

Policy Imperatives for the Mental Health of Filipino Overseas Seafarers

Ronahlee A. Asuncion



- Even with the prevalence of mental health issues among Filipino overseas seafarers, it still continues to be a hidden struggle among them.
- The huge gap in addressing their mental health needs necessitates implementing a multi-stakeholder approach and putting in place proactive measures to strengthen mental health policies and programs of all duty bearers.

Introduction

The shipping industry is a vital force in international trading and consequently, the global economy. Manned by seafarers from various countries, the Philippines emerges as the top supplier as shown below.

Figure 1: 2021 global percentage share of Filipino overseas seafarers

Officers		Ratings	
Philippines	9.46%	Philippines	16.55%
Russian Federation	8.36%	Russian Federation	12.22%
China	8.09%	Indonesia	8.93%
India	6.84%	China	6.27%
Indonesia	5.97%	India	5.3%

Overall Rating	
Philippines	13.33%
Russian Federation	10.47%
Indonesia	7.59%
China	7.10%
India	6.00%

Source: Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA 2022)

The nature of their job inevitably exposes them to various hazards in the form of biological, chemical, physical, ergonomic, and psychosocial factors.

Right to decent work

All workers have the inherent right to decent work. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), one aspect of decent work is the right of workers to safe conditions at work. To give emphasis on its importance, in 2022, the ILO added the fifth Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work to include having a

safe and healthy working environment. This automatically amended their 1998 Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work which specified only four obligations and commitments of ILO member countries such as: a) freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; b) the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; c) the effective abolition of child labour; and d) the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

Mental health as a hidden struggle of seafarers

When it comes to occupational safety and health at sea, it is usually the physical hazards that is given primary priority. While this is very much true because of the work of seafarers and their workplace, their psychosocial hazard should likewise be given equal attention. Nittari et al. (2022) stated that the mental health issues of seafarers are oftentimes regarded as less important than accidents or physical pathologies. However, considering that it can significantly impair the overall functioning of individuals, mental health issues of seafarers should likewise be given utmost attention.

Prevalence of mental health issues

Psychiatric and suicide cases were reported in the past years. For example, Roberts and Marlow (2005) noted that from 1976-2002, of the 835 traumatic work-related deaths, 17 of which were due to suicide and the cause of 178 seafarers who disappeared at sea or were found drowned were undetermined. Using a mental health screening survey to 1,572 seafarers from

Policy Imperatives for the Mental Health of Filipino Overseas Seafarers

various nationalities, Lefkowitz and Slade (2019) found that: a) 25% had scores suggesting depression that is significantly higher compared to other working and general population; b) 17% demonstrated anxiety; c) 20% had suicidal ideation either for several days, more than half the days or almost every day two weeks before the survey was conducted; d) work environmental factors like non-caring company culture, violence at work, job satisfaction, and self-rated health were determinants of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation; and e) self-rated health is the strongest predictor of anxiety and depression.

From 2010-2014, a total of 118 medical repatriation of Filipino overseas seafarers were recorded because of various mental and behavioral disorders (Abaya et al. 2015). The same causes were noted between 2015-2019 by Abaya et al. (2023), but this time, the cases increased to 153. The National Maritime Polytechnic [NMP] (2023) reported an increase in suicide cases involving Filipino seafarers from one in 2018 to nine in 2022. It also noted a steady annual increase of mental health disorders as the table below shows.

Table 1: Number of mental health cases of Filipino seafarers, 2018-2022

Year	Number of mental health cases
2018	23
2019	25
2020	34
2021	43
2022	64

Source: National Maritime Polytechnic (2023)

Current support systems and challenges

The Philippines has ratified Maritime Labour Convention 2006 in 2012 so it has legal and ethical obligations to comply with it. The Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), the Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA) together with non-government organizations, private sector, civil societies, and labor unions are all engaged in advancing the welfare of Filipino overseas seafarers.

Philippines laws are also in place such as the Presidential Decree 442 (Philippine Labor Code), Republic Act 11036 (Mental Health Act), Republic Act 8042 (Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995), and just recently, on 23 September 2024, Republic Act 12021 (Magna Carta of Filipino Seafarers) was enacted where Chapter IX is devoted to medical care and maritime occupational safety and health standards. However,

even with policies in place, barriers still remain such as, limited access to mental health services onboard ships, inadequate training of ship officers to recognize and address mental health concerns, economic constraints, socio-cultural challenges like the social stigma attached to mental health disorder, and psychosocial issues such as confidentiality and privacy concerns.

Concluding note

The nature of mental health disorders is complex. Unlike physical disability, where there is corresponding compensation, there is none so far in mental health cases. However, the increasing number of such cases cannot be ignored. It is then imperative to address the gap in the mental health of Filipino overseas seafarers through a multi-stakeholder approach and putting in place a proactive legal, social, economic, and technological measures to safeguard the welfare of Filipino overseas seafarers and for them to really experience total decent work.

(Ronahlee A. Asuncion/University of the Philippines)

References

- **Abaya, Antonio Roberto M., Saren Roldan, Jose Carlo E. Ongchangco, Regina M. Ronquillo-Sarmiento, Raymond Francis R. Sarmiento. 2015.** *Repatriation rates in Filipino seafarers: a five-year study of 6,759 cases.* Int Marit Health 2015; 66, 4: 189–195 DOI: 10.5603/IMH.2015.0038. https://journals.viamedica.pl/international_maritime_health.
- **Abaya, Antonio Roberto M., Jonathan P. Chan, Jian Kenzo O. Leal, Raymond Francis R. Sarmiento, Saren Bongalonta-Roldan, Jaime Jose Lorenzo C. De Rivera. 2023.** *Five-year (2015–2019) follow-up study of 6,526 cases of medical repatriation of Filipino seafarers.* International Maritime Health. Via Medica. Vol 74, No 3 (2023). In <https://journals.viamedica.pl>.
- **Lefkowitz, Rafael & Slade, Martin D., 2019.** *Seafarer Mental Health Study: Final Report.* ITF Seafarers' Trust & Yale University. October 2019.
- **Maritime Industry Authority, 2022.** *Annual Maritime Statistics, International and National Data, 2022.*
- **National Maritime Polytechnic, 2023.** *Assessing the Mental Health & Well-being of Filipino Seafarers, 2023.*
- **Nittari, Giulio, Filippo Gibelli, Paolo Bailo, Ascanio Sirignano & Giovanna Ricci. 2022.** *Factors affecting mental health of seafarers on board merchant ships: a systematic review.* 28 October 2022. In <https://www.degruyter.com>.
- **Roberts, SE. & Marlow, PB. 2005.** *Traumatic work related mortality among seafarers employed in British merchant shipping, 1976–2002.* In <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>.