensitive matters. This assumes that the safety representative has a good level of trust with the manager and colleagues, which, in turn, requires some continuity among safety representatives. This can be a challenge in cases where it is common for both individuals designated as safety representatives and other colleagues to move around frequently to work on different ships in the shipping company.

Sometimes it can be challenging for safety representatives to balance the desire to be a good listener, the obligation of confidentiality regarding information about individuals, and the need to bring shortcomings to the attention of the employer. Therefore, it is essential that safety representatives are provided with a good understanding of the rights and responsibilities of their role, and that they are involved when goals, procedures, and action plans for preventive and promotive work environment work are developed. There is added value in safety representatives and managers attending training together to be able to “speak the same language” and create a common understanding of the work environment on board.

**Employees**

**Safety representatives**

*Tips!* Seko Sjöfolk has developed the handbook *Jobba aktivt* (available in Swedish) as guidance for how safety representatives and elected representatives can act in cases of workplace bullying, discriminatory treatment, and sexual harassment.
A buddy check is a term used in climbing. It means that those who climb together double-check each other’s equipment to ensure their safety. In recent years, the concept has also gained ground in the construction industry for those working with fall protection and in schools where students are encouraged to be attentive to each other.

In practice, it means being vigilant and acting on changes in colleagues’ behaviour or in the interaction within a workgroup, and making sure that no one involuntarily ends up outside the workplace community.

**Do a buddy check!**
Managers and supervisors

Through their leadership, managers and supervisors become role models and set the tone for the work environment on board. This requires clarity regarding the manager's own role and what applies in the workplace. To work efficiently with the work environment, as a manager, you need to be aware of your responsibilities. You also need to acquire necessary knowledge, appropriate mandate, sufficient time, and other resources to take action. Employers must ensure that managers are able to apply this knowledge in practice. Even though managers represent the employer in daily work, they are also employees themselves. Obviously, managers and supervisors need to have a good work environment themselves.

A particular challenge for managers on board is the continuously rotating and shared leadership, which is a natural consequence of ships generally having double crews. When there is a lack of consensus among the managers, there is an increased risk of conflicts. It is essential for managers and supervisors to communicate common work expectations and priorities to make it clear to employees what applies in different situations.

An unhealthy workload can lead to health issues and increase the risk of workplace bullying and harassment. Within the framework of systematic work environment work, managers should ensure that the work environment is examined so that early signs can be detected and addressed.

Incidents to be vigilant about!

- Unwanted sexual insinuations, groping, or behaviours that otherwise degrade an employee based on gender.
- Employees who don’t have time to take breaks during a work shift.
- Employees who need to work extra hard due to shortage of personnel.
- Employees who talk about sleep disorders, having trouble staying focused, or lacking motivation.
- Signs of irritation and conflicts within the workgroup, ironic comments, or someone berating a person in front of the group or similar.
- Threatening situations at work.
- Increased negligence or mistakes at work.
There are ready-made checklists for assessing workload. However, much useful information is already available within your own organization, for instance, data on sick leave, near misses, and accidents. But also other information that predicts the workload can be helpful, such as working and rest hours, numbers of passengers, and service satisfaction. Ask questions about clarity – does everyone know what they should do, how and why, and what the results should be?

It can be challenging to determine what a near miss incident – an “oops” – can be in the context of organizational and social work environment. On the previous page, you can see some examples of incidents to be vigilant about, but it’s a good idea to discuss together in the workgroup what “oops” and “ouch” mean in this context.

As a manager, it’s essential to be clear that workplace bullying and harassment are not tolerated. Have conversations with employees and safety representatives about the ground rules that apply in the workplace. Follow up to ensure that agreements are followed and that unacceptable behaviours have consequences.

The Equality Ombudsman’s Active measures describes four steps in the work of preventing discrimination and promoting equal rights and opportunities in the workplace.

In the handbooks from the non-profit organization Prevent, Work Environment for Managers and Organisational and social work environment – working practically, you will find many useful tips.
**Employers**

The employer has the ultimate responsibility for the work environment, and it’s essential that the preventive work on occupational health and safety also addresses the underlying causes of workplace bullying and harassment. The employer is obligated to take necessary measures to prevent ill-health and accidents at work. The systematic work environment management aims to understand the root causes of problems in the work environment before proposing solutions, so that decisions about actions are based on facts.

Employment conditions and the composition of the crew are important factors for the organizational and social work environment. It is an advantage to have continuity in ship crews, having the same individuals returning to the same vessel. This fosters mutual learning, both in terms of ship-board knowledge and in the social interaction on board. When we know each other, we understand each other’s expectations, reactions, and working methods. Continuity increases employee loyalty, reduces the risk of having under-qualified personnel, and enhances employees’ job security, in addition to the positive aspects it brings for individuals and colleagues in terms of improved working conditions.

For a lasting change in the onboard culture that currently poses an increased risk for women seafarers to experience workplace bullying and harassment, a long-term commitment to recruiting more women is needed. Unfortunately, there is often an implicit or explicit expectation that women, through their mere presence, can break prevailing norms and contribute to creating a more heterogeneous work environment. However, the path to achieving this is not straightforward. Women do not want to be treated differently from men in a workplace.
It is good if more women can work on the same vessel at the same time, as it strengthens the entire workgroup both socially and professionally.

Being new at work can be a transformative time. In a short time, the newly hired employee needs to gain an understanding of their assignment and role, acquire new theoretical and practical knowledge, and get to know new colleagues. The initial period is often associated with experiences of uncertainty and stress. An effective programme for onboarding and induction can address these problems and help newcomers to settle in. A programme may involve mentoring, sponsorship, and a gradual increase in work tasks. Well-fitting work clothes and functional protective equipment are also essential for feeling welcome in a new workplace. Unfortunately, such equipment is often more tailored to men than women. Apart from the risk of the new employee feeling insecure and ridiculous in ill-fitting clothes and equipment, it can affect the performance and safety of work.

Addressing the issue of underreporting of bullying and harassment is important. Clear procedures are needed for how all kinds of incidents are reported, handled, and followed up, even for events related to the organizational and social work environment. It should also be clarified to whom employees can turn both on the ship and ashore, as well as the measures that may be taken. When the employer becomes aware of harassment, there is an obligation to act, regardless of whether a report has been submitted or not. It is important that these cases are handled with respect and dignity.

There are different methods for investigating harassment. One method that has gained strong traction and has been evaluated in various types of organizations with good results is the Fact-finding investigation.

The method involves objectively investigating the grounds for an allegation of harassment to determine what actually happened and based on that, make decisions about actions.

*KAKS* (Conflicts, Aggressive behaviour, and Harassment) is another model for investigating harassment. KAKS is based on the power of storytelling and relies on narrative interviews. The method not only assesses whether it is harassment or not but also helps identify risk factors in the organizational and social work environment. The choice of method may vary depending on the situation, but it is essential to have clear procedures so that everyone knows how the handling will be conducted.
The maritime industry has demonstrated a willingness to grab the bully by the horn, for example by developing the Guidance on Eliminating Shipboard Harassment and Bullying, jointly produced by the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF). However, the journey beyond the common declaration of intent requires a “translation” of policy documents into concrete proposals and activities – something that makes ideas actually come into use and create change. There is no silver bullet to reach this point, but the commitment of the top management is crucial. When the responsibility for this type of change falls on middle managers, it is easily forgotten in the daily work.

To create attractive workplaces and facilitate sustainable recruitment and retention, the maritime industry needs to address the fundamental organizational structures that risk fostering harassment. With an understanding that women seafarers are at higher risk of being subjected to harassment, all stakeholders also need to work long-term towards increased gender equality in the maritime industry. Even though gender equality often takes men and women as a starting point, it’s important to remember that there are more power structures and classifications that encompass categories other than gender.

In a workgroup with a clear minority, there is a risk of developing beliefs and behaviours, such as stereotyping of the minority. This, in turn, can lead to problems in the workplace. A gender-equal work organization is not only about the number of women and men. It is also about power, influence, status, respect, conditions, health, and the opportunities provided in the workplace and in the profession. Therefore, the discussion of inequality should not be reduced to only being about women: the lack of women in the maritime industry; the issues faced by women seafarers; gender differences in health, or similar topics. It’s important to broaden the perspective and consider the whole picture. However, this is a challenge because it’s difficult to see the prevailing norm when you are part of it yourself. Discrimination against foreign seafarers occurs on several levels, including being treated differently through other employment conditions. From a perspective of justice and safety, it is challenging to see on what grounds this practice can be justified.

Increased representation of minorities in the maritime industry is one possible path toward increased diversification and a way to break the macho culture. The industry needs to revise the image of the skills and competencies that today’s seafarers need. Physical capacity plays a subordinate role today since intellectual, cognitive, and social qualities are required for problem solving on board.

The industry also needs to work on attitudes and values regarding parenthood and the possibility of flexible shifts to improve work-life balance. Organizations should automatically provide opportunities for employees to fulfil parenting obligations and support for single parents. If not, existing norms about women as primary caregivers are consolidated.

As the supervisory authority for working conditions on Swedish-flagged vessels, the Swedish Transport Agency has an important mission to ensure that the rules are followed. The agency should also strengthen its work on the international stage for a general improvement of the requirements for good working conditions. Procedures for reporting work-related injuries need to be simplified and clarified in collaboration with other authorities to counteract the significant under-reporting, primarily of occupational diseases. A comprehensive and accurate picture of the risks in the working environment on board is required to take the right measures and prioritize supervision efforts.
During the autumn of 2017, the world was shaken by the #metoo movement, which highlighted men’s sexual harassment and abuse of women in various contexts. In Sweden, over 60 initiatives were created for different industries, including the maritime. The #lättaankar initiative quickly gathered a large group of seafarers who shared frightening testimonies of what happens within the Swedish maritime industry. To highlight the seriousness and extent of this issue, a deeply moving YouTube video was compiled, in which women read out some of the testimonies.

The problem of workplace bullying and harassment at sea is about much more than a handful of individual perpetrators. It is about a culture that affects individuals as well as organizations. Several industry-wide collaborations to eliminate workplace bullying and harassment followed the #metoo appeal. However, the willingness alone is not enough, and today we know that there is a lack of knowledge in many places about how to handle and prevent workplace bullying and harassment, and it is this knowledge gap that this project aimed to fill.

A concluding reflection is that there seems to be increased gender equality in the maritime industry, or at least that gender equality has gained more attention. Or is it just islands of gender equality, and simply variations of gender inequality? To some extent, the underlying causes of workplace bullying and harassment are handled formally, but when it comes to everyday practice, this work is neglected. Continued discussions and spreading of knowledge are important, but to move forward, a greater focus on informal practices is needed.

Working to promote a good organizational and social work environment, free from abusive treatment, is also a way to strengthen the industry’s recruitment base by consciously including women. Incentives for each shipping company’s work for a gender-equal maritime industry are rooted not only in the necessity of creating a safer profession and breaking a negative macho culture on their own ships, but also in strengthening their position in the industry’s labour market.