

Theft and extortion common experiences, say seafarers

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Professor Helen Sampson. Credit: Cardiff University

Seafarers have spoken of the pressures caused by corrupt practices when they arrive at some ports.

Interviews gathered by academics at Cardiff University reveal those working at sea are often faced with demands for cash and provisions when their vessels enter ports. One seafarer spoke of his crew being

forced to resort to food rationing between ports, while another described seeing a supervisor hand over money from his own pocket, fearing a delay to their schedule might cause him to lose his job.

One seafarer said: "There are ports where cigarettes and alcohol are so important that sometimes the pilot boat will refuse to come alongside unless you have a man on the deck waving the cartons for them to take. So that's a lot of pressure.

"It causes a lot of discomfort and it causes enough discomfort for grown men to shed tears. We feel powerless. It's very degrading."

Researchers have also been told of incidents where vital safety equipment on board is compromised by thefts of brass fittings.

Another seafarer said: "There are certain ports we go to, where we've identified theft is quite high. So, before we arrive, we go around the ship, we remove all those brass fittings so they can't be taken away. It makes you nervous and worried. We're trained to deal with fires but we're not firefighters, so having the safety critical equipment taken away from you because of pilfering leads to that extra stress."

These first-hand testimonies are a continuation of research led by Professor Helen Sampson of the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) and are included in a film to raise awareness of their plight. More than 1.5 million people worldwide work at sea, in dangerous conditions and far from home.

Professor Sampson, who is based in the University's School of Social Sciences said: "Our research provides insights into the challenges frequently faced by [seafarers](#). We have reports of [port](#) officials engaging in a variety of [corrupt practices](#) which include demands for facilitation gifts, theft of provisions, demands for cash payments, theft of brass

fittings and equipment and fraud in relation to the supply of fuel, known as bunkers.

"The amount of resistance they can mount in the face of such practices is limited and they are increasingly constrained by relatively new company policies aligning with anti-corruption legislation. This places them in an unenviable position when they arrive in ports and are met with demands for things, which they cannot provide, from powerful individuals who can arrange for the delay and detention of a ship at considerable cost to their employers.

"In these circumstances, seafarers fear being blamed, and potentially sacked, by their companies for any negative outcomes arising from their refusal to meet the demands of port personnel. As a result, they may resort to disbursing their own personal cash or 'raiding' the welfare funds which are provided for recreational equipment on board.

Professor Sampson will present the findings and show the film to an industry audience at the CrewConnect European conference in Amsterdam in May. It will also be distributed to stakeholders in shipping companies and ports across the world.

She added: "It is also important that employers understand the position of seafarers in these situations and the desperate measures they resort to as a result of being placed in an impossible position. I hope our research will help improve the lives of the many seafarers that are affected by these issues."

Versions of the film are available in English with subtitles in Russian, Arabic, Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and French. They have been produced with funding support from Lloyd's Register Foundation.

SIRC was established in 1995 with the aim of conducting research on

seafarers. The Centre has a particular emphasis on issues of occupational health and safety. It is the only international research facility of its kind and has built up unparalleled experience of research in this field.

Provided by Cardiff University

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