

Chapter 1

Introduction



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The shipping industry transported a total volume of 10.3 billion tons of cargo in 2017 (UNCTAD 2017) and is estimated to employ 1.5 million workers (<http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/seafarers/lang%2D%2Den/index.htm> accessed 1/2/18) who are classed as seafarers. Such workers are employed on different vessel types in the cruise and cargo sectors. Sailors working for the military are not classed as seafarers. However, seafarers may be employed on board in a variety of roles which are not directly associated with marine navigation (as croupiers or entertainers on a cruise ship for example) but their ship should be engaged in a voyage which would differentiate them from taking a ‘fishing trip’ for example. Doumbia-Henry describes some of the provisions of ILO Convention No. 185 stating that:

Article 1 defines the seafarer as “any person who is employed or engaged or works in any capacity on board a vessel, other than a ship of war, ordinarily engaged in maritime navigation”. This is a very broad definition of seafarers, extending the term seafarer to persons working on board a ship who may not be ship’s crew. It covers all those who work on a ship and need an identity document for the purposes of shore leave, joining ship or transit to join a ship or repatriation. (Doumbia-Henry 2003, p. 135)

This edited collection, focuses on those seafarers who work in the cargo sector of the industry on board a variety of ships such as oil and chemical tankers, gas carriers, bulk carriers (carrying minerals or wood products for example), refrigerated cargo vessels, container ships, and what are termed ‘general cargo ships’. Most of these workers are men (Belcher et al. 2003; http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/world-of-work-magazine/articles/WCMS_081322/lang%2D%2Den/index.htm) who have acquired a range of internationally recognized certificates to qualify for work on board. Such seafarers are employed in various roles relating to navigation, engine

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performance, and vessel/crew maintenance. They are drawn from a range of traditional (e.g. European, OECD) and 'new' (e.g. China, Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia) labour supply countries and frequently work as part of a mixed nationality crew. The vast majority of seafarers are employed by third party crew agencies who are contracted to supply workers to shipowners and shipmanagers on temporary contracts. Typical voyages last for between three and 12 months and many seafarers are technically 'unemployed' during their leave periods ashore and uncertain of when, or indeed if, they will be re-called by their agency to join a vessel. As such, although they are relatively well-paid whilst they are on board, seafarers are generally temporary workers employed on precarious contracts.

The global nature of the industry is a challenge to nations which seek to protect their shorelines from pollution/'security' threats, and to implement both labour and environmental laws within their territories (including territorial waters). Major pollution incidents and those involving loss of life (particularly amongst passengers) can be seen to have been instrumental in driving change in international regulations covering safety and environmental protection. Such regulations (as well as those relating to security) are produced and amended at the International Maritime Organization which is a United Nations (UN) agency with responsibility for regulating ships as technical entities. The International Labour Organization (another UN special agency) also plays a significant role in the regulation of the sector but this is restricted to matters pertaining to labour standards and seafarers' rights.

Not only does the industry present challenges to states wishing to safeguard their national economic and security interests, it also presents difficulties for worker representation and protection. Employers tend to operate different wage scales for different nationalities on board and on multinational vessels it also common for the duration of a contracted voyage and arrangements for overtime payments to vary with nationality. Thus one third officer from the Philippines (at the end of his contract) may be replaced by another from Ireland who is paid more per month and expected to remain on board for a shorter period of time. Such inequities are accepted by seafarers, who are also acutely aware of their vulnerability in the labour market and for whom the competition for jobs between labour supply countries could easily translate into a classic 'race to the bottom'. In this context the role of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has been critical in protecting wages. The ITF is one of a small number of Global Union Federations and is unique in negotiating wages for seafarers employed on open register vessels which are not covered by a recognized collective bargaining agreement. In practice the wage scales negotiated with employers by the ITF play a key role in setting an international benchmark for wages, and the role of national collective bargaining agreements in determining wages has diminished. This leaves many trade unions occupying rather curious positions as job brokers and service providers (Yang 2010) and weakens their capacity, or willingness, to defend the interests of seafarers in dispute with vessel operators.

The shipping industry can be seen to be at the forefront of globalization, and it provides us with a good example of the associated challenges for labour, regulation and standards. As a crucial part of the transport infrastructure that facilitates trade between nations it has indeed 'driven' globalization. At the same time, it has, been

transformed by globalisation as ships have ‘flagged out’ and labour recruitment has been outsourced and off-shored. These processes have been written about and analysed by a number of authors (e.g. Sampson 2013). However the kind of broad perspective contained in such accounts is necessarily produced at the expense of an in depth and detailed consideration of many of the individual elements which comprise the industry. This book addresses the gap in the literature and provides a detailed account of the industry which can be metaphorically likened to a mosaic—or to filling in some of the pieces of a complex jigsaw. The collection is largely based upon chapters produced by the authors of a variety of PhD theses all of which related to the shipping industry but which were otherwise unrelated to one and other constituting free-standing research projects and pieces of work. Students were from a variety of backgrounds and nation states and came together in Cardiff as part of a large postgraduate programme led by Helen Sampson who also makes a contribution to this work as co-editor with Gekara (a member of the first cohort of PhD students starting in 2004) and as the author of Chap. 8. This PhD programme, the scholarships that emerged as a part of it and this book, have only been possible because of generous funding from The Nippon Foundation. The Nippon Foundation funded the PhD programme in full from 2004–2017. Ten cohorts of PhD students were recruited numbering 37 individuals in total. The theses were varied and rich and in this text we attempt to weave a selection of them together to provide a unique insight into a very complex global industry.

The book is organised into three parts which reflect the trajectory of seafarers as they enter the industry.

‘Part I’ considers where seafarers hail from, why they join the industry, and some of the barriers that particular seafarers face in finding and keeping jobs. As such the component chapters discuss: the history of the Philippines as the leading global labour supply nation; the recruitment practices of agencies operating in China; the policy challenges associated with maintaining adequate training and supply of junior officers in traditional maritime nations in the current labour market jobs; seafaring as a portfolio career and the opportunities and threats to the industry that are presented by current recruitment practices; and the barriers presented to would-be women seafarers who seek a career in this highly male-dominated industry.

Overall, ‘Part I’ provides a better understanding of why it is that the industry may find it challenging to recruit good quality deck officers, and engineers, in the future. Officer shortages have been predicted by analysts for several decades (BIMCO ISF 2015) but the reasons behind such predicted shortages have been less-well described. Whilst relatively poor members of developing (labour export) societies such as the Philippines may continue to seek a career at sea they may be deterred by the costs of training and education in the largely private maritime education and training sector. Meanwhile, Chinese seafarers are less likely than originally predicted to make up any shortfall in the global supply of officers as a result of the operational constraints on Chinese crewing agencies which result in the payment of inflated wages to ratings and inadequate salaries to officers in comparison to international wage rates. These practices deter Chinese officers from continuing to work at sea and may explain why it is that China has not come to dominate the global labour market for seafarers as had previously been predicted by academics and industry insiders. Meanwhile we

have seen a reluctance amongst employers to invest in the higher salaries demanded by junior European officers despite the fact that European senior officers remain in demand. This has undermined labour supply in Europe. When these factors are set in a broader context in which seafarers find the life at sea less attractive than it once was, and half of the potential labour force are excluded from seafaring careers as a consequence of their gender, then the long-term prospects for the global supply of high quality officers to the international fleet may indeed seem bleak.

The first three chapters in 'Part II' of the book provide an insight into the day-to-day life of seafarers on board. Chapter 7 describes the transitions and adjustments required of seafarers as they leave home to join a vessel, progress through a 'tour of duty' and prepare for the end of their voyage. Chapter 8 discusses issues of nationality and hierarchy in the context of a strong occupational culture and the overwhelming dominance of work on board merchant cargo vessels. Chapter 9 reports on research that focussed upon Filipino seafarers in lower ranking positions and discusses what it is like to live and work on board alongside powerful supervisors and managers.

Seafarers constantly live and work under threat of severe sanctions whether these relate to instant dismissal (a potential consequence of the displeasure of a captain or chief engineer) or to the imposition of personal fines and imprisonment by port authorities charged with enforcing international regulations. These chapters convey a great deal about life on board a commercial cargo vessel and the ways in which seafarers' activities are constrained and monitored. Such institutionalized and regulated lives can produce high levels of occupational stress. In a context where seafarers' opportunities for 'resistance' and indeed for psychological 'restoration' are highly circumscribed such stress is likely to produce a variety of health problems and the potential for high levels of seafarer attrition.

The final three chapters in 'Part II' direct our attention to some of the specific challenges of working at sea. Seafaring is known to be a relatively dangerous occupation characterized by high rates of occupational illness and work-related fatalities. In 2014 Roberts et al. estimated that the mortality rate for British seafarers over the period 2003–2012 was 21 times higher than that found in the general UK working population (Roberts et al. 2014). However, shipping is also an industry that has been associated with headline-grabbing oil spills which produce a great deal of pollution and more recently it has been characterized by some states as constituting a potential threat to national security as well as playing a role in the facilitation of covert (undocumented) migration. As a result of these combined 'threats' the industry has been increasingly regulated and Chaps. 10, 11 and 12 deal with some of the intended and unintended consequences of such regulation. Chapter 10 describes the ways in which regulatory requirements (in this case relating to environmental protection) structure the experience of work and the ways in which work is conducted on board. In Chap. 11 Xue sheds light on the management of safety on board vessels crewed and managed within China, and in Chap. 12 Senu describes the rarely considered impact, on seafarers, of attempts to prevent the carriage of shipboard stowaways and to deter the rescue of undocumented migrants imperilled at sea.

In 'Part III' we look beyond the ship to consider the shore-based and computer-facilitated mechanisms which are currently available to support contemporary

seafarers and their families as they grapple with challenges associated with participation in the industry. As such Gekara considers the challenges that are posed to national trade unions attempting to support and represent seafarers participating in a global sector; Buiser reflects on the limits to trade union support in the Philippines; and Tang discusses the on line support that has developed in China to support seafarers' partners and assist them in enduring the consequences of the long absences of serving seafarers.

In combination these chapters provide a wealth of detail about a range of key actors and stakeholders engaged in the cargo shipping sector. The book is organized with a logic that allows it to either be read from start to finish or in a more piecemeal fashion. However it is used, it serves to provide a remarkable insight into a poorly understood, global, fragmented, industry of considerable scale.

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