

# Explicit Recognition of Seafarer Mental Health within India's Maritime Regulatory Framework: Aligning with Global Standards and Addressing Lived Realities

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**Abstract**—The mental health of mariners has emerged as a serious concern in contemporary maritime law, situated at the intersection of international conventions and domestic regulation. The Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC) mandates complete protections under Title 4, including health, medical care, welfare, and social security, yet psychological well-being remains only implicitly recognized [Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, Reg. 4.1].<sup>1</sup> Complementing this, the STCW Convention emphasizes fatigue management, while guidelines issued by the ILO and IMO highlight the fair treatment of seafarers [STCW Convention, 1978].<sup>2</sup> In the Indian context, the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958 provides a foundational framework on employment, safety, and repatriation, [IMO & ILO, Guidelines on Fair Treatment of Seafarers, 2006]<sup>3</sup> and the Maritime Labour (MLC) Rules, 2016 mark India's domestic compliance with international standards [Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, India].<sup>4</sup> Further, circulars from the Directorate General of Shipping, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, have sought to address crew change and welfare challenges [Maritime Labour Rules, 2016, India].<sup>5</sup> However, broader national initiatives such as the National Maritime Development Programme and the Sagarmala Project prioritize trade and infrastructure over seafarer welfare [DG Shipping, Circular No. 33 of 2020].<sup>6</sup> This gap underscores the need for an explicit recognition of mental health within India's maritime regulatory framework, aligning with global standards while addressing the lived realities of Indian seafarers.

**Index Terms**—Seafarer Mental Health; Maritime Law; India; Maritime Labour Convention (MLC); STCW Convention; ILO; IMO; Merchant Shipping Act; Mental Well-being; Regulatory Framework; Fatigue; Social Isolation; Depression; Anxiety; Suicide; COVID-19

## I. INTRODUCTION

The maritime industry serves as the backbone of global trade and commerce, employing an estimated 1.5 million seafarers worldwide. Despite its essential nature, seafaring is widely recognized as a hazardous and demanding profession, exposing workers to significant physical and psychological risks. Historically, the mental health of seafarers has received less attention compared to physical health issues, with studies on psychological functioning among maritime workers accounting for only a small percentage of overall research. However, there is increasing recognition of the profound impact of mental health conditions on injury, illness, and overall operational safety in working populations [Ministry of Shipping, National Maritime Development Programme, 2006].<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the mental health of seafarers has emerged as a critical concern in contemporary maritime law, necessitating a comprehensive re-evaluation of existing international conventions and domestic regulations. While foundational legal instruments exist, the explicit recognition and comprehensive protection of psychological well-being remain largely underdeveloped. This article aims to critically analyze the current regulatory landscape concerning seafarer mental health, with a particular focus on the Indian maritime sector. It will highlight the existing gaps where national initiatives inadvertently prioritize economic and infrastructural development over the welfare of seafarers, thereby highlighting the urgent need for an explicit and robust mental health framework within India.

## II. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### II.1 The Critical State of Seafarers' Mental Health

Seafarers face a unique array of stressors that can significantly impact their mental well-being, often more remarkably than their ashore counterparts. Common mental health issues reported among seafarers include depression, anxiety, burnout, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation [Ministry of Shipping, Sagarmala: Concept and Implementation, 2015].<sup>8</sup> Depression and anxiety are the most commonly encountered mood disorders, with studies reporting significantly higher prevalence rates among seafarers than in the general population or even comparable working groups like oil and gas workers. For instance, one study found that 25% of seafarers showed symptoms of depression and 17% had anxiety, with 20% reporting suicidal ideation [BMC Public Health, 2022].<sup>9</sup> The rate of suicide among seafarers has been shown to be much higher than in general populations, with some statistics indicating that 5.9% of seafarer deaths between 1960 and 2009 were due to suicide [Sharma, 2024].<sup>10</sup>

### II.2 Factors Contributing to Poor Mental Health at Sea

Numerous factors contribute to the decline of seafarer's mental health, making the working environment on merchant ships peculiar and challenging. These factors can be broadly categorized as individual and work environmental. Social Isolation and Loneliness: This is consistently identified as a primary cause of mood disorders, stemming from long periods at sea, distance from families, cultural diversity, and language barriers on board [BMC Psychiatry, 2021].<sup>11</sup> Seafarers are more likely to experience loneliness at sea than at home. Fatigue and Stress: Long work shifts, irregular sleep patterns, heavy workloads, and the constant

demands of the job are major contributors to fatigue and stress, which are precursors to mental disorders [BMC Psychiatry, supra note 11].<sup>12</sup> Fatigue can lead to mental health problems, increasing the risk of chronic disease and early death, including suicide.

III. Working Conditions and Environment: This includes adverse weather, extreme temperatures, noise and vibrations, limited shore leave, poor social life on board, frequent crew changes, poor job and contract security, and concerns about inadequate medical assistance. Poor living/working conditions were cited as the most frequent source of job dissatisfaction [Kaur & Joy, 2023].<sup>13</sup>

Abuse and Harassment: Stress, harassment, and bullying are recognized causes of mental illness, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. On top of that the COVID 19 Pandemic exacerbated existing stressors, leading to increased isolation, travel restrictions preventing repatriation, crew change delays, job insecurity, fear of contagion, and limited access to healthcare [Kaur & Joy, supra note 13].<sup>14</sup>

### II.3 Gap in Recognition and Prioritization:

Despite these efforts, a significant gap persists. Broader national initiatives in India, such as the National Maritime Development Programme and the Sagarmala Project, primarily prioritize trade and infrastructure development over the explicit recognition and comprehensive welfare of seafarers, particularly their mental health. This prioritization reflects a broader global issue where marine industry regulations often focus more on individual problems rather than harmonizing norms or promoting proactive, holistic well-being. Studies have highlighted that despite literature emphasizing the seriousness of mental health issues for years, it has not always been treated with proper attention, often considered less important than tangible physical problems.

### II.4 Lived Realities of Indian Seafarers :Recent studies shed light on the mental health status of Indian seafarers:

- In Mumbai, a study found that among 105 seafarers, 90.5% had mild mood disturbances, and 8.6% reported depression. A significant association was found between depression and isolation, as well as with Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL). Those experiencing isolation had an associated risk of depression, and low WRQoL predicted a 1.23 times higher likelihood of developing depression.
- Another pilot study conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown in India found that 16.9% of Indian seafarers experienced moderate depression, 15.6% moderate anxiety, and 5.2% severe stress.
- Indian seafarers, particularly younger males, are susceptible to high rates of mental health conditions. Contributing factors include long hours, isolation from family and friends, fatigue, and poor social support. The pandemic exacerbated these challenges, prolonging time away from family and limiting shore leave.
- Despite these challenges, very few seafarers sought professional help, partly due to the stigma associated with mental illness and fear of job loss.

## III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The current maritime legal and policy framework in India, while complying with international standards in many respects, still falls short in explicitly recognizing and adequately addressing the unique mental health challenges faced by its seafarers. The implicit recognition of psychological well-being within conventions like the MLC, coupled with national development programs that prioritize economic and infrastructural growth, creates a significant void in proactive and comprehensive mental health support. This gap disproportionately impacts Indian seafarers, whose lived realities involve prolonged isolation, immense work-related stress, and a lack of accessible and destigmatized mental health resources, issues that were profoundly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a research article to analyze this regulatory lacuna and advocate for policy reforms that explicitly integrate mental health into India's maritime law, thereby aligning with global best practices and directly addressing the well-being of its seafaring workforce.

## IV. OBJECTIVES

This article aims to:

- Analyze** the extent to which international maritime conventions (MLC, STCW) and national Indian regulations (Merchant Shipping Act, MLC Rules, DGS circulars) implicitly and explicitly address seafarer mental health.
- Identify** the specific gaps in India's maritime regulatory framework concerning mental health, particularly where broader national development initiatives overshadow seafarer welfare.
- Explore** the lived realities of Indian seafarers, drawing on existing research to highlight the prevalence and causes of mental health issues within this population.

**Advocate** for the explicit recognition of mental health within India's maritime legal and policy framework, proposing actionable strategies for alignment with global standards and addressing seafarers' needs

## V. MEHTODOLOGY

This article employs a **multi-faceted analytical approach** combining **legal and policy analysis** with a **systematic review of relevant literature**.

- Legal and Policy Analysis:** A comprehensive review of key international maritime conventions, including the MLC, 2006, and the STCW Convention, will be undertaken to identify provisions related to seafarer health, welfare, and fatigue management. This will be paralleled by an in-depth examination of India's domestic maritime laws and policies, specifically the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, the Maritime Labour (MLC) Rules, 2016, and pertinent circulars issued by the Directorate General of Shipping. The analysis will focus on identifying explicit mandates and implicit recognitions of mental health, as well as any perceived prioritization of economic and infrastructural goals (e.g., National Maritime Development Programme, Sagarmala Project) over seafarer welfare.

- **Literature Review:** A systematic review of academic literature published between 2006 and 2025 (and beyond, if highly relevant new sources are available) will be conducted using prominent search engines such as PubMed, Web of Science (WoS), and CINAHL. The review will focus on empirical studies, systematic reviews, and reports detailing:
  - The prevalence of mental health conditions (depression, anxiety, suicide, burnout) among seafarers, with a specific emphasis on Indian seafarers.
  - Key occupational and psychosocial risk factors contributing to poor mental health in the seafaring profession.
  - The impact of events like the COVID-19 pandemic on seafarer mental health and welfare.
  - Existing interventions and best practices for promoting mental well-being in the maritime sector.

This integrated approach will allow for a robust assessment of the current state of seafarer mental health in the Indian context relative to the prevailing regulatory framework and international standards

## VI. DISCUSSION

**Implicit Recognition in International Frameworks:** The Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC), a cornerstone of international maritime law, mandates comprehensive protections under Title 4, encompassing health, medical care, welfare, and social security. However, the MLC implicitly recognizes psychological well-being rather than providing explicit provisions for mental health care. [IMO, Regional Seminar on Seafarers' Mental Health, 2019].<sup>15</sup> While court decisions over the past five decades have established a seafarer's right to free medical care as including mental health care, the convention itself does not specifically address it. The STCW Convention focuses on fatigue management, a critical aspect of mental health, as fatigue is strongly linked to mental health problems and can lead to serious incidents [Merchant Shipping Act, 1958; Maritime Labour Rules, 2016].<sup>16</sup> Guidelines from the ILO and IMO further emphasize the fair treatment of seafarers and provide recommendations for mental care onboard, covering stress, harassment, anxiety, depression, and addiction. The ISM Code highlights the need for companies and masters to intervene if fatigue or excessive work hours are apparent. Despite these, the overall lack of specific international regulations for seafarer mental health contributes to the problem of stress on board, with regulations often focusing on individual problems rather than harmonizing international norms [DG Shipping, Circular No. 33 of 2020 SOPs, Apr. 22, 2020].<sup>17</sup>

## VII. REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

### International Maritime Instruments

The Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC) is often described as the “fourth pillar” of international maritime regulation, alongside SOLAS, MARPOL, and STCW. While the MLC explicitly addresses health and welfare (Title 4), mental health is implied rather than directly codified. Nonetheless, the ILO and IMO have issued joint guidance recognizing mental well-being as integral to seafarer rights [[Krishnan, Anusooya, Kumar & Sekaran, 2025]].<sup>18</sup>

The STCW Convention requires adequate rest hours and fatigue management, acknowledging that exhaustion contributes to both safety risks and psychological strain [BMC Psychiatry, supra note 11].<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the International Safety Management (ISM) Code obliges shipowners to provide a safe working environment, which by implication includes psychosocial risks [ILO, Maritime Labour Convention FAQs, 2013].<sup>20</sup>

### Indian Legal Context

India, as a signatory to the MLC, enacted the Maritime Labour Rules, 2016, operationalizing convention standards into domestic law [IMO & ILO, Guidelines on Medical Examination of Seafarers, 2013].<sup>21</sup> The Merchant Shipping Act, 1958 remains the core statute, regulating contracts of service, repatriation, medical care, and working conditions [STCW Convention, supra note 2].<sup>22</sup> However, while these laws mandate provisions for safety and welfare, explicit recognition of mental health is absent.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Directorate General of Shipping (DGS) issued emergency circulars to facilitate crew changes, repatriation, and seafarer medical support, acknowledging stress and isolation as pressing challenges [ISM Code, IMO, 1993].<sup>23</sup> Despite these efforts, systemic integration of mental health into maritime law remains limited.

## VIII. INDIAN SEAFARERS: CHALLENGES AND REALITIES

India has one of the largest seafaring populations, estimated at over 250,000 active personnel [Maritime Labour Rules, 2016, supra note 5].<sup>24</sup> Yet, studies suggest that Indian seafarers experience disproportionately high rates of stress, fatigue, and depression [Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, supra note 4].<sup>25</sup> Factors unique to Indian seafarers include:

- Cultural stigma surrounding mental health, discouraging disclosure and treatment [DG Shipping, Circular No. 33 of 2020, supra note 6].<sup>26</sup>
- Employment insecurity, with many working under fixed-term contracts with foreign shipping companies [Ministry of Shipping, India Maritime Profile, 2022].<sup>27</sup>
- Insufficient welfare measures, with limited counseling services and support networks available through Indian maritime institutions [Krishnan et al., supra note 15].<sup>28</sup>

Research highlights that younger Indian seafarers, particularly cadets and junior officers, are more vulnerable to burnout and depression, often due to financial pressures and adaptation challenges [Kaur & Joy, supra note 13].<sup>29</sup> India's domestic legal framework demonstrates a commitment to international standards through the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, and the Maritime Labour (MLC) Rules, 2016. These provide a foundational structure for employment, safety, and repatriation, aligning with global requirements [ILO, Maritime Labour Convention 2006, as amended, 2013].<sup>30</sup> The Directorate General of Shipping (DGS) has also



issued circulars, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing critical issues like crew change and seafarer welfare [IMO, Guidelines on Fatigue, 2019].<sup>31</sup> The DGS's Mental Wellness Program for Seafarers (MWPS) in collaboration with NIMHANS is a commendable initiative providing counselling and mental health awareness. However, its effectiveness is challenged by issues of accessibility and outreach, especially for seafarers at sea or in remote areas [IMO, ISM Code, 2015].<sup>32</sup>

A significant concern highlighted by the abstract is that broader national initiatives, such as the National Maritime Development Programme and the Sagarmala Project, primarily prioritize trade and infrastructure development over explicit seafarer welfare. This economic focus, while vital for national growth, inadvertently sidelines the explicit integration of mental health considerations into the regulatory framework. This represents a critical gap, as the health and well-being of the workforce are fundamental to the sustainability and efficiency of the maritime industry.

The consequence of this regulatory gap is evident in the lived realities of Indian seafarers. Studies indicate a notable prevalence of mental health issues within this population. For example, a study in Mumbai found that a large majority (90.5%) of seafarers experienced mild mood disturbances, with 8.6% reporting depression. This depression was significantly associated with **isolation** and lower **Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL)** [Brooks et al., 2022].<sup>33</sup> Another study revealed that 16.9% of Indian seafarers suffered from moderate depression, 15.6% from moderate anxiety, and 5.2% from severe stress during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Key contributing factors among Indian seafarers include: [(Zhao et al., 2021)]<sup>34</sup>

- **Prolonged Isolation and Separation from Family:** A leading cause of mental health decline, exacerbated by long contracts and limited communication. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this by prolonging time offshore and restricting shore leave.
- **Fatigue and Stress:** Long working hours, demanding physical work, irregular sleep, and constant exposure to hazards contribute significantly.
- **Underreporting and Stigma:** Seafarers often dismiss mental health issues due to their intangible nature and fear of being labelled, which can have consequences for social acceptance and job security. Only a small percentage of seafarers have sought counselling or professional support.

These findings highlight that while physical health checks are routine, mental health problems like depression can go undetected due to existing conflicts of interest where employers prefer healthy crew members, and seafarers seek work regardless of their condition.

## IX. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Several maritime jurisdictions have gone beyond the baseline requirements of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC) by explicitly integrating mental health into national maritime policy. These comparative frameworks illustrate how India, while formally compliant, lags behind in substantive protections.

### V.1 United Kingdom

The United Kingdom Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has taken a proactive approach to mental health at sea. Its *Marine Guidance Note (MGN) 505 (M): Fatigue and Seafarer Wellbeing* requires shipowners and operators to account for psychosocial risks alongside physical safety hazards [Sharma, supra note 10].<sup>35</sup> The MCA further recommends onboard training in stress management and mandates access to tele-counseling services for crews, particularly during long voyages [Sharma, supra note 27].<sup>36</sup> Unlike India's reliance on general provisions in the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, the UK embeds psychological well-being directly into its regulatory guidance, making mental health an operational compliance issue.

### V.2 The Philippines

The Philippines, which supplies nearly one-fourth of the world's seafarers, [BMC Public Health, supra note 9]<sup>37</sup> has adopted statutory measures to safeguard seafarer welfare. The *Seafarers Protection Act* (Republic Act No. 10706, 2015), [UK MCA, MGN 505 (M), 2014]<sup>38</sup> though primarily focused on curbing exploitative practices by "ambulance-chasing" lawyers, is complemented by government and industry programs that incorporate mental health awareness in pre-departure training [UK Dept. for Transport, 2018].<sup>39</sup> The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) has further expanded its training modules to address psychosocial resilience, recognizing the stigma attached to mental illness within Asian seafaring communities [International Chamber of Shipping, 2021].<sup>40</sup> These measures demonstrate a holistic approach: combining statutory protection with preventive education.

### V.3 The Indian Gap

By contrast, India's domestic framework anchored in the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958 and the Maritime Labour Rules, 2016 remains limited to physical health, safety, and repatriation [Republic Act No. 10706, 2015].<sup>41</sup> No statute or binding circular mandates psychological training, counseling services, or independent grievance mechanisms. The only recognition of seafarer mental health in India emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Directorate General of Shipping (DGS) issued temporary circulars on crew change and welfare [POEA, Standard Terms and Conditions, 2016].<sup>42</sup> However, these measures were ad hoc and lapsed after restrictions eased, leaving no permanent institutional framework.

The identified gap in India's framework contrasts with the growing global emphasis on seafarer mental health. International initiatives and research consistently call for proactive measures beyond reactive counseling. These include:

- **Improved Communication and Connectivity:** Providing free and unlimited internet access to reduce isolation and facilitate family contact is a recurring recommendation.<sup>43</sup>

- **Enhanced Onboard Welfare:** Implementing varied recreational activities, promoting physical activity, ensuring adequate rest, and fostering positive social interactions are crucial.
- **Proactive Management and Training:** Officer training in creating a positive atmosphere, enforcing anti-bullying policies, and providing mental health awareness are vital. [Safety4Sea, 2023; Safety4Sea, 2025].<sup>44</sup>
- **Revision of Contract Terms:** Balancing work and leave periods, with an upper limit on time onboard (e.g., maximum six months), can significantly reduce stress and improve mental well-being.
- **Telemedicine and Psychological Support:** Offering web-based counseling, online therapy sessions, and access to licensed mental health specialists can bridge the treatment gap.

These proactive measures, rather than solely reactive strategies, are identified by seafarers and some employers as more effective in improving mental health and well-being onboard. [Skuld Club, 2025; Abila, 2023]<sup>45</sup>

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS: BRIDGING THE LEGAL GAPS

The Indian maritime legal framework, while broadly aligned with international obligations under the MLC, 2006, has not evolved to address the complex and growing issue of mental health among seafarers. The following recommendations critically evaluate the deficiencies and propose targeted reforms.

**VI.1 Legislative Amendment to the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958:** The Merchant Shipping Act, 1958 regulates employment, repatriation, and welfare, but its language on “health” remains restricted to physical well-being. This statutory silence perpetuates the invisibility of mental health in regulatory oversight. A targeted amendment should expand “health and welfare” under Part VIII to explicitly include *psychological well-being*. This would align Indian law with international best practices (e.g., the UK MCA guidelines) and provide a statutory anchor for enforceable rights.

**VI.2 Mandatory Counselling Services Onboard and Ashore:** While the Maritime Labour Rules, 2016 implement the MLC, they stop short of mandating structured psychological services. Shipowners under Indian jurisdiction should be legally required to provide confidential counselling, both onboard and ashore, through licensed professionals. Without a binding obligation, mental health support remains ad hoc and vulnerable to cost-cutting. Statutory compulsion would prevent welfare dilution and create enforceable accountability.

**VI.3 Training and Awareness through STCW Modules:** The STCW Convention mandates rest hours and fatigue management but does not address psychological resilience training. India, as a training hub for global seafarers, should amend its national STCW curricula to include modules on stress management, emotional resilience, and crisis handling. Without such integration, mental health awareness remains superficial and reactive, failing to equip cadets and officers for long-term challenges.

**VI.4 Monitoring and Compliance under DG Shipping:** Current DG Shipping oversight is limited to medical certificates and crew change compliance. There is no inspection mechanism to verify whether seafarers are provided meaningful mental health support. A dedicated mental health compliance mechanism, modeled on port state control, should be instituted. Ships failing to provide evidence of counseling access, mental health policies, and grievance redressal must face sanctions. Absent such monitoring, laws risk remaining aspirational rather than operational.

**VI.5 Collaboration with NGOs and Seafarer Unions:** Welfare delivery under Indian law is primarily employer-driven, ignoring the role of civil society and unions. To fill this gap, the law should institutionalize partnerships with NGOs (e.g., ISWAN) and seafarer unions, mandating the establishment of helplines, peer-support groups, and crisis hotlines. Such statutory recognition would strengthen social safety nets and reduce stigma, especially for younger seafarers reluctant to approach employers.

**VI.6 Post-COVID Institutionalization of Emergency Measures:** The COVID-19 circulars of the DG Shipping temporarily recognized psychological distress during crew change crises, but these measures lapsed once restrictions eased. This reactive model underscores a critical gap: welfare measures remain tied to emergencies rather than systemic protection. Parliament should codify these ad hoc provisions into permanent welfare obligations, ensuring continuity of support beyond pandemics or crises.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The mental health of seafarers is a pressing concern globally, with significant implications for individual well-being, maritime safety, and industry sustainability. While India's maritime regulatory framework, guided by international conventions like the MLC, provides a foundation for seafarer welfare, it falls short in explicitly recognizing and adequately prioritizing mental health. The focus on trade and infrastructure in broader national initiatives, combined with the implicit nature of mental health provisions in existing laws, creates a critical gap that negatively impacts Indian seafarers. The high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress, exacerbated by factors like isolation, fatigue, and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the urgent need for systemic change.

This gap underscores the need for an explicit recognition of mental health within India's maritime regulatory framework, aligning with global standards while addressing the lived realities of Indian seafarers. Prioritizing psychological well-being is not only a moral imperative but also a sound financial decision, leading to improved job satisfaction, increased productivity, and enhanced safety.

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