



## Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect at work

Safe and efficient operation of ships require the crew onboard to work well together as a team. The best teams are those where everyone feels valued and treated with dignity and respect.

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When this article was first published, the [2016 Amendments](#) to the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) had just entered into force. These amendments encouraged flag states to consider harassment and bullying when addressing occupational safety and health risks and conducting investigations.

Since then, the maritime industry has made important progress in protecting seafarers from shipboard harassment and bullying. The [2025 Amendments](#) to the MLC will make it mandatory for flag states to ensure policies and measures are in place onboard ships to prevent and resolve cases of shipboard violence and harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and sexual assault. Flag states should also consider putting in place similar measures for recruitment and placement services established in their territories. Initiatives such as the IMO's ' [My Harassment-Free Ship](#) ' campaign, as well as the [forthcoming updates to the STCW Code](#) , which include mandatory anti-harassment training, reflect a growing global commitment to safer and more inclusive shipboard environments. The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) has also introduced a comprehensive set of [industry principles aimed at eliminating harassment and bullying](#) , underscoring the importance of collaboration among shipowners, flag states, and seafarers' representatives.

## Harassment and bullying remain common

Despite the progress, far too many seafarers are still likely to be bullied or harassed at work. In a [survey](#) among seafarers conducted by the Norwegian Maritime Authority (NMA) in 2023, as many as 27% stated that they had been bullied or harassed in the last 12 months. 2% of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment, which increased to 15% among the 400 female respondents. A [member survey](#) conducted by Nautilus International in 2021 showed similar concerning results, with 28% of its members reporting that they had experienced bullying or harassment onboard, rising to 42% who had witnessed bullying or harassment onboard.

*By updating this article, we hope to contribute to the ongoing discussion about harassment and bullying at sea, and to inspire long-term awareness and proactive action in order to safeguard the health and wellbeing of seafarers.*

## A tough and lonely profession

Preventing offensive or hurtful behaviour between colleagues is important in all workplaces, but perhaps even more so at sea. Seafaring is characterised by demanding physical working conditions, potentially hazardous tasks, long hours of work and high levels of stress and fatigue. Seafaring is also described as a 'lonely life'. Not only are seafarers away from family and friends for very long periods of time, many seafarers live isolated lives while onboard. Crew members may have very different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and the organisational, and associated social, structure onboard is usually strongly hierarchical. An increasing degree of automation onboard ships has led to smaller crews, which means that the team onboard is even more vulnerable and dependent on good collaboration.

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At Gard we deal with seafarers' health issues every day. Indeed, crew claims are one of the most frequently occurring types of maritime claims, as outlined in our recent [Gard Crew Claims Report 2025](#). Our data show that illnesses related to abdominal and cardiovascular conditions top the list of causes for repatriating seafarers. But data only gives limited insight into the actual working conditions and safety culture onboard. Could diagnoses such as 'abdominal pain' and 'chest pain' in some cases reflect a person's reduced mental wellbeing from being bullied at work? Could a 'broken finger' be reported as a 'slip, trip and fall incident' to cover-up physical abuse by a fellow crew member?

Unfortunately, claims data does not enable us to quantify the extent and consequences of harassment and bullying onboard ships. However, we do know that there are seafarers out there with some upsetting stories to tell and seafarer surveys clearly indicate that there is room for improvement.

## Recognising harassment and bullying

Violence and harassment in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and include gender-based violence and harassment. The terms harassment and bullying are often used interchangeably, but the ICS and International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) '[Guidance on eliminating shipboard harassment and bullying](#)' (ICS-ITF Guidance), which is also referenced in the MLC, explains them as follows:

**“Harassment** is a form of discrimination which has the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.”

**“Bullying** is a form of harassment that includes hostile or vindictive behaviour, which can cause the recipient to feel threatened or intimidated.” threatened or intimidated.”

It is worth noting that harassment and bullying:

- can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from use of offensive language, rude gestures, spreading malicious rumours and making unwelcome sexual advances, to various forms of physical aggression resulting in serious injuries,
- does not only happen face to face. The increasing availability of electronic communication has created a potentially powerful means to harass, embarrass, humiliate, threaten, or intimidate individuals. This has become known as 'cyber-bullying',

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- can be between two individuals or it may involve groups of people. It can be officers who bully a crew member of a lower rank, or it can occur between crew members of the same rank,
- might be obvious or insidious. A working relationship described as a ‘personality-clash’ or individuals described as ‘over-sensitive’, ‘unable to see a joke’ or ‘having an attitude problem’, could sometimes be excuses for behaviour that involve ‘hidden’ bullying, and
- can occur unwittingly, rather than as a result of any deliberate malign intention. In some cases, those committing acts of harassment and bullying may be unaware of the impact their behaviour has on others. However, this is no excuse and may still constitute harassment or bullying.

Most people will agree on extreme cases of harassment and bullying but it is sometimes the ‘grey areas’ that cause the most problems. Some ship operators prefer to provide examples of what is unacceptable behaviour in their organisation, and many relevant examples are provided in the [ICS-ITF Guidance](#) . However, for all practical purposes, if a seafarer complains of being harassed or bullied, he or she has a grievance which must be dealt with regardless of whether or not the complaint meets with a standard definition.

## Fostering a good working environment

Harassment and bullying is not only unacceptable on moral grounds. Such behaviours can, if left unchallenged, create serious problems for shipowners. Safe and efficient operation of ships require the crew onboard to work as a team. And teams that work best are those where team members feel valued – where they treat each other with dignity and respect.

We encourage our members and clients to foster a working environment in which seafarers can work free of harassment and bullying. A first step for **shipowners and operators** is to review all relevant regulatory requirements, the [ICS Industry Principles](#) , and the [ICS-ITF Guidance](#) , then to:

- ensure that they have a clearly written policy statement on the elimination of harassment and bullying,
- identify the standards of behaviour expected of seafarers and make sure that officers and superintendents have the necessary skills to lead by example,
- maintain fair procedures for dealing promptly with complaints from seafarers, and

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• carry out regular communication, training and awareness sessions. A written policy will only eliminate harassment and bullying in the workplace if it is supported by positive action to put it into practice.

Everyone has a responsibility to set a positive example and behave in a manner, which will not offend, embarrass or humiliate others, whether deliberate or unintentional. It is therefore equally important that **seafarers** :

- are familiar with and follow company procedures,
- know to whom they can turn if they have a work-related problem,
- respect appropriate standards of behaviour, and
- report if they experience harassment and bullying or observe such behaviour directed to others.

As the victims of harassment and bullying may not feel able to speak up about their ordeal, we encourage seafarers to get involved in situations where they see colleagues being harassed and bullied and support them when necessary. Even minor offences must be addressed right away to prevent them from happening again or becoming more serious in the future.

## Additional sources of information

- European Community Shipowner's Association (ECSA) and European Transport Worker's Federation (ETF):

[Eliminating workplace harassment and bullying - guidelines to shipping companies](#), including supporting material ([video](#) and [workbook](#)).

- Nautilus International:

[Protect and Respect – Guidance on recognising and tackling bullying and harassment in the maritime workplace](#)

- Anglo Eastern Ship Management Limited (AESM):

[Gender diversity booklet](#)

- US Ship Operations Cooperative Program (SOCP):

[Best practices guide on the prevention of sexual harassment and assault](#)

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- ILO:  
[Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 \(No.190\)](#)

- Norwegian Maritime Administration (NMA):  
[How you can prevent harassment and bullying](#)

Further information about seafarers' rights to decent conditions of work is also available via Gard's website: [Maritime Labour Convention](#)

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