



Workplace bullying and harassment at sea: A structured literature review

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ABSTRACT

Seafaring is a masculine-coded occupation with a strong professional culture that values practical experience. Traditionally, youths were accepted on board ships to be guided, socialised, and often bullied into the working and living cultures at sea. The maritime industry is characterised by several factors known from research to constitute a hotbed for workplace bullying and harassment, such as sustained high workload, role conflicts, jargon, and precarious work. Women and minority groups are especially exposed to bullying and harassment in these kind of working environments. At policy level, these issues are addressed by the International Safety Management Code and the Maritime Labour Convention, which require employers to identify and prevent occupational safety and health risks. This study analyses the extent and scope of the peer reviewed literature on workplace bullying and harassment at sea, and what recommendations have been proposed in previous research. The results show that workplace bullying and harassment is a substantial problem in the maritime industry. While research in this field is growing, there is a general need for future research based on strong research designs. Given the complete lack of scientific intervention studies, this should be prioritised in future research. Further, there is a need to address underlying causes of workplace bullying and harassment and ensure decent employment and working conditions at sea. Managers ashore as well as officers on board must be provided with adequate resources, usable tools, and sufficient time for a proactive work. This work should be included as part of the safety management system.

1. Introduction

1.1. Workplace bullying and harassment

Workplace bullying and harassment is an unfortunate reality for many people. Although there are no standardised definitions, the term *bullying at work* is generally used for repeated and regular activities, processes, and behaviour that affect a victimised person negatively. Some examples include harassing, offending, or socially excluding a person, often over a prolonged period of time [15]. Hence, a single occurrence is generally not considered bullying. Also, bullying often includes a power imbalance between the parties. This imbalance can reflect the formal power structure, where a co-worker is bullied by a superior, or be the result of informal power structures between colleagues [15]. The term *harassment* is often divided into physical and psychological forms; sexual harassment and workplace violence are examples of the former type, while the latter includes non-physical mistreatment, for example bullying or mobbing [47]. In employment

law, harassment commonly refers to acts of discrimination based on any protected class or characteristics. The exact scope of the protected characteristics varies between countries. The experience of being a target of any type of workplace bullying and harassment is referred to in literature and employment law as *victimisation* [4]. For recent overviews of the research literature with clarifications of definitional characteristics regarding workplace bullying and harassment, see for instance Nielsen and Einarsen [46] and D'Cruz and Noronha [13].

Given the lack of uniform definitions and the varieties of overlapping conceptualisations, the concept *workplace bullying and harassment* is selected for the purpose of this literature review. This is in line with the International Association on Workplace Bullying & Harassment [24], an association for scholars and practitioners in the field. Bullying and harassment are also the terms used in the guidance jointly developed by the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), in which they declare harassment and bullying unacceptable on board the world's ships [25].

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1.2. The shipboard working environment

Seafaring is a male dominated, masculine-coded occupation with a strong professional and hierarchical culture that values practical experience. Traditionally, youths were accepted on board ships to be guided, socialised – and too often bullied – into the working and living cultures and jargon of the sea [29].

Despite considerable improvements over the years, the shipboard working environment is still a physically demanding and hazardous workplace [49,68]. In addition, the ship is a living and social environment where seafarers eat, sleep, and socialise together – often for long periods of time. A seafarer can be expected to serve 12 months on board before being entitled to repatriation at the shipowner's expense (MLC Regulation 2.1). With most ships being manned by third world nationalities, there is a weak link between shipowners and their crew that may affect the mutual commitment to job, organisation, and crew [7].

Along with changes in how work on board is organised and performed, follows a shift in seafarer mortality and morbidity. The importance of mental health and wellbeing has been given greater prominence in recent years [41,57,58]. Lefkowitz and Slade [33] show that prevalence of depression among seafarers was significantly higher than in other populations using the same survey questions. Prevalence of anxiety and suicidal ideation was also notably high. Significant risk factors include an uncaring work environment, workplace violence and bullying and harassment [33]. Long working hours, a lack of clear separation between work and rest, and being far from the private social network of family and friends have also been identified as significant stressors, as is the continuous need for getting to know, and adapt to, new colleagues and form new work relationships [9]. Österman et al. argue (2020) that continuous reorganisations and optimisations of operations have led to an increased workload and suspense, with less planned – or unplanned – time between tasks or operations to allow for sufficient recovery on and off work.

In addition to effects on individual workers' health and performance, previous research shows that deficiencies in the organisational and social work environment also increase the risk of workplace bullying and harassment. Organisational risk factors include workers who experience sustained high workload, role conflicts, jargon, and inappropriate or destructive leadership [6,11,22]. Workers within contact-based professions which require face-to-face contact with other people [52], or in professions where cash or valuables are handled are at greatest risk [36]. The risk is further increased when work is performed alone, and when alcohol or drugs are involved [11]. Due to differences in the labour market, women disproportionately become victims of workplace bullying and harassment. The risk is further aggravated for women who work in professions or environments dominated by men where the women challenge masculinity [12]. In addition, precarious workers hired on short-term contracts or subcontract basis are at heightened risk. Due to the nature of the employment, they more often work in risk occupations characterised by job insecurity, limited bargaining powers and rights, and insufficient wages [55]. Further, employers tend to invest less in training of these workers [38].

All these factors are widespread in the maritime industry and can be found in the shipboard work environment. Besides increasing the risk of workplace bullying and harassment, and mental ill-health among seafarers, the organisational and social work environment has been shown to have a notable impact on crew commitment to maritime safety [2,16,40]. Other consequences at company level include decreased productivity, increased absenteeism and employee turnover and costs for repatriation [6,22].

Implicitly, these risk factors are covered in the International Safety Management (ISM) Code which requires a safety management system that encompasses the assessment of all identified risks to ships, personnel and the environment, and the establishment of appropriate safeguards [27]. The factors are more explicitly covered under the 2016 amendments of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), which added bullying and harassment to the guidelines of Regulation 4.3 on health and safety protection and accident prevention. Governments and shipowners must take measures to protect seafarers, as outlined in the *Guidance on eliminating shipboard harassment and bullying* ([25,26], Regulation 4.3). They must have a clear policy statement that dictates the commitment to eliminate workplace bullying and harassment, communicate standards of expected staff behaviour, and contain information on reporting routines and grievance procedures.

However, there is a gap between legislative policy and enforcement, and the state-of-the-art research on causes and remedies for bullying and harassment. The guidance referred to in the MLC lacks instructions on the elimination of workplace factors known to cause bullying and harassment. While zero tolerance company policies, and routines for reporting and handling of complaints arguable are important, this is not enough. The underreporting of bullying and harassment is well documented in previous research, especially in workplace cultures where incidents are trivialised [11,22,39]. In addition to these *bureaucratic vaccines* [14], the risk factors in the shipboard work environment that constitute a hotbed for bullying and harassment must be identified and prevented.

1.3. Overall aim and research questions

Acknowledging the special features of the shipboard work environment, this paper presents and discusses the results of a systematic review of peer reviewed literature on workplace bullying and harassment concerning people working in any capacity on board a ship or offshore. Specifically, the review aims to answer the following questions:

- i. In what way has bullying and harassment at sea been researched?
- ii. What is the prevalence of bullying and harassment at sea and its effects at individual and system levels?
- iii. What recommendations have been proposed to various stakeholders in the maritime industry, and to what extent have they been tested and evaluated?

The overall aim has been to synthesise the existing knowledge about bullying and harassment at sea and identify knowledge gaps in the research literature.

2. Research design

A systematic, qualitative literature review was performed to determine the extent and scope of scientific, peer reviewed literature on workplace bullying and harassment at sea.

The research design consisted of four phases: (1) searching and identifying relevant literature; (2) reading of abstracts; (3) analysing and categorising of full papers; and (4) synthesising the findings.

2.1. Search strategy and identification of relevant literature

Fig. 1 illustrates a flowchart of the literature search and selection process. The search was performed in June 2020 in the scientific databases Elsevier's *Scopus*, Clarivate Analytics' *Web of Science* and U.S.

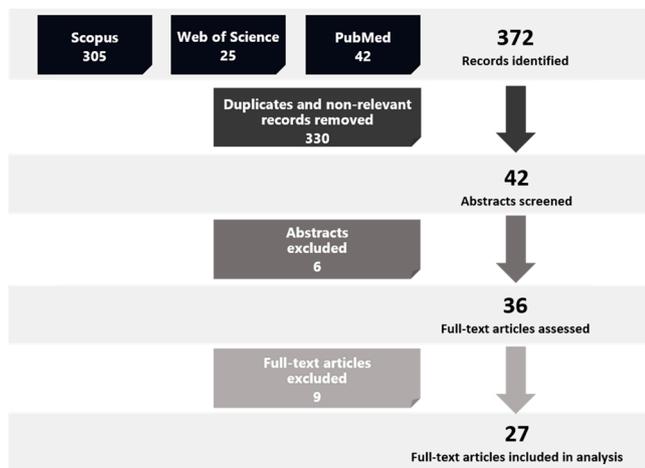


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the search and selection process.

Table 1

List of search terms used in the Scopus, Web of Science and PubMed databases.

Variations of terms and Boolean operators used in the literature search	
bully* AND seafarer	victimisation AND seafarer
bully* AND maritime	victimisation AND maritime
bully* AND offshore	victimisation AND offshore
harassment AND seafarer	victimization AND seafarers
harassment AND maritime	victimization AND maritime
harassment AND offshore	victimization AND offshore

National Library of Medicine’s *PubMed*. Together, they constitute the most comprehensive collection of international scientific literature.

Combinations of the search terms bullying, harassment and victimisation were used with bully truncated (bully*), and victimisation with both American and British spelling in combination with the terms seafarer, maritime, and offshore (Table 1). Purposedly, the term ship* or shipping was not used since this includes all kinds of shipment of parcels and logistics.

The field code *ALL* was used in Scopus and PubMed. The advanced search field tag *TS* was applied in Web of Science, enabling a topical search of the records’ title, abstract, keywords, and Keywords Plus®. By using Keywords Plus®, the search captures common words or phrases that frequently appear in an article’s reference list and enhances the power of the search.

In all, 372 records were identified and compiled in an Excel file. A manual removal of duplicates was conducted, followed by a first screening of results to ensure study relevance according to the following inclusion criteria: (1) Original, scientific, peer reviewed journal publications, published or available online. No book chapters, conference papers or grey literature were included. (2) Studies regarding workplace bullying and harassment concerning people working in any capacity on board a ship or offshore, anywhere in the world. (3) Published in the English language, the scientific and maritime *lingua franca*. This first screening brought the number of records down to 42.

2.2. Screening of abstracts

To strengthen inter-rater validity, all abstracts were read by the two authors separately to determine which full-text articles to assess for

Table 2

Data extracted from the papers with further details and an explanation of the purpose of extraction.

Data extracted	Details	Purpose
Year published	Year when the publication was assigned to a journal volume and issue.	To show how the overall research interest has developed over time.
Author location	Geographical distribution of first author affiliation.	To give an overview of where this research area is studied.
Journal ranking	Ranking according to the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers.	To provide indication of weight or impact.
No. of citations	Number of citations in Google scholar at the time of analysis.	To provide indication of spread of information.
Type of study	Intervention, explorative, qualitative, quantitative, descriptive, questionnaire or survey.	To provide information of the research design and methods for data collection and analysis employed in the studies.
Data collection	Main method[s] for data collection.	To indicate whether the results are generalisable or not.
Respondents	The number of respondents and gender ratio.	To assist in assessing the transferability of the study.
Study focus	The focus or foci of the study regarding type of bullying and harassment: gender-based; bullying or victimisation; or workplace violence.	To show the foci of previous work within the area, and to illuminate areas where further research is needed.
Recommendations	An account of the recommendations given to prevent workplace bullying and harassment, and at which level the recommendations are directed: individual; organisation; sector; or regulatory.	To provide a summary of research-based recommendations to various stakeholders, and to identify knowledge gaps.

eligibility. Whenever there was a disagreement, the authors re-read the abstract and discussed divergent viewpoints until consensus was reached. These discussions fine-tuned the analysis, providing an increasingly clear picture of how the abstracts were to be assessed.

2.3. Analysis and categorisation of full papers

Similarly, the full-text articles were read and categorised by the two authors separately for strengthened inter-rater validity. This resulted in the further exclusion of nine papers that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 27 full-text articles were included for analysis. The extracted data from the articles is outlined in Table 2.

3. Results

The presentation of the results of the literature review is structured in the order of the research questions: (i) the extent and scope of research on bullying and harassment at sea; (ii) prevalence of bullying and harassment at sea and its effects; followed by (iii) recommendations proposed to stakeholders in the maritime industry.

3.1. Extent and scope of research on bullying and harassment at sea

The overall results of the structured literature review are

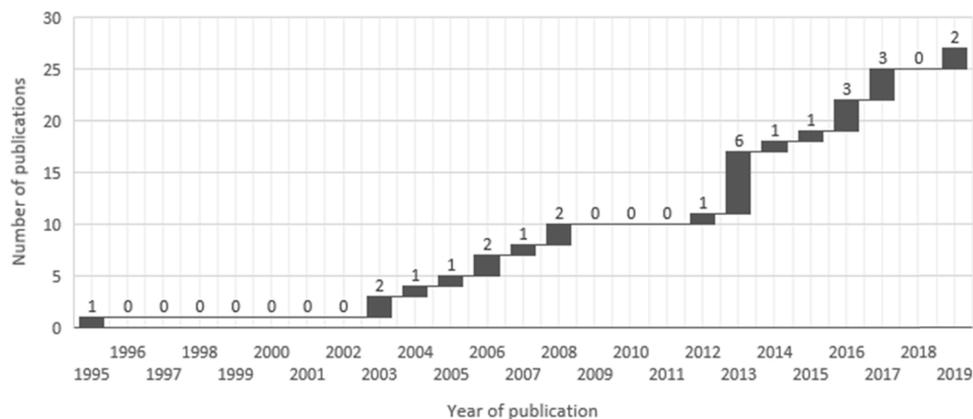


Fig. 2. Cumulative frequency over time of the number of publications.

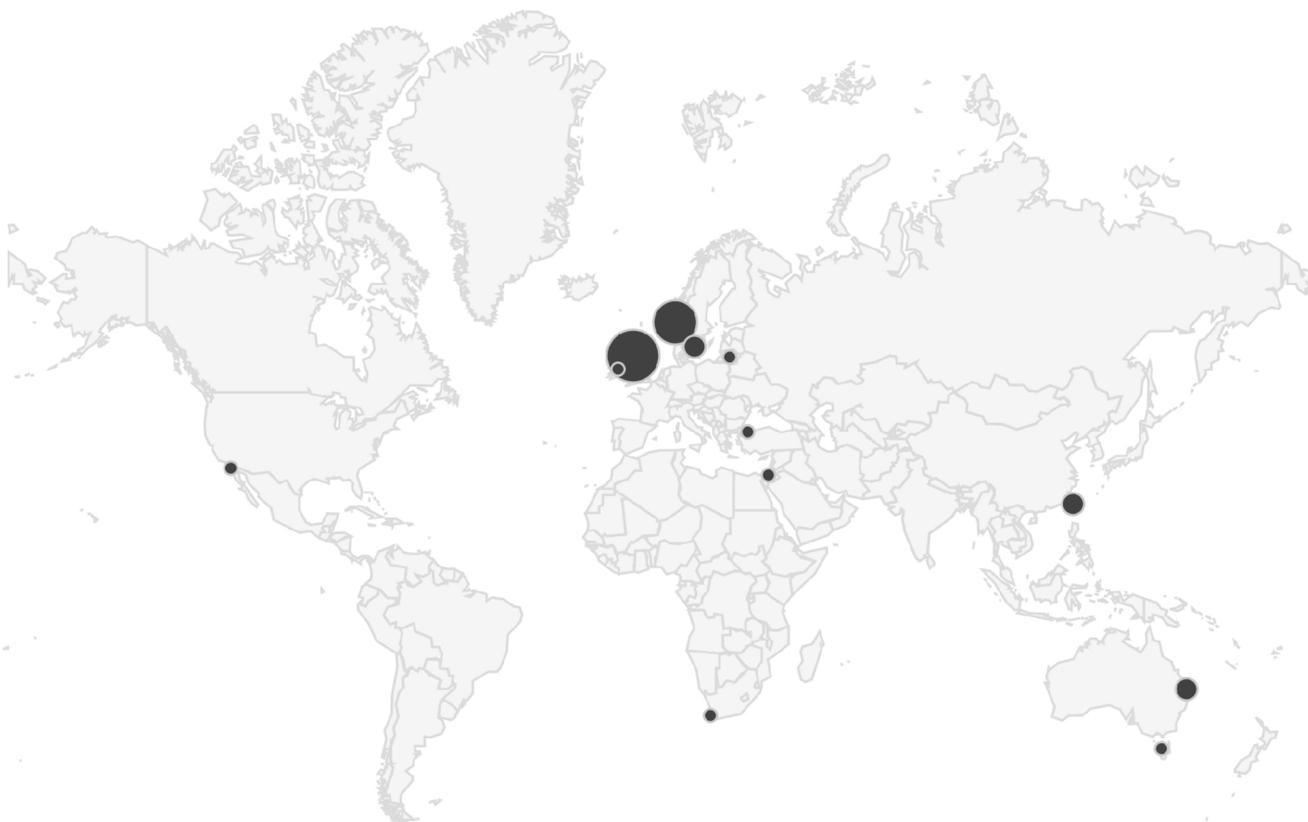


Fig. 3. Geographical distribution of first author affiliation.

summarised in Table A1. Only 27 studies met the inclusion criteria, indicating a rather limited research interest. The included studies varied somewhat in research design, study foci and population. Notably, there were no studies that included an evaluation of a workplace intervention. All but four studies rested on empirical data. Eight studies employed a quantitative design, using survey questionnaires, and eight studies were based on individual or group interviews. The remaining seven employed a mixed methods approach.

As seen in Fig. 2, there has been a modest increase in the number of studies per year since the first article was published in 1995. The forerunner was the United States Navy, which started tracking the sexual

harassment rates among its personnel already in 1989 [43]. The early 2000s brought an increased interest of the area, which has been further researched in recent years; almost two thirds of the papers have been published in the last seven years leading up to this review.

Fig. 3 shows the geographical distribution of the affiliation of the first author of the respective paper. There is a relatively high proportion of studies centred in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom ($n = 8$), Norway ($n = 6$), and Sweden ($n = 2$). The remaining studies are dispersed around the world, for instance in Australia ($n = 3$) and Taiwan ($n = 2$).

The geographic foci of the studies vary greatly. Some studies have

Table 3
Overview of papers quantifying prevalence of workplace bullying and harassment.

Source	Data collection method	Aspect of workplace bullying and harassment	Population	Prevalence
Forsell et al. [18]	Web-based questionnaire.	Perceived exposure to offensive actions or harassment at least once within the last 12 months.	1 963 seafarers in the Swedish Transport Agency's register of seafarers. 158 women 1 462 men	Women 45% Men 22%
Kum & Ertas [32]	Questionnaire with 23 items, derived from the <i>Work Harassment Scale</i> , and complemented with follow-up face-to-face interviews.	Perceived exposure to any kind of sexual harassment by word or behaviour. No time frame defined.	50 people in the Turkish maritime industry, both seafarers and shore-based personnel. 11 women 39 men	Women 36% Men 15%
Malinauskiene & Jonutyte [35]	<i>Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ)</i> , an instrument for measuring frequency, intensity, and prevalence of workplace bullying.	Perceived exposure to bullying at work within the last 6 months.	370 seafarers attending the mandatory health examination in Klaipeda, Lithuania.	Occasional bullying 10% Severe bullying 4%
Mayhew & Grewal [37]	Face-to-face interviews following a structured questionnaire.	Perceived exposure to occupational violence/ bullying from other workers on board within the last 12 months.	108 (4 women and 104 men) seafaring students from Australia (n = 71), Sweden (n = 23) and Malaysia (n = 14).	Verbally abused 19% Threatened 6% Assault 1% Sexual assault 1%
Newell et al. [43]	<i>Navy Equal Opportunity/Sexual Harassment (NEOSH) Survey</i>	Perceived exposure to sexual harassment within the last 12 months.	1 585 women officers and enlisted personnel in the US Navy.	Enlisted personnel 44% Officers 33%
Nielsen [44]	<i>Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R)</i> , an instrument for measuring frequency, intensity, and prevalence of workplace bullying.	Perceived exposure to at least one bullying behaviour per week within the last 6 months.	594 seafarers from two Norwegian shipping companies. (1% women, 99% men)	Targets of bullying 8%
Stannard et al. [62]	Web-based questionnaire.	Experience of sexual harassment.	595 women seafarers (officers and ratings) worldwide.	Considering sexual harassment a current issue 18%

been locally based, focusing on a specific issue, e.g. women seafarers in Taiwan [21], sexual harassment in the US Navy, or based on data from a national maritime registry [18]. Other studies use one company [3] or a few vessels [19] as starting point. The results from these studies reflect the diversity of the workforce in international ship operations. Ship-owners may employ seafarers from a broad range of nationalities and operate vessels globally.

About half of the studies (14 of 27) focused exclusively on gender-based harassment (Table A1). All but two of these 14 studies explored the experiences of women seafarers as targets of bullying and/or sexual harassment. One specifically addressed women researchers conducting fieldwork on board cargo vessels [59], and another dealt specifically with women working or travelling on board Islamic ships [30]. The interplay of gender and race was only highlighted by Van Wijk [66], and to some extent by Acejo and Abila [1] who discussed masculinity across ethnicities. In contrast, eight of the studies did not specifically address gender as a risk factor for bullying and harassment, nor any other social categories such as age, LGBTQ+, or physical or cognitive function variations.

3.2. Prevalence of bullying and harassment at sea and its effects

The analysis of the included studies shows that bullying and harassment remain a considerable problem in the maritime industry. Table 3 provides an overview of papers quantifying prevalence of workplace bullying and harassment, showing methods for data collection, which aspects of bullying and harassment that were investigated, population, and prevalence. The seven studies that have investigated and quantified prevalence span from 1995 to 2017 [18,32,35,37,43,44, 62]. In Nielsen [44], about 8% of all seafarers reported that they had been exposed to at least one bullying behaviour per week during the last six months period. Similarly, in Malinauskiene and Jonutyte [35] 10% of the seafarers reported occasional bullying and 4% severe bullying. Forsell et al. [18] reported that about 22% of all men and 45% of all women seafarers had been exposed to offensive actions or harassment

during the past 12 months. However, women engine crew reported an even higher exposure (58%). Women also report a greater risk of being exposed to sexual harassment. In the earliest included study from 1995, Newell et al. [43] showed that 33% of women officers and 44% of enlisted women in the US Navy reported experiences of sexual harassment during the 12month reporting period. In later studies, about 17% of women seafarers reported that sexual harassment is currently an issue for them [62], and 1% of cadets have experienced sexual assault during their time on board [37].

An additional ten studies report occurrences of bullying or harassment without quantifying the prevalence [19,31,36,45,48,59,63–65, 67]. As seen in Table 3, the patchiness of the literature and inconsistent usage of constructs, make direct comparisons of prevalence difficult.

For example, Mayhew and Chappell [36] argue that the term workplace violence describes all forms of bullying, harassment and aggressive behaviours, both physical and non-physical. And while Guo and Liang [21] reported no “serious sexual harassment” among the interviewed women seafarers and cadets, several of them were victims of verbal harassment such as sexual jokes. In the same way, Gibson [19] reported how many women on cruise ships learnt ways to sidestep “intensive and unwanted male attention”.

The perpetrators of bullying and harassment are commonly found among supervisors, top down from senior to subordinate crew members, followed by co-workers [18,37,43]. In Forsell et al. [18], 9% of the perpetrators were passengers.

3.3. Risk factors of workplace bullying and harassment at sea

Several risk factors of bullying and harassment, known to affect most types of work, as identified in previous research, were also found in the included studies. For instance, several authors mention that high workload, long working hours, too many and conflicting tasks, and fatigue lead to increased tension that may cause conflicts [3,32,37,40]. Forsell et al. [18] show that iso-strain work (high job demands, low decision-latitude and low social support) is associated with having

Table 4

An overview of the proposed recommendations given to stakeholders at different levels.

Source	Recommendations level			
	Ind	Org	Sec	Reg
Acejo & Abila [1]				
Akamangwa [3]				
Forsell et al. [18]		●		
Gibson [19]		●		
Guo [20]				
Guo & Liang [21]				
Hystad et al. [23]		●		
Kant et al. [28]		●		
Khalilieh [30]				
Kitada [31]	●	●		
Kum & Ertas [32]		●		
MacNeil & Ghosh [34]		●	●	●
Malinauskienė & Jonutyte [35]		●		
Mayhew & Chappell [36]		●		
Mayhew & Grewal [37]		●		
McVeigh & MacLachlan [40]		●	●	
Newell et al. [43]				
Nielsen [44]		●		
Nielsen et al. [45]		●		
Nielsen et al. [48]		●		
Sampson & Thomas [59]	●			
Stannard et al. [62]				●
Thomas [63]		●	●	●
Thomas [64]		●		
Thomas et al. [65]				
Van Wijk [66]				
Zhao et al. [67]		●	●	●

experienced harassment or offensive actions. Poor or absence of leadership and supervisors lacking necessary training or other prerequisites have also been touched upon [34,44,45]. In addition, there are some risk factors that are specific to the maritime context or are enhanced by the nature of the shipboard work environment, often described as a total institution [67]. These include uncertain employment and working conditions for seafarers working on flag of convenience vessels, shift work, and the social environment of the ship with weak boundaries between the work life and private domains [37,64]. Further, compliance to increased and complex safety and environmental regulations has added to the already high workload and demands faced by seafarers. Difficulties with adhering to rules and procedures and a fear of criminal sanctions for non-compliance are reported to affect inter-personal relationships between crews, their colleagues and managers [3].

Kitada [31] argues that the professional culture of seafaring has its own rules that force seafarers to carve out and standardise their personalities to meet the requirements within this culture. For women seafarers, this means that in dealing with the masculine workspaces on board, they may feel the need to hide their femininity and reinforce their masculinity. This phenomenon, described as ‘rubbing out gender’ by Acejo and Abila [1] impedes the integration of women on board and increases the risk of gender related or sexual harassment. This has been seen especially among women trainee officers (cadets), who are not only vulnerable in their role as cadets, in the bottom of the hierarchy, but also as lone women on board [64,67].

3.4. Individual and organisational effects of bullying and harassment at sea

Studied effects on the individual include an association between bullying and musculoskeletal disorders [35], mental health [48], as well

Table 5

Recommendations for further research and directed at different stakeholder levels.

Level	Recommendations
<i>Further research</i>	Further studies are proposed in the following areas: Explorative studies on the range of masculinity across ethnicities to provide a deeper understanding of the relations among seafarers [1]. Longitudinal studies to show long term effects on health and well-being caused by ship-board activities [3]. Studies of causes and mechanisms behind harassment [18]. Studies of moderating and mediating variables of leadership and bullying [44]. Studies of the role of women in maritime, e.g. pay imbalance and employment trends [34].
<i>Individual</i>	Provide independent and reliable means for researchers [59] and women seafarers [31] to communicate with shore without involvement of other personnel.
<i>Organisation</i>	Ensure organisational justice by establishing fair working conditions [23,40]. Interventions should include empowerment of bystanders [28]. Develop and implement measures to improve the physical and psychosocial work environment on board [35,48]. Integration of multifaceted and organisation-wide strategies, including continuous identification of site-specific risk factors and evaluation of measures, is needed to reduce workplace violence [36]. Procedures and policies to protect the dignity and integrity of seafarers need to be stringently enforced by senior management [28,34,37,63,64]. These should also be mandatory for staff induction [34]. Implementation of clear and confidential reporting processes [32,34]. Organisations need to develop and raise the professional status of hotel department crews on cruise ships [19]. Organisations should consider recruiting, training, and developing authentic leaders in order to foster a positive psychosocial work environment with low acceptance for bullying [44]. Training of supervisors in organisational justice principles, such as employee participation and interpersonal interaction [23]. Shipping companies should consider designing an employment support plan for women seafarers [31,34]. This could include the placement of several women on the same vessel to mitigate the consequences of being the only woman on board [63,67]. The issue of seafarer retention also needs to be approached regardless of gender [63]. Industrial causes of perceived injustice need to be addressed [40]. Enhance the visibility and impact of women in the maritime industry through education and training, and ‘demystify’ the shipping industry by marketing campaigns to recruit more women [40, p. 51]. Positive experiences of companies employing women seafarers should be highlighted in order to address and diminish gender stereotypes within the industry [63]. Include gender equity into maritime curriculum [34]. Provide networking, fellowship and mentoring opportunities for women within and across maritime organisations [34]. Increase women membership in transport unions to ensure fair representation [34]. Develop joint working committee including stakeholders at various levels to form a coherent front to promote gender equality [67]. Monitor and measure the short and long term progress of the integration of women to encourage strategies for further development [34].
<i>Sector</i>	Implement and enforce regulations to prevent gender discrimination in maritime university recruitment [67]. Legislate the right for women seafarers to have access to medical, sexual health, contraceptives, and sanitary items on board all seagoing vessels [34,62]. Policies relating to pregnancy and maternity benefits need to be considered [63].
<i>Regulatory</i>	

as other physical and psychological symptoms [43,64]. Mayhew and Chappell [36] show that consequences of psychosocial violence can be just as severe as physical violence. Of all forms of workplace violence, bullying had the most severe impact on seafarer psychological and emotional well-being. Repeated and severe incidents may result in post-traumatic stress disorder or even suicide [36]. This risk is likely to be elevated by the fact that a victim of bullying and harassment on board a ship may be forced to work close to the perpetrator for long periods of

time.

Nielsen [44] argues that workplace bullying may have a negative effect on crew communication, collaboration, and job performance. This in turn can create dangerous situations, especially during safety critical operations. At company and sector level, poor organisational and social work environments where crews are exposed to bullying and harassment, are likely to affect recruitment and retention of seafarers [67]. The effects of 'glass ceilings and sticky floors' [20, p. 645] for women cadets and seafarers imply an untapped resource that could fill labour shortages both at sea and in the maritime industry at large [63]. Further, Hystad, Mearns, and Eid [23] highlight the potential for adverse consequences related to poor commitment to safety procedures and degraded safety performance caused by perceived injustice.

3.5. Proposed recommendations to various stakeholders

There were no intervention studies in the included research literature. Hence, the recommendations have not been implemented and evaluated for their efficacy. Some recommendations are directed towards the research community as suggestions for future research. Other recommendations concern support for the individual victims of bullying and harassments, while other are directed towards shipowners, the maritime industry at large, and legislators at national and international levels. Table 4 shows an overview of the proposed recommendations at the individual, organisational, sector, and regulatory levels. Then, Table 5 outlines the recommendations in more detail.

4. Discussion

Based on the research elicited in this review, it is evident that bullying and harassment continue to pose a considerable problem in the global maritime industry. A majority (16 of 27) of the reviewed papers are authored by researchers with their affiliation in Europe. This may be an indication of the English language bias in scientific publication [42]. Yet, the distribution corresponds to the research interest in general for these issues [56].

Two main research areas can be distinguished: gender-based harassment and workplace bullying. Generally, there is little overlap between the two. This may have implications for research, as well as for policy and practice. When comparing prevalence rates, between studies as well as between women and men, it should be considered that women are a minority in the maritime industry. There are geographical and cultural differences as to how women are represented, for example differences in position and rank. Women are predominantly working in service professions on board, often associated with lower social status. As demonstrated by Salin [56], women are more at risk of being subjected to workplace bullying and harassment, based on being a minority and lower social status. Women may also estimate their own experience of workplace bullying and harassment differently, reporting a higher and more severe degree than men when self-labelling the severity of the problem.

Gender differences amongst both perpetrators and victims are well documented in previous research. Hence, the work of women seafarers is constantly scrutinised, and their performance will pave way for the acceptance of future generations of women seafarers. Being judged according to the male norm, it is possible that the shipping industry will grow accustomed to women 'through a slow and natural process' [20, p. 645], if and when women performance is similar to that of men. However, demanding excellent and uniform performance would neither be fair to current women employees, nor would it embrace the possibility of gaining new and valuable insights through the inclusion of a diverse

workforce. Still, the speed of such a transformation, or whether it is at all attainable, can be questioned. According to Schneider [60] and what he calls the 'attraction-selection-attrition' framework, it is the people who are drawn to and accepted into an organisation that later determine its future, something that slows down the speed of organisational change.

The only ground of discrimination thoroughly addressed was gender, and to some extent the dichotomy between oriental and occidental cultures. The research discourse is lacking other perspectives commonly used by scholars in social sciences, such as age, class, religion, and sexual orientation. Many of these characteristics are protected by international human rights legal frameworks, and at the same time over-represented among those reporting bullying and unfair treatment [22]. When designing and deciding on preventive measures to protect workers from bullying and harassment, a wider perspective can mitigate potential conflicts with other interests. There is a risk of sub-optimisation if decisions are made, and measures are taken, unilaterally.

As suggested in the reviewed studies (Table 5), more research is needed regarding causes and mechanisms behind bullying and harassment, long term health effects, leadership, and the role of women seafarers. Given the disparate nature of the studies (Table A1), inconsistent usage of terminology and measuring instruments (Table 3) there is also a need for strong research designs more generally to facilitate comparisons between findings. The lack of intervention studies means that recommendations proposed by researchers have not been implemented and evaluated for a maritime context. Hence, this should be a natural next step for future work, to ensure that the suggested preventive measures are evidence based and likely to have effect. Interventions and measures must target the underlying structural and organisational causes of workplace bullying and harassment. As seen in the reviewed studies, several of these underlying causes are rooted in employment and working conditions that are shaped by global economic factors at macro level. The maritime industry is characterised by its error inducing complex organisational and social structures [51]. Geographical, physical, and social distances between the actors make the construction of interpersonal relationships difficult. The weak links between flag states, owners, and seafarers have gradually weakened the formal employment contract, as well as the psychological contract between shipowner and seafarer. Breaches of the psychological contract and perceived inequity can yield intense emotional reactions [53] and lead to frustration, stress, and bullying behaviour [5]. McVeigh and MacLachlan [40] argue that equal pay for equal work on the same ship would not only strive towards establishing fair working conditions and organisational justice but also create a supportive work environment. Fundamental changes in this respect must be done at a global level to provide a level playing field. This does not necessarily imply more legislation, but rather a more stringent monitoring, enforcement, and compliance of existing regulatory framework. Primarily, it is the flag states' responsibility, supplemented by the authorities of port states, to identify deficiencies. In addition, there are various self-regulating vetting systems driven by commercial interests and trade organisations that have come to play a dominant role within the maritime industry. Many sea transport buyers express an increased interest in environmental, social, and ethical matters and require compliance of standards and guiding principles that often go beyond legislation [69].

Several of the recommendations in the reviewed literature are proposed with women in mind. However, the people that would benefit from the recommended changes can be extended. For example, fellowship and mentoring of women, as proposed by MacNeil and Ghosh [34], could be expanded to include junior seafarers as well as minorities entering a new career. Likewise, an employment support plan [31] could

also be helpful for all newcomers on board, not only women. Being new on board poses challenges, such as living and working in the same place with no clear boundary between the private and professional sphere that necessitates acculturation [19]. An effective onboarding process [61] can ease the transition into shipboard life.

Current maritime safety regulations largely refer to the safety of life and property at sea and avoidance of damage to the environment. While a slight improvement can be seen regarding marine casualties and incidents [17], mental ill-health among seafarers is a growing concern [33, 57, 58]. To unlock the full potential for the contemporary legal framework and a safety management system, the phenomenology of safety must be addressed. In addition to actions to prevent adverse events leading to human injury and loss of life, the safety management systems must encompass health-promotive objectives and routines that more effectively target contemporary origins and symptoms of seafarer ill-health at system levels. Maritime charities have been instrumental in providing self-help guidance and practical and emotional support for seafarers. But, as argued by Sampson and Ellis [58] there is a need for a proactive investment by shipowners and employers to safeguard seafarers' health and wellbeing. Here, it should be possible to draw from the large body of knowledge on workplace bullying and harassment in other contexts, when developing and designing strategies and tools that work also within the maritime domain.

It is likely that the coming years will see an increased need of qualified seafarers to maintain safe and sustainable sea transports [8]. Hence, it is necessary to make sure that seafarers are provided with fair working and employment conditions that support recruitment and retention of seafarers. This must be enforced internationally to ensure a level playing field.

Decision-makers, shore-based management, and officers on board must be provided with adequate resources and usable tools for a preventive and proactive work. While the symptoms of workplace bullying and harassment are reflected in the person affected, the causes are found at the organisational level. A reactive emphasis on reporting places the responsibility largely on the individual victim, rather than on the organisation, and is unlikely to lead to improvements. Hence, in keeping with the processes of the safety management system, the risks that constitute a hotbed for workplace bullying and harassment must be actively identified, assessed, and managed. Furthermore, the impact of actions taken needs to be continuously monitored and measured to ensure that implemented actions have the intended effect.

Training of crew and managers is generally suggested to increase awareness of safety critical issues. Similarly, mandatory training is recommended as a solution to workplace bullying and harassment in the included studies. However, when the training is done as a quick fix, using onboard computer-based training (CBT) that does not support active reflection or interaction, this kind of training has been found to have limited or even counter-productive effects [10]. Comparably, hundreds of studies from the 1930s and onwards have shown that short-term educational interventions do not change attitudes or behaviour [50, 54]. When introduced as an isolated activity, the training primarily becomes of no more than symbolical value, a means for employers to limit their liability and comply with basic regulations, rather than tackling the problem [14]. The key to any training intervention is to let it be part of a broader effort with explicit aims and a plan for evaluation. Complementary measures should seek to engage and bring together people from different professional, ethnic and gender groups, for instance through formal mentoring [34], or programs directed towards empowering of bystanders to be committed allies, as recommended by Kant et al. [28].

To protect seafarers from an unhealthy work environment, the

problem cannot be reduced to the dichotomy of victim and bully. There is a pressing need to address the structural and organisational issues that constitute the hotbed for bullying and harassment. Legislators, managers, and officers need to grab the bull by the horn. But not simply to throw out the bully, but rather to address dysfunctional and problematic features of employment and working conditions with vigour and precision.

5. Conclusions

Workplace bullying and harassment is a significant problem in the maritime industry, and not much seems to have changed since the first reviewed study was published in 1995 until present day. Prevalence rates of workplace bullying and harassment at sea range from 8% to 25% of all seafarers and over 50% of women seafarers. However, inconsistent usage of constructs and measuring instruments used in the reviewed studies make comparisons of prevalence difficult. Even though research on workplace bullying and harassment at sea is growing, there is a general need for future research based on strong research designs. Given the complete lack of scientific intervention studies, this should be prioritised in future research.

Most of all there is a need to address the underlying causes of workplace bullying and harassment to ensure that seafarers have decent working conditions. Managers ashore as well as officers on board must be provided with adequate resources, usable tools, and sufficient time for a proactive work to reducing the factors that constitute the hotbed for workplace bullying and harassment. Since there is no evidence of short-term training interventions to have any lasting effects, wider efforts are needed to tackle the problem.

From a global perspective, it is not necessarily more legislation that is required, but rather a more stringent monitoring and enforcement of the compliance of existing regulatory framework. Vetting inspectors and auditors must ask new types of questions to gain better and deeper insights of working conditions on board. In a proactive effort, safety management systems need to be complemented with leading indicators that assist in identifying drivers of safe work. Finally, with the predicted future shortage of qualified people to the maritime industry, measures to improve seafarer recruitment and retention should be high on the agenda. This involves protecting seafarers from bullying and harassment and caring for the wellbeing of everyone at sea regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other social or personal characteristics.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Cecilia Österman: Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Analysis, Writing – original draft, Revision. **Magnus Boström:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Analysis, Writing – original draft and Revision, Visualization.

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Appendix

See [Table A1](#).

Table A1

A descriptive overview of studies on workplace bullying and harassment at sea.

Source	Journal ranking	No. of citations	Type of study	Data collection	Respondents	Gender-based harassment	Bullying/victimisation	Workplace violence
Acejo & Abila [1]	1	3	Ethnographic Case study	Interview Observation	99 respondents (gender unknown)	●		
Akamangwa [3]	2	11	Explorative Case study	Interview	41 respondents (gender unknown)		●	
Forsell et al. [18]	1	19	Descriptive	Questionnaire	1963 respondents (10% women, 90% men)	●	●	
Gibson [19]	1	120	Explorative Qualitative	Interview	38 respondents (both genders represented, ratio unknown)	●		
Guo [20]	1	1	Qualitative	Interview Observation	40 respondents (gender unknown)	●		
Guo & Liang [21]	1	19	Explorative Qualitative	Focus group Interview Observation	29 respondents (100% women) Interviews at 4 shipping companies (no. of participants and gender unknown)	●		
Hystad et al. [23]	2	43	Hypothesis testing	Questionnaire	340 respondents (gender unknown)		●	
Kant et al. [28]	2	60	Hypothesis testing	Questionnaire	261 respondents (7% women, 93% men)		●	
Khalilieh [30]	1	4	Historical account	-	N/A	●		
Kitada [31]	1	31	Explorative Qualitative	Interview	44 respondents (82% women, 18% men)	●		
Kum & Ertas [32]	1	1	Quantitative	Questionnaire Interview	50 respondents (22% women, 88% men)	●	●	
MacNeil & Ghosh [34]	1	6	Conceptual review	-	N/A	●		
Malinauskiene & Jonutyte [35]	2	8	Quantitative regression analysis	Questionnaire	370 respondents (gender unknown)		●	
Mayhew & Chappell [36]	1	155	Conceptual review	-	N/A	●	●	●
Mayhew & Grewal [37]	-	13	Descriptive Qualitative	Interview	108 respondents (4% women, 96% men)	●	●	●
McVeigh & MacLachlan [40]	1	5	Descriptive	Focus group	32 respondents (100% men)		●	
Newell et al. [43]	1	68	Cross-sectional	Questionnaire	1585 respondents (100% women)	●		
Nielsen [44]	1	119	Cross-sectional	Questionnaire	594 respondents (1% women, 99% men)		●	
Nielsen et al. [45]	1	43	Cross-sectional	Questionnaire	541 respondents (1% women, 99% men)		●	
Nielsen et al. [48]	1	31	Cross-sectional	Questionnaire	1017 (14% women, 86% men)		●	
Sampson & Thomas [59]	2	110	Ethnographic Qualitative	Fieldwork	N/A	●		●
Stannard et al. [62]	1	13	Descriptive	Questionnaire Focus group	595 respondents (100% women) 10 respondents (100% women)	●		
Thomas [63]	1	68	Explorative Qualitative	Interview Focus group	55 respondents (100% women) 2 focus groups (no. of participants unknown, 100% women)	●		
Thomas [64]	1	11	Explorative Qualitative	Interview Focus group	33 respondents (100% women) 2 focus groups (no. of participants unknown, 100% women)	●		
Thomas et al. [65]	1	9	Explorative Comparative	Interview	19 respondents (100% women) 192 respondents (both genders represented)	●		
Van Wijk [66]	1	6	Social constructionist analysis	-	N/A	●		
Zhao et al. [67]	1	2	Explorative Descriptive	Interviews Questionnaire	26 respondents (62% women, 38% men) 121 respondents (29% women, 71% men)	●		

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