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Developing and Promoting Seafarers' Welfare under the Maritime Labour Convention: A Research Agenda

Maria Progoulaki^a, Aikaterini Katradi^b, Ioannis Theotokas^c

^aUniversity of the Aegean, Dept. of Shipping Trade and Transport, Re-SHIP Laboratory,
2A Korai Street, 821 00, Chios, Greece, Email: m.progoulaki@aegean.gr

^bUniversity of the Aegean, Dept. of Shipping Trade and Transport, Re-SHIP Laboratory,
2A Korai Street, 821 00, Chios, Greece, Email: akatradi@chios.aegean.gr

^cUniversity of the Aegean, Dept. of Shipping Trade and Transport, Re-SHIP Laboratory,
2A Korai Street, 821 00, Chios, Greece, Email: gtheotokas@aegean.gr

Abstract

Seafarers' welfare is becoming a major issue for the international maritime community. This paper aims at examining the effect of welfare interventions onboard and ashore in the development and promotion of seafarers' well-being. For this, it analyses the theoretical context of welfare and its aspects concerning the shipping industry. The paper is based on the results of a qualitative survey among ten Greek-owned shipping companies that manage a total fleet of more than 430 vessels. Literature review and results of the field further existing knowledge on provision of crew welfare facilities and services, as well as on the role of various stakeholders involved in the provision of such facilities. Analysis also focuses on the examination of current conditions. The paper also examines the way the Maritime Labor Convention standards are met by the industry stakeholders, discusses possible gaps that need to be filled and proposes actions for policy makers. This article introduces the research agenda in the field of welfare and well-being in the shipping industry. The present analysis contributes to our understanding on crew welfare and well-being and offers a base of dialogue on the different areas they affect.

JEL Classification: J81; I38; K31.

Keywords: Crew welfare; Welfare services and facilities; Seafarers; Well-being; Research agenda.

1. Introduction

Workplace wellbeing can be synonym to psychological contentment and happiness at work. Armstrong (2009) noted that people can be happy with their work, with its characteristics and practices. Happiness at work is emerged with diverse happiness-related constructs reflecting to various forms of happiness such as pleasant experiences (positive feeling, moods, and emotions) and positive attitudes at work (Fisher, 2010). Additionally, workplace wellbeing depends on the quality of work-life. The provision of welfare practices aims at balancing effectively the work responsibilities and interests that people have outside work. High quality services, facilities, policies, and practices aim at a better

life and health in the workplace. Therefore, a satisfactory balance between work and non-work activities sought to employees' satisfaction, motivation, productivity and performance among others (Armstrong, 2009). Consequently, as it is mentioned by Tehrani, Humpage Willmott, and Haslam, (2007), well-being at workplace refers to the improvement of workforce's physical, mental and social health. According to White (2010) and Sinha (2012), psychological well-being at work is related to positive mood and emotions the employees feel while they are seeking to be satisfied, motivated, committed and productive at work (Keyes, Hysom and Lupo, 2000).

Especially in the case of seafaring profession, the quality of working conditions and work-life balance are essentials for the effective and safe operation of ships. The ship is a working and simultaneously a living environment, thus making seafaring a profession with particular patterns and needs. Additionally, Progoulaki, Knudsen and Theotokas (2006) and Theotokas (2010) state that seafarers can be characterised as a unique employment group which has a free-lancing character, experiences prolonged isolation in combination with limited available on board services, while the access to any port can be difficult. In combination, the aforementioned characteristics and the faint boundaries between work and life in seafaring profession, led the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to set as a priority the quality of work and life onboard vessel. Therefore, the concept of wellbeing is identified by the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) (ILO, 2006), highlighting the need for onboard and shore-based welfare services and facilities. However, several aspects of the issue remain unclear, both in terms of identifying and clearly defining the concept of welfare, as well as in terms of implementing the international requirements that stem from the MLC. Welfare in the case of shipping and seafaring, may include a wide range of notions, such as (a) the welfare and health of the individual seafarer, the level of job satisfaction and the well-being of his/her family, (b) crew welfare while being onboard and at ports, health and safety of the crew, and (c) welfare of the society, which is strongly related with the corporate social responsibility and the well-being of the societies affected by the shipping operation. Further, it is an issue that can affect satisfaction of the seafarers from their employment, retention to their employer, the occupation and the industry, as well as attractiveness of the seafaring profession.

So far, little attention has been paid to the crew welfare and its provisions. This paper provides a fundamental base to understand and analyse the meaning of crew welfare and further, and offers a base of dialogue on the different areas that it affects. Section 2 analyses the meaning of welfare in the case of the shipping industry, and the requirements that accrue from MLC, along with the methodology used. Section 3 discusses the applied crew welfare policies by different stakeholders internationally, and in the case of Greek shipping. Conclusions, limitations and the proposed research agenda follow in Section 4.

2. Background and Research Methodology

2.1 Welfare in the shipping industry

The promotion, development and improvement of welfare have been a long-term objective for the ILO, many years before the MLC. The ILO underlined the need for si-

gnificant onboard welfare facilities and services for seafarers, as well as the need for access to shore-based welfare facilities and services with the main aim to promote and secure seafarers' rights concerning their physical and psychological health and well-being. For this, a series of international conventions and regulations had been introduced, which had limited adoption by the ILO member community, though. The MLC (ILO, 2006) set standards for both onboard and shore-based welfare facilities and services, thus raising the interest for examining and possibly improving the currently available facilities and services world widely.

The MLC, being an internationally accepted and ratified convention, was adopted by the ILO in order to provide international standards for the employment of seafarers and their rights. The crew welfare, as it is presented by ILO, depends on the provision of those facilities and services aiming at boosting seafarers' social (individual and collaborative) and psychological wellbeing onboard, including recreational facilities and communication services, such as television and radio facilities, films, sports equipment, library, telephone and internet services among others (ILO, 1987; 2003). The requirements of the MLC, outlined in Titles 3 and 4 of the Convention (ILO, 2006), contribute to the general idea of seafarers' wellbeing which can be broadened to include provisions of decent accommodation and recreational facilities, medical care onboard, communication and recreation facilities as well as social insurance. However, while this broad definition could come out of the MLC description, the Convention per se relates seafarers' welfare mainly with (a) rights for decent working and living conditions on board, (b) avoidance of abuse and financial exploitation, (c) access to medical care, and (d) freedom of association. It is important to clarify that under MLC, the onboard welfare facilities and services offered by the shipping companies will be subject of inspection and certification, while the provision of shore-based welfare facilities will not.

Furthermore, as far as shore-based welfare is concerned, MLC Regulation 4.4 (ILO, 2006) ensures that seafarers shall have access to shore-based facilities and services securing their health and well-being. Under the MLC, such type of facilities and services are becoming a major concern to the states, port authorities, seafarers' unions and other stakeholders. However, due to lack of knowledge on the existing welfare services and facilities, the level to which the various stakeholders meet the MLC standards needs to be examined. In this vein, under MLC it is the responsibility of each ILO Member State to ensure, "where welfare facilities exist on its territory, that they are available for the use of all seafarers, irrespective of nationality, race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion or social origin and irrespective of the flag State of the ship on which they are employed or engaged or work" (ILO, 2006:67). Moreover, each Member State is responsible to promote effectively a) the development of welfare facilities in suitable ports of each country, b) the encouragement to establish welfare boards and c) the supervision of the welfare facilities and services with the participation of ship owners and seafarers organisations' representatives. The MLC requires that the Member States cooperate in the promotion of the welfare of seafarers at sea and in port, by organising international seminars on the subject of welfare of seafarers, organising international sports competitions, agreeing the joint provision of welfare facilities in major ports so as to avoid unnecessary duplication, and others (the later can be provided by the Member States, by the public

authorities, and/or the ship-owners and seafarers' organisations concerned and/or voluntary organisations. See Guideline B4.4.2 paragraph 2 in ILO, 2006:68).

MLC also stresses the need for establishment of welfare boards at port, regional and national levels whose task will be to (a) review the adequacy of existing and the need for additional facilities; and (b) assist welfare providers and coordination between them. Board members should include ship-owner and seafarer organisations, competent authorities, voluntary and social bodies (see Standard A.4, ILO, 2006:67). For instance, in the case of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), the Committee that was established involved among others representatives from the following organisations: Mission to Seafarers, Australian Ship-owners Association, International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), Australian Mariners Welfare Society, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. An additional point that should be mentioned in relation to seafarers' access to shore-based welfare facilities is that in many cases seafarers are facing restrictions on shore leave (ITF, 2005). These restrictions can lead to a limited use of the shore-based welfare facilities, including medical care. Therefore, the MLC underlined the need for access to shore-based welfare facilities and services for all seafarers in order to avoid the aforementioned problems and to secure seafarers' health and well-being.

2.2 Research Methodology

The methodology used in this analysis includes initially a thorough literature review of the existing research in the field. Further, an investigation of the crew welfare services and facilities offered in Greece revealed aspects of the subject from two sides: (a) national policy on seafarers' welfare and (b) corporate policy on crew welfare. Primary data was gathered via semi-structured interviews aiming at obtaining an insight on how Greek-owned shipping companies perceive the issue of crew welfare. Through a qualitative analysis, a thorough understanding and thus, an in-depth approach of such a sensitive issue is able to be gained (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Qualitative data was collected by interviewing representatives (i.e. crew managers, Quality, Health, Safety, Environment [QHSE] managers and training officers) of ten Greek-owned shipping companies that manage a fleet of more than 430 vessels in total, representing almost 12% of the total number of Greek-owned ships.

The survey took place during November 2012; this was the period that Greece was preparing for the ratification of MLC, and thus is considered a voluntary and preparatory stage prior enforcement of MLC. Interview questions aimed to obtain a general perception of the meaning of crew welfare, and examined the following: knowledge of existing port-based crew welfare facilities; best practices towards increase of crew welfare practiced by Greek owned shipping companies; crew welfare facilities and services offered on board Greek owned ships; examination of seafarers' job satisfaction and welfare from offered on board welfare facilities; and identification of the effect of MLC implementation to crew welfare policies and offered services and facilities. The interviewees hold many years of sea experience and were aware of the crew needs for welfare facilities onboard. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Data from all interviews was cross-analysed so similarities and differences were noted.

3. Discussion: Crew welfare policies applied by different stakeholders

3.1 Crew welfare policies, services and facilities found internationally

Data on the basic onboard and port-based crew welfare facilities and services found internationally was collected by Kahveci (2007:3). Such facilities and services appear to include: contacts with seafarers' welfare workers, usage of seafarer centres and port based facilities, commercial "seafarer centres" (i.e bars and shops), communication with family and friends whilst on board, shore- leave, alternative seafarer welfare provisions, onboard welfare provisions (i.e. library, DVDs, television, music instruments, sport equipment and gym facilities), spiritual and recreational needs of seafarers. However, Kahveci (2007) mentioned that the onboard welfare provisions may vary from company to company and from vessel to vessel.

From the aforementioned onboard welfare facilities and services, communication was found to be really important for seafarers. Nevertheless, at the time of the MLC introduction, the majority of shipping companies have Email and internet access mostly for business use only (ITF, 2007). Moreover, at times senior officers may had free Email access, while captain could decide who could use Email services onboard or rarely was free use of Email for every crew member (Kahveci, 2007; Davies and Parfett, 1998). Even though sometimes there was free Email access, usually companies do not kept privacy in seafarers' messages.

Concerning the port-based facilities and services, the ITF Seafarers Trust (Trust) (ITF, 2004), provides seafarers with the opportunity to use facilities ashore, via networking and the financial support of local churches and other industry organisations (such as the Apostleship of the Sea [AoS], the Sailors' Society, the Mission to Seafarers, the International Christian Maritime Association, the Merchant Navy Welfare Board, and the International Seafarers' Assistance Network). According to Kahveci (2007) the main ports in Western Europe, North America, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore provide seafarers free transport/shuttle bus, availability of phone boxes within the port area, easy access to town centre, easy of communication with port workers for local information (see also the Seafarers' Centres Directory offered free-of-charge and online by the International Committee for Seafarers' Welfare [ICSW]); however, it is a great concern whether these services are used by all the seafarers.

3.2 Results concerning Greece

As already mentioned, under MLC, all Member states, such as Greece, should provide shore-based welfare facilities to all seafarers, irrespective of their national origin. However, the provided port welfare services are quite limited in Greece. The "Deutsche Seemannsmission", i.e. the German branch of the Seaman's Mission in Piraeus is the only seafarers' centre based in Greece, offering free transport from and to the port, accommodation, telephone, wireless internet access and being open 24 hours a day to all seafarers. There is no other evidence for the operation of similar seafarers' centres in other Greek ports, apart from the "Seafarers' Hearth"; the latter promotes financial, mental and social support for Greek seafarers only. The 'Seafarers' Hearth' is available to national seafarers only, probably because its operation is funded directly by the fees

that Greek seafarers and shipping companies operating Greek-flagged vessels pay through the national seafarers' social security system

The survey among Greek owned shipping companies and their representatives revealed confusion towards the theoretical meaning and content of welfare, and more specifically, crew welfare. This may be due to the fact that MLC does not clearly define the term "crew welfare". Thus, apart from crew wellbeing onboard, crew welfare is often related -by the shipping companies- with seafarer's job satisfaction and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Taking into consideration the shipping companies' representatives' answers, crew welfare seems to play an extremely important role in crew retention. Thus, shipping companies are willing to invest in their seagoing personnel's wellbeing, since it is considered a main source of productivity. Therefore, following the standards of related international conventions and CSR industry practices -including but not limited to MLC-, shipping companies seek to offer a decent working and living environment. In relation to this, the survey showed that the companies offer, apart from comfortable accommodation and advanced medical care (on-line), a variety of onboard recreational facilities that include gym equipment, television, karaoke, internet access, library/books, DVDs, newspapers (in Greek and other languages). It is also mentioned that seafarers are encouraged to carry onboard their personal musical instruments, table games and portable music and other services. In this frame, it was noted that onboard welfare facilities and services are implemented equally and uniformly to all types of vessels and seafarers without discrimination. Also, these are considered an essential part of each company's crew management policy, due to their contribution to high retention rates, improvement of company's reputation and increase of their company's attractiveness.

Communication was highlighted as one of the most important services; however the provided ones are either limited or too expensive for the crew. More precisely, although telephone is acknowledged as a very expensive communication means, simultaneously is considered as the main communication means linking the crew's onboard life with that of the family and friends. Although in all cases there is internet access, it is used mainly for business with a few exceptions. However, seafarers can send a limited number of Emails to their family without having permanent communication access to this means. It is important to note that some shipping companies mentioned that they try to fulfil seafarers' needs to communicate via internet by giving them the possibility to use free software, such as "Skype" or other equivalent.

Regarding the information of the crew about the available port-based facilities and services on each next port of call, basic knowledge is mainly provided to seafarers by the manning agencies. Additionally, it is observed that seafarers perceive transportation between the port-based facilities and the vessel as necessary. Despite the fact that, the shipping companies do not evaluate the seafarers' satisfaction from the shore-based crew welfare facilities, seafarers can unofficially inform the company about their satisfaction and consequently, inform the manning agents and request improvement -if possible- of the offered welfare facilities and services at the ports. Generally, respondents believe that the provided welfare services in the main European and American ports are quite satisfying, and that MLC's requirements regarding onboard facilities and services are already fulfilled by most of the Greek-owned shipping companies.

4. Conclusions, limitations and a research agenda

The aim of this paper was to examine the promotion and development of seafarers' welfare under MLC as well as to identify and analyse the existing knowledge on welfare facilities and services either onboard vessel or ashore. Taking offered welfare provisions into consideration, shipping companies create a conceptual framework for improving employees' satisfaction in which MLC's requirements are followed and mostly employees take greater advantage of the received benefits. The survey showed that not only MLC standards are met, but also that shipping companies offer additional welfare facilities and services of high quality onboard vessel. It should be emphasized that, welfare provisions aim to insure individuals' well-being as well as social development and team working. The paper also examined the role of stakeholders involved in the provision of such facilities, as well as the perception of shipping companies on port welfare services. The contribution of Kahveci (2007) offered an overall understanding of port-based welfare facilities and services, mapping seafarers' perception on potential benefits and gaps internationally. In this framework, Greek-owned shipping companies' perception on welfare provisions ashore is that there are adequate port-based provisions in main ports internationally which offer mainly communication and transportation services. However, the shipping companies expressed the doubt on the efficacy of the offered provisions ashore, noting that the companies themselves are responsible for their seafarers' welfare ashore by assigning the manning agencies and port agents in each port to act on behalf of them. Although some of the obstacles in the creation and operation of port-based facilities and services include the lack of funds and financial support, the heavy workload of seafarers, lack of interest from authorities, language boundaries, and distance between different ports and terminals, the literature review showed that the provided port-based facilities and services reach an adequate level. However, there is enough room for improvement.

The qualitative analysis produced results that indicate areas which need further investigation, and thus, was useful for the development of a Research Agenda that surpasses the requirements of MLC and opens the dialogue for a more holistic approach to the topic. The key topics that need further research can be categorised in the following streams: management, policy and theory. Each area discusses several aspects of the topic. More specifically, in the management level, shipping companies' policies, practices and best strategies towards promoting, developing, increasing and retaining seafarers' welfare and measuring and improving crew's job satisfaction are of major concern. In the policy level, ILO Member States' and Port State authorities' policies need to be examined and enhanced, while in the theoretical level, the application of organisational behaviour theories which focus on welfare and job satisfaction can be examined in relation to seafaring and the maritime industry.

Survey results produce conclusions whose ability for generalization can be mentioned, taking of course into account that comes out of sample of one nationality. However, considering the top percentage of Greek owned fleet in the world fleet, one can acknowledge the results of this survey, as a first and thorough insight in some key points of the issue. In general, the importance of this study lays in the examination of the existing knowledge on crew welfare in the voluntary period prior the implementation of MLC. Also, the ini-

tial survey among Greek owned shipping companies offered the chance to examine some key areas concerning crew welfare, and to focus on more areas that need further investigation; thus, creating a useful research agenda. Discussing methodological implications that emerge from such an approach, future research should be used inductively to build a conceptual model which welfare onboard and ashore can be explored and used in practice or conceptualised within the framework of existing theories.

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