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Ship Abandonment and the Life of Workers on Abandoned Vessels: A Scholarly Journal

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Introduction

Ship abandonment remains one of the most persistent humanitarian crises within the global maritime industry. A ship is considered *abandoned* when its owner fails to provide essential maintenance, financial support, wages, and repatriation for its crew for a prolonged period, leaving seafarers stranded both physically and legally.[1] Despite the protections afforded under the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006), the number of abandonment cases continues to rise globally, indicating structural weaknesses in enforcement and accountability.[2]

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) notes a significant increase in abandonment reports in the last decade, particularly in ports in the Middle East, South Asia, and the Mediterranean.[3] Human Rights at Sea (HRAS) has repeatedly described abandoned seafarers as "ghosts of global supply chains," highlighting how easily their suffering becomes invisible to the global public.[4]

This journal examines the lived realities of workers trapped aboard abandoned ships, analyzing their physical, psychological, socio-economic, and legal challenges. It draws upon reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), HRAS, and ITF.

1. Early Signs: Wage Delays and Administrative Silence

The pathway to abandonment typically begins with wage delays. Under the MLC, seafarers must receive wages on a monthly basis without undue delay.[5] In practice, delays may continue for months before any intervention occurs.

As recorded in multiple ITF case reports, shipowners often begin reducing communication long before abandonment becomes official.[6] Port agents withdraw support, maintenance activities slow down, and scheduled supplies fail to arrive. HRAS notes that administrative silence is one of the earliest indicators of abandonment, creating anxiety and uncertainty among crew members.[7]

This early stage is psychologically destabilizing because seafarers have no clarity about the safety of their employment, their families' welfare, or the future of the voyage.

2. Material Scarcity and Onboard Deprivation

As abandonment sets in, essential supplies become scarce. IMO reports consistently document the lack of food, water, electricity, and medical supplies as the most critical challenges for abandoned crews.[8]

2.1 Food and Water

When provisions run out, crews depend on donations from welfare groups or local individuals.[9] Water-making plants often fail due to lack of fuel, leading to severe rationing. Crew members may be limited to minimal drinking water quantities per day.

2.2 Loss of Electricity and Hygiene Breakdown

Fuel shortages lead to generator failure. Without electricity, air conditioning and refrigeration stop. In hot climates, ships become "floating ovens," causing dehydration and heat-related illness.[10]

HRAS has documented instances where toilets overflowed, freshwater became contaminated, and infestations of insects and rodents appeared onboard abandoned ships.[11]

Material scarcity transforms the vessel from a functioning workplace into a hostile environment.

3. Psychological Trauma and Emotional Distress

Mental health deterioration is a defining aspect of ship abandonment. A joint study by the ILO and IMO found widespread symptoms among abandoned seafarers, including depression, insomnia, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation.[12]

The psychological burden stems primarily from **uncertainty**—not knowing when the ordeal will end. ITF welfare officers observe that the indefinite waiting period creates emotional paralysis, destroying morale.[13]

Many seafarers conceal their true conditions from their families to prevent worrying them, which intensifies emotional isolation. As HRAS notes, abandoned seafarers exist "between visibility and erasure," unable to fully express their suffering.[14]

4. Legal Vacuum and Jurisdictional Barriers

Abandonment exposes the gaps within the maritime legal system. Although the MLC requires flag states to ensure that shipowners maintain financial security for repatriation and unpaid wages, enforcement is inconsistent.[15]

4.1 Flags of Convenience (FOC)

HRAS identifies flags of convenience as major contributors to abandonment. Many FOC states lack capacity or willingness to enforce labour protections.[16] Shipowners exploit these weak regulatory structures to avoid accountability.

4.2 Port State Reluctance

Port states often hesitate to intervene because of:

- cost implications
- immigration rules
- legal uncertainties
- fear of setting precedent

Some port authorities have even denied medical disembarkation for critically ill crew members.[17]

4.3 Concealed Ownership Structures

The ITF has reported that many shipowners operate through shell companies and layered corporate structures, making legal action extremely difficult.[18] As a result, seafarers are trapped in a jurisdictional stalemate where multiple states deny responsibility.

5. Health Risks and Medical Neglect

Medical emergencies represent some of the most tragic aspects of ship abandonment. Without access to shore-based healthcare or medical supplies, seafarers suffer untreated injuries, infections, and chronic illnesses.[19]

IMO case files include instances where crew members died onboard because port authorities refused medical evacuation due to legal uncertainty.[20]

In some cases, deceased crew members remained onboard for days or weeks, deepening the trauma experienced by surviving crewmates.[21]

6. Economic Impact on Families

The economic consequences of abandonment extend far beyond the vessel. Over 80% of seafarers are the primary breadwinners for their families.[22] When wages are withheld:

- families fall into debt
- mortgages default
- children's education is interrupted
- medical bills accumulate
- social stigma increases

ITF welfare reports show families borrowing at high interest rates to survive, sometimes leading to long-term financial ruin.[23]

7. Social Dynamics and Solidarity Onboard

Adversity often strengthens solidarity among seafarers. ILO studies show that abandoned crews develop strong communal bonds as coping strategies.[24] Shared responsibilities—cooking, cleaning, resource rationing—create a sense of collective survival.

However, tensions may arise when resources become extremely limited or when officers and ratings disagree on daily management. HRAS has documented conflicts arising from unequal access to food, water, or communication devices.[25] Crew leadership plays a critical role in maintaining morale.

8. Role of NGOs, Maritime Unions, and Civil Society

8.1 ITF and Welfare Organizations

NGOs such as the **ITF**, **Mission to Seafarers**, **Stella Maris**, and **HRAS** serve as lifelines for abandoned crews. They deliver food, negotiate with authorities, provide legal support, and assist in repatriation.[26]

8.2 Media and Public Pressure

In many cases, media exposure becomes the catalyst for government intervention.[27]

However, HRAS cautions that media attention can occasionally complicate legal negotiations by prompting shipowners to withdraw further from accountability.[28]

9. Repatriation: A Long and Uncertain Process

Although MLC Regulation 2.5 guarantees repatriation, abandoned seafarers often wait months or even years to return home. Obstacles include:

- visa and immigration complications
- incomplete documentation
- court orders detaining vessels
- outstanding wage claims
- conflict between shipowners and insurers

Seafarers describe repatriation as both emotionally overwhelming and physically draining.[29] The return journey often feels surreal, as their long confinement distorts their sense of time and reality.

10. Life After Repatriation

Post-repatriation challenges are severe. Many seafarers suffer from:

- PTSD
- chronic anxiety
- depression
- social reintegration difficulties
- financial instability

ILO interviews reveal that some seafarers abandon the profession entirely due to trauma.[30]

Wage recovery cases may last years, and in some instances, wages are never recovered.[31]

11. Structural Causes and Regulatory Failures

Ship abandonment persists because of:

- weak enforcement of the MLC
- irresponsible shipowners
- opaque corporate ownership
- unregulated flags of convenience
- ineffective port state control
- slow international coordination

The IMO Legal Committee has repeatedly emphasized the need for systemic reforms to address the "governance vacuum" surrounding abandonment.[32]

12. Global Trends and Case Patterns

Data from ILO's abandonment database reveals recurring trends:

- Middle Eastern ports host many of the longest abandonment cases
- Asian crews are disproportionately affected
- vessels often deteriorate at anchor
- shipowners frequently disappear after insolvency
- prolonged cases exceed 12–24 months

These patterns highlight the need for a global rapid-response mechanism for humanitarian intervention.[33]

CONCLUSION

Ship abandonment represents a profound human rights failure within the global maritime system. Seafarers—who operate 90% of world trade—bear an unacceptable burden of legal invisibility, physical hardship, and psychological suffering.[34] The findings of the ILO, ITF, HRAS, and IMO all point to a single conclusion: abandonment is not merely a labour issue but a humanitarian emergency.

Funding guarantees, transparent ownership registries, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and coordinated international responses are essential to eliminating abandonment. Without systemic reform, the suffering of abandoned workers will continue unchecked, hidden beneath the surface of global commerce.

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