



WORK RELATED ABSENCES FROM HOME AND ITS IMPACT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL BEING OF SEAFARERS

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ABSTRACT Seafarers can be rightly describes and a global workforce and seafaring one of the ancient occupations in the world. The occupation albeit its adventurous nature and benefits is characterized by work patterns demanding periodic absences from home and separation from families. This has a significant impact on the seafarers and their family members. The impact of work related intermittent absence is especially high among married seafarers and influences their psychological wellbeing. This paper sought to provide fresh insight on the impact of intermittent absences on the psychological wellbeing of the seafarers. The researcher has adopted descriptive research design. The sample of the study comprised of 181 seafarers. Due to the transitory nature of the seafarers work the researcher used convenience sample for the study. Data was collected using a questionnaire addressing demographic variables and Psychological wellbeing of the seafarers. Data was collected using interview method. Data was analyzed using appropriate statistical procedures. Results revealed that the seafarers experienced low psychological wellbeing

KEYWORDS : Seafarers, Work-related absence, Psychological wellbeing

INTRODUCTION:

The Shipping industry is one of the oldest and traditional industries in the world and seafaring one of the ancient professions dating back to centuries. It also influences the global economy to a large extent and could be rightly called the lifeblood of global economy. Global Shipping plays a fundamental role in international trade by carrying almost 90% of the cargos across the globe. Shipping industry is currently one of the ancient and largest industries in the world. There are over 50,000 merchant (cargo) ships trading internationally, transporting every kind of cargo to every single country in the globe. The world fleet includes ships from over 150 nations, manned by over a million seafarers of almost every nationality. Apart from playing a crucial role in global trade and commerce, the shipping industry also provides employment to many individuals.

Seafarers:

The world's seafarers can be described as one of the first actual international and global workforces, comprising of individuals from regions as geographically and culturally disparate as Western Europe, Russia, India, South America and the Philippines. Such seafarers work on a range of different vessels, operating different trades, with a diverse range of work conditions. However, one thing that is common for these individuals is that their work necessitates prolonged separation from their home and families, these separations are very often characterized by infrequent and rare opportunities for communication. As such, seafaring may be seen as more than an occupation, rather a lifestyle—a lifestyle that involves a constant series of partings and reunions with associated transitions from shore-based life to the unique work environment of the ship. Inevitably, it is a lifestyle that will impact dramatically on both seafarers and their families.

Seafaring Work Patterns & Work Related Absence from Home:

- Seafaring is characterized by unique features which sets it apart from other occupations. This includes 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'. Seafaring work patterns vary based on a number of factors such as nationality and rank of seafarer, employers' policies, type of trade and routes sailed. A typical length of contract for an Indian officer is three months offshore and three months leave back to back whereas that of an Indian rating is 9 - 12 months with approximately two months leave on completion of the contract. Employment contracts may differ ranging from permanent employment with paid leave and other associated benefits to single contracts with no income during the leave period and no assurance of employment when the seafarer wishes to return to sea.
- Seafaring schedules, whether involving trips of weeks, months or even years, will involve a constant process of change, readjustment and transition for both seafarers and their families. For seafarers, they must adapt from the drastically different environments of the ship to home life. Not only are seafarers away from family and friends for very long periods of time, many

seafarers live isolated lives while onboard. An increasing degree of automation onboard ships has led to smaller crews and crew members may have very different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In this context, the workforce may be regarded as particularly vulnerable to mental ill health. This has a significant impact on the psychological wellbeing of the seafarers.

Psychological Wellbeing:

At the most basic level, psychological wellbeing (PWB) is quite similar to other terms that refer to mental healthy states, such as happiness or satisfaction. Although baseline psychological wellbeing may be fairly stable, day to day events and experiences also exert an impact. For example, even the most resilient person may eventually become very low, or depressed, if his or her daily experiences are repetitively troubling. There is strong proof to show that exposure to work-related stressors over long periods of time will have a negative impact on PWB. A study, conducted by Cardiff University and funded by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), combined the use of questionnaires, interviews, literature to clarify:

- The perception of stakeholders on mental health of seafarers;
- factors that seafarers identify as supporting or undermining mental health and wellbeing onboard cargo ships; and
- the policy level changes that could be implemented by employers in order to provide better support for seafarers' mental health and wellbeing.

The results of the study revealed when seafarers experienced, family-related problems it made most seafarers to feel 'down' or depressed onboard. Various ship-specific factors caused seafarers to feel down, such as too much work, being unable to take shore leave and poor food. Various crew related factors caused seafarers to feel down, such as having a 'bossy captain', experiencing discrimination, being blamed for things and falling out with superiors and other colleagues. Getting tired was identified by the majority of seafarers as an underlying cause of shipboard depression, as was boredom. Many such studies portray the problems of seafarers onboard leading to poor mental wellbeing of the seafarers

Review of Literature:

Dr Olivia Swift & Dr Rikke Jensen (2016) Researchers in the University of London, used existing research to examine how internet connectivity and social media can help and/or hinder seafarers' mental health and onboard social cohesion. The authors contend that though there is no common verdict about whether improved connectivity is 'beneficial' or 'bad' for seafarers' mental health and social interactions onboard ship, there are signs that improved connectivity onboard is generally helpful.

Papachristou, A et Al (2015) studied the impact of communication technologies onboard in the retention of seafarers. More than 500 seafarers participated in a survey that was conducted. The analysis of the results have revealed that respondents perceived their separation from families and the inadequacy of communication with family and friends while at sea as the most significant issues hindering retention in the seafaring profession. While seafarers were satisfied with their

choice of joining the profession, they considered inadequate communication with family and friends as a reason for abandoning their career. This provides clear evidence of the role played by communication in increasing the retention rate within the seafaring profession.

Thomas, M., Sampson, H. and Zhao, M. (2003) Separation from partner and family has been found to be one of the most significant causes of stress for seafarers, with separation from the family one of the most important 'stress' factors influencing a decision to reduce planned sea service. The paper concludes that the negative consequences of seafaring can be minimized by such policies as shorter trips, continuous employment (rather than employment by voyage) and opportunities for partners and families to sail. Whilst these measures may have financial costs, these can be off-set by improved retention of seafarers and the avoidance of stress-related illnesses. Indeed, at a time when there is a projected shortfall of well-trained seafarers, such steps may be sound company policy

METHODOLOGY:

This research study was descriptive in nature. The objective of the study was to examine how periodic absences from home influence the psychological wellbeing of the seafarers. The universe of the study was married seafarers who were registered in National Union of Seafarers in India (Tuticorin). The sample for the study 181 seafarers selected through convenience sampling technique. Demographic details of respondents were collected by means of a short self-structured questionnaire and Psychological and general well-being index developed by Harold Dupuy 1984, 22 items was used to assess the Psychological wellbeing of the respondents. Data was collected using interview method.

RESULTS:

Variable	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Age (in years)	Below 35	95	52.5
	36 to 40	61	33.7
	41- 45	15	8.3
	46 and above	10	5.5
Years of experience	Below 5	86	47.5
	6 to 10	72	39.8
	11 to 15	15	8.3
	16 and above	8	4.4
Career Breaks	Yes	54	29.8
	No	127	70.2
Reason for Career breaks	Reducing Shore Leaves	4	2.2
	Health Issues	7	3.9
	Loneliness and homesick	19	10.5
	Personal/ Family Problems	23	12.7
	Onboard politics	1	.6
Duration of duty	One month	10	5.5
	Three months	13	7.2
	Six months	42	23.2
	Nine months	82	45.3
	Twelve months	26	14.4
	Thirty Two months	8	4.4
Duration of leave	One month	32	17.7
	Two months	89	49.2
	Three months	45	24.9
	Four months	12	6.6
	Five months	3	1.7
Monthly Income (Rs.)	30001-40000	6	3.3
	40001-50000	11	6.1
	50001-60000	35	19.3
	60001-70000	82	45.3
	Above 70000	47	26.0

The above table depicts that, of the total 181 seafarers more than half (52.5 percent) of them were below 35 years of age, 33.7 percent of them were between 36-40 years, 8.3 percent of them were between 41-45 years and 5.5 percent of them were above 46 years. This reveals that majority of the respondents are youngsters. The table shows that 47.5

percent of the respondents had years of experience below 5 years, 39.8 percent of them had an experience between 6-10 years, 8.3 percent of them had an experience between 11-15 years and 4.4 percent of them had an experience between 16 and above. More than half of the respondents are youngsters who have joined their job recently, thus majority of them are having an experience below 5 years. Majority of the respondents (70.2 percent) don't have any career break and 29.8 percent of the respondents had career breaks.

Out of the 54 seafarers who have career breaks, 12.7 percent of them have stated that the reason for their career break is personal and family problems, 10.5 percent of them have stated the reason as loneliness and homesick, 3.9 percent of them have stated the reason as health issues, 2.2 percent of them have stated the reason as reducing shore leaves and 0.6 percent of them have stated the reason as onboard politics. The duration of duty of seafarers was found to be nine months among 45.3 percent, 23.2 percent of their duration of work was found to be six months, 14.4 percent of their duration of work was found to be twelve months, 7.2 percent of their duration of work was found to be three months, 5.5 percent of their duration of work was one month and 4.4 percent of their duration of work was found to be thirty two months.

The table reveals that 49.2 percent of the seafarers had leave duration of two months, 24.9 percent of them had leave duration of three months, 17.7 percent of them had leave duration of one month, 6.6 percent of them had leave duration of four months and 1.7 percent of them had leave duration of five months. The above table shows that 55.2 percent of the seafarers duration of marriage was found to be below 5 years, 32.6 percent of their marriage duration was found to be between 6 to 10 years, 6.6 percent of the seafarers duration of marriage was found to be between 11-15 years and 5.5 percent of the seafarers duration of marriage was found to be above 16 years. The above table reveals that the monthly income of the seafarers, which shows that 45.3 percent were earning an monthly income between 60001-70000, 26 percent of were earning an monthly income above 70000, 19.3 percent of them were earning an income between 50001-60000 and 6.1 percent of them were earning an income between 40001-50000 and 3.3 percent of them were earning an income between 30001-40000.

Level of Psychological Well-being of Seafarers

S.No	Psychological Well-being	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Extremely High (83-110)	2	1.1
2	Very High (56-82)	30	16.6
3	High (49-55)	40	22.1
4	Low (40-48)	78	43.1
5	Very Low (21-39)	31	17.1
	Total	181	100.0

The study reveals that 43.1 percent of the seafarers were having a low psychological well-being, 22.1 percent of them were having a high psychological well-being, 17.1 percent of them were having a very low psychological well-being, 16.6 percent of them were having a very high psychological well-being and 1.1 percent of them were having extremely high psychological well-being. This shows that majority were unable to cope with the nature of work due to their lesser experience as many of them are youngsters.

Suggestions:

- 1) Shipping Companies and stakeholders should understand the importance of good mental health identify the onset of psychological problems among seafarers and take steps to support mental health and wellbeing on board in order to proactively reduce the incidence of unhappiness and of recent-onset anxiety and depression among seafarers.
- 2) Free and unlimited communication facilities should be made available to all seafarers on board all cargo vessels.
- 3) Recreation activities should be provided
- 4) Shore leave should be provided at every opportunity and for all ranks.
- 5) Contracts should balance work and leave time for all ranks in a ratio not worse than 2:1 and with an upper limit of a maximum of six months on board.
- 6) Counselling services should be made available

CONCLUSION:

Seafaring, though an attractive career option among today's youth. It is a rewarding career yet it has its own disadvantages. Albeit the adventurous nature of seafaring there are a number of risks involved in

the career. One of the major disadvantages of the profession is its work pattern that demands seafarers to leave their homes for fixed intervals. This cycle of parting and reunions have a significant impact on the psycho-social aspects of life of seafarers. The study reveals that the work patterns of the seafarers have significant impact on the Psychological wellbeing of the respondents. The low levels of Psychological wellbeing reinforce the need for counselling and family interventions. Co-operation between employers and family professionals in various areas from which they recruit seafarers and will enable families experiencing the negative effects of work-related absences avail professional support. Premarital counselling of seafarers and spouses would help to understand the challenges they would face in their life and help them understand what to expect while marrying a seafarer. In addition to these interventions policy level changes focusing on the welfare of seafarers and their families would encourage existing seafarers to continue their careers and attract more youngsters which would thereby influence the national economy.

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