

# ADDRESSING HARASSMENT INCIDENTS ON BOARD SHIPS

ADDRESSING POTENTIAL HARASSMENT INCIDENTS, INCLUDING SEXUAL HARASSMENT, ON SHIPS IS A CRITICAL CONCERN THAT DEMANDS A WELL ORGANISED AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGY. THE MARITIME COMMUNITY HAS BEGUN TO IMPLEMENT INITIATIVES AIMED AT COMBATING HARASSMENT, REDUCING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS, AND CREATING GENDER-NEUTRAL WORK ENVIRONMENTS.

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The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) are collaborating to tackle violence and harassment within the maritime sector. Their guidelines<sup>1</sup> offer a comprehensive framework for addressing these serious issues. Below are some of the approaches to prevent harassment incidents on board.

## COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING

Effective training is essential to combat harassment. Training should not only cover harassment policies but also include modules on gender sensitivity, communication skills and conflict resolution. It is crucial that training programmes are mandatory for all crew members, regardless of rank or position. Participants should learn to recognise early warning signs of harassment, bullying, and bias, including behavioural changes, isolation, and diminished morale or performance.

Additionally, training should emphasise a zero tolerance policy towards harassment. Implementing a buddy system that pairs crew members can also encourage mutual support and companionship. This system can be particularly beneficial for individuals who may be experiencing distress or isolation, providing both emotional support and conflict mediation.

Promoting diversity and inclusion within the maritime workforce also helps in preventing bullying and harassment. A diverse crew, reflecting various cultural backgrounds, can occasionally face misunderstandings that, if ignored, may escalate into conflict. By fostering a culture of respect for different backgrounds and encouraging cultural sensitivity through team-building exercises and conflict resolution strategies, the risk of discord can be significantly reduced.

The IMO's Sustainable Development Goals<sup>2</sup> (SDG), particularly SDG-5<sup>3</sup> on gender equality, alongside the Women in Maritime programme, supports gender visibility and empowerment. This initiative includes training and career development opportunities specifically for women, aiming to establish professional associations and enhance visibility in the industry.

## CLEAR REPORTING CHANNELS

Establishing secure and confidential reporting processes is crucial for encouraging victims and witnesses to come forward. Options may include anonymous hotlines, dedicated email addresses, or digital reporting platforms. Management must ensure that these channels are easily accessible and that crew members are informed about them during onboarding.

Creating a safe, non-judgmental space for reporting incidents is essential in empowering individuals to speak out. Many ship managers have successfully set up anonymous email systems or letterboxes for reporting harassment or unfair treatment. These reports should be directed to the Designated Person Ashore (DPA) to maintain confidentiality, aligning with the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) guidelines on complaints procedures.

## SUPPORT NETWORKS

Support networks are vital for addressing harassment effectively. These networks should provide access to the DPA, welfare officers, mental health resources, and peer support groups. Appointing a specially trained individual to handle complaints will ensure thorough investigations and maintain confidentiality. This individual should also have the authority to escalate serious cases to more senior

management. Additionally, management should consider engaging an independent third-party welfare organisation that offers a 24-hour confidential helpline for seafarers. This resource can help crew members feel safe when voicing their concerns.

## PROMPT INVESTIGATIONS

All reported incidents of harassment should be investigated promptly and thoroughly, ensuring fairness and confidentiality for all parties involved. This is in line with MLC requirements, which mandate that all grievances related to seafarers' working conditions or legal violations be treated confidentially. Investigators must conduct their inquiries impartially and without any conflicts of interest.

The investigation process should include timely and confidential interviews with the victim, witnesses, and the accused, ensuring all parties feel respected and protected throughout.

## REGULAR POLICY REVIEW

Management companies should establish clear policies that prohibit all forms of bullying and harassment, ensuring a commitment to thorough investigations when incidents are reported. These policies should be part of the Safety Management System (SMS) and clearly outline what constitutes bullying and harassment, along with grievance procedures.

Regular reviews and updates of these policies are necessary to reflect legislative changes and incorporate feedback from crew members about their effectiveness.

## ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY

A strong zero-tolerance policy towards harassment must be enforced. Crew members should be informed of the consequences of such behaviour, emphasising that it will not be tolerated and will lead to disciplinary action.

## OPEN COMMUNICATION

Encouraging open communication about issues without fear of retaliation is vital. Regular meetings where crew members can voice concerns and suggest improvements can create a more inclusive atmosphere. Additionally, clear job roles and fair task allocation processes can help mitigate tensions that may lead to harassment or bias.

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Providing information about external resources, such as helplines, counselling services, and legal advice, is essential for crew members who need support. In some cases, rehabilitation programmes for offenders, along with professional consultations, can address the underlying causes of inappropriate behaviour. These should be designed to facilitate personal growth and create a safer, more respectful work environment.

By fostering an inclusive and respectful culture, the maritime industry can work towards eliminating harassment and ensuring a safe environment for all crew members.



### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Members requiring any further guidance are advised to contact the Britannia Loss Prevention Department.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/PressBriefings/Pages/Tackling-violence-and-harassment-in-maritime.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/TechnicalCooperation/Pages/WomenInMaritime.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/un-system-sdg-implementation/international-maritime-organization-imo-34611>