

Filipino Seafarers: How Are They Faring? (A Situationer)

Thelma B. Magcuro

The article gives an overview on the local and international seafaring industry, and the situation of its primary workforce, the seafarers. It shows the crucial role of the seafarers in local and international development and their significant contributions to the country as one of the highest contributors of remittances. Furthermore, it examines major issues confronted by the Filipino seafarers by virtue of the nature of their work amidst a changing global seafaring industry.

Introduction

There are a number of seafarers in my family and I have seen the extent of their efforts to do their job well in service of the people and their country. I have shared in many of their struggles and issues in their personal and professional lives. I have a brother who has been a seafarer for 22 years and three cousins, two of whom are third mates, who have been seafaring for an average of 19 years. In the last two years, three nephews have come on board.

Far from the common notion that seafarers and their families live a life of comfort and financial stability, my experience with my relatives and their circle of friends who are mostly seafarers too, shows a cycle of financial highs and lows. While they are on board, which can be from six months to two years, there is relative financial stability for the family because of the monthly allotment or remittance. A few months after the contract ends, cash becomes scarce and families start to borrow from various sources. Or they sell appliances and other assets. The duration of living off loans is contingent on how fast the seafarer can get a new contract. As contractuels, seafarers have no job security and are at the mercy of manning agencies and/or shipping companies.

Apart from financial concerns, seafarers and their families also contend with loneliness and a sense of isolation. There are stories of husbands and wives who engage in extramarital relationships, or turn to alcohol, and/or throw away money in casinos to compensate for the loneliness arising from long periods of separation. These situations give rise to family problems which the whole clan helps to resolve as in the case of some of my relatives.

In my search for academic materials on seafarers, I discovered that, unlike landbased overseas Filipinos, not much has been written about them. My interviews with ordinary people to determine their familiarity with the situation of seafarers (or seamen as they are popularly called) revealed that little was known about seafarers apart from two common impressions. One was the running joke that says "in every port, report; in every place, replace" which refers to seafarers having a woman in every port. The second was that they earn big dollars. While the two impressions may have some basis in fact, there is much more to know about their contributions to the country's development and their important role in global development.

This article presents a general picture of the seafaring industry, the profile of Filipino seafarers, and their contributions to national and international development. Moreover, it discusses the current issues and challenges they face as a sector, and government programs meant to benefit them and their families. Data were obtained from secondary materials, personal interviews and three focus group discussions (FGDs) with seafarers. The FGDs were conducted on September 21, October 11 and 18, 2010 with six, eight and ten participants, respectively.

An Overview of Filipino Migration

Various history books claim that as early as the 1400s, Filipinos were already trading with Asian neighbors like China, thereby encouraging mobility (Ang, 2006).

Likewise, in the 1700s, some trade galleons plying the Manila-Acapulco route were manned by Filipino seafarers, a number of whom would later settle in

the bayous of Louisiana in the United States (US). Organized migration, however, came at a much later date, in the early 1900s, during the American colonial period, with the high demand for plantation workers in Hawaii (Bautista, 2002).

Overseas migration of Filipinos is said to have happened in waves. The first wave consisted of the massive transport of Filipinos to Hawaii as agricultural workers and the deployment of a significant number of scholars or "pensionados" from the elite segment of Philippine society as part of the US colonial government's strategy to win over influential groups to its intent of establishing a commonwealth government.

The 2nd wave took place after World War II when the US government opened its doors to Filipino soldiers who served in the US armed forces, and their families. This privilege extended to Filipino brides of American servicemen. The same period was also marked with unprecedented reforms in the immigration laws of the governments of Canada, Australia and the US, specially in relation to Asian immigrants (Ang, 2008).

The 3rd wave began in the 1970s, a period of severe unemployment in the country, specially among professionals. Martial law did not bring the promised New Society. From 1971-1975, the average unemployment rate was 11.72% (DOLE, 2003). The oil boom in the Middle East led to many economic opportunities, particularly in infrastructure development, that created a demand for skilled and semi-skilled Filipino workers and professionals. The Marcos dictatorship favorably responded to this by instituting the overseas employment program in 1974.

The 3rd wave continues to this day. It includes the subsequent deployment of tens of thousands of women and men workers to newly industrialising Asian countries like Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, and other countries all over the globe. The nature of jobs started to diversify, too- from construction and engineering services to domestic or household labor, to entertainment and more recently, to health and other allied services. A common running joke is that, "*wherever you go in the world today you will surely meet a Filipino, from the North Pole to the South Pole, and in all points of the equator.*"

Overseas Filipinos may be categorized into three: permanent or settler immigrants (about 3.5M in 2006), such as those in the US, Canada, Australia, and Germany; overseas contract workers (3.8M) whose stay abroad is temporary and dependent on a work contract such as those in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea; and undocumented workers (800,000+) who emigrated for different reasons, living and working abroad without proper documentation (Commission on Filipinos Overseas, 2006).

There are push and pull factors that affect an individual's decision to seek work abroad. Three major reasons can be considered: more job opportunities, better income, and good welfare and social services in the host country.

More job opportunities for higher income are available overseas, attracting not only the unemployed but also the employed in the Philippines. Many Filipinos leave permanent jobs to go abroad for better pay. Nurses, for example, have been leaving the country by tens of thousands. A nurse's initial gross monthly salary in the Philippines can go as low as US\$174.00. It pales in comparison to what s/he stands to earn in the US, i.e. US\$3,000 (gross income) or 129,000 pesos (<http://www.payscale.com>). Nowhere in the Philippines can a nurse earn that much.

Another reason could be the availability of efficient social and welfare services. Others opt to work abroad hoping to go to another country with very good social services (e.g., health, education, housing) with the intent of bringing the whole family.

The Philippines has a very poor social service system. The government does not allocate enough resources for social welfare services. Education, health and housing costs are prohibitive and are borne mainly by individuals and families.

Hence, overseas migration offers possibilities of putting oneself and his/her family in a strong position to attain a better quality of life.

The Seafaring Industry

The international shipping industry is responsible for the carriage of 90% of world trade; hence, it is considered as the lifeblood of the global economy (ISF-world trade flyer.pdf). Without shipping, it would be almost impossible to conduct intercontinental trade. The bulk of raw materials cannot be transported to parts of the world where it is needed, import and export of food and other products cannot be done. As a result, half of the world could starve and the other half could freeze to death (ISF-world trade flyer.pdf). It is the availability of low cost and efficient maritime transport that has made possible the large shift towards industrial production in Asia which, in turn, has led to recent improvements in global living standards. Virtually all sectors of the industry have benefited from the recent global shipping boom (ISF-world trade flyer.pdf).

Between maritime nations, there are about 10,000 shipping companies involved in international trades operating about 50,000 ships. The ships are of various types, providing different services. They may be categorized into four:

1. **Container Ships-** carry most of the world's manufactured goods and products, usually on scheduled liner services. The latest generation of container ships can carry the equivalent of 10,000 heavy trucks.
2. **Bulk Carriers** – the work horses of the fleet, transporting raw materials such as iron ore, coal and foodstuffs, and are identifiable by the hatches raised above deck level which cover the large cargo holds. The largest bulk carriers can transport enough grain to feed nearly four million people for a month.
3. **Tankers** - transport crude oil, chemicals and petroleum products. More than 70% of the world's oceangoing tankers now have double hulls. The largest tankers can carry over 300,000 tons of oil, enough to heat an entire city for a year.
4. **Other ships** that include car carriers, gas carriers, heavy-lift vessels and ships supporting the offshore oil industry. There are also a large number of smaller general cargo ships. Ferries and passenger ships which usually

perform shorter journeys for a mix of passengers, cars and commercial vehicles. Many of these ships are Ro-Ro (roll on-roll off). The number of luxury cruise ships has also expanded greatly in recent years (<http://www.shippingfacts.com>).

A typical ship has three departments, i.e. deck, engine and steward departments. The following compose the crew of each department:

A. Deck Department

1. **Master/Captain** – is the person in command of the vessel and all its departments. S/he is usually in-charge of the payroll, paperwork, on bridge for entry and departure on ports and checks on navigational watches. S/he is almost always a day worker except during emergencies or crises.
2. **Chief Mate** – directly supervises the Bosun, 2nd and 3rd mates during all deck evolutions (cargo, maintenance/repairs/drills). On most ships, s/he keeps watch over the navigation, which is done both day and night.
3. **Second Mate** – is responsible for all aspects of navigation, which includes voyage planning, chart/publication correction, navigation equipment maintenance, cargo watch and recently communications responsibilities as well. At port, s/he is responsible for the safe and efficient transfer of cargo.
4. **Third Mate** – is responsible for all safety inspections, is usually designated as a medical officer, maintains navigation watch while at sea and is in-charge of cargo watch while at port.
5. **Deck Cadet** - is usually a student from a Maritime Academy doing a sea apprenticeship to become a Third Mate.
6. **Bosun/Boatswain** – is the highest unlicensed rating that supervises all Able-bodied (A/B) seamen usually during deck maintenance and repair.
7. **Able Bodied Seaman (A/B)/Leading Seaman/Quartermaster** – is responsible for keeping a lookout for other vessels, land masses, etc.

and steering the vessel in and out of port. Deck maintenance usually include chipping rust, painting, lubricating fittings, cleaning various areas and splicing line.

8. **Ordinary Seaman (O/S)** – is almost the same as the A/B but they are not allowed to do steering job and the concentration of work is cleaning the vessel.

B. Engine Department

1. **Chief Engineer** – is in-charge of the Engine Department and is responsible for most paperwork, ordering, maintaining spare parts inventory and directly supervises critical engine repairs.
2. **1st Assistant Engineer** – is in-charge of all engine room repairs and maintenance. S/he maintains overtime records, and can either be a watch standee or day worker for the same reason as a Chief Mate.
3. **2nd Assistant Engineer**- maintains an engine room watch and is responsible for the smooth operation of all engine room system. S/he also checks on engine room systems.
4. **3rd Assistant Engineer**- maintains an engine room watch and is responsible for the smooth operation of all engine room system. S/he also checks on engine room systems.
5. **4th Assistant Engineer** - maintains an engine room watch and is responsible for the smooth operation of all engine room system. S/he also checks on engine room systems.
6. **Engine Cadet** – is usually a student from a Maritime Academy doing apprenticeship to become a Third Assistant Engineer.
7. **Electrician** – is responsible for anything on a ship's electrical system.
8. **Mechanic** – is responsible for taking apart of machinery and their repairs usually under the supervision of the day engineer.
9. **Motorman** – makes rounds in the Engine Room and reports to the Engineer on watch, and assists as directed.
10. **Oiler/unlicensed Junior Engineer** – makes rounds, cleans and assists as directed.

11. **Wiper** – is responsible for cleaning various engine spaces and assists as directed.

C. Steward Department

1. **Chief Steward** – is in-charge of the steward department, create daily menus, orders and stocks sufficient amounts of food for the voyage, cooks, bakes and prepares food.
2. **Chief Cook** - cooks, bakes and prepares food.
3. **General Steward Utility/Bedroom** – is responsible for cleaning officers' staterooms and cleaning gallery areas around meal hours (General Information on Seafaring. Martin's Seafaring Page). Hiring of seafarers to man various shipping vessels are based on the various positions outlined above.

Current Profile of Filipino Seafarers

Filipino seafarers are in high demand in the global seafaring industry. They account for 20 percent of the world's total merchant fleet of over 1.2 million. Figures from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) show that 330,424 seafarers were deployed in 2009, posting a 26.3% change from the previous figure of 261,614 in 2008 (Flores, 2010). This 2009 total also accounts for 23 per cent of the 1,422,586 Filipinos (including landbased ones) deployed in the same year.

The increase in deployment figures from 2007-09 indicates that the shipping industry has already started to recover from the effects of the global recession. Said recession resulted to the decline in international trade, forcing some companies to shut down or streamline its operations, and cancel contracts for cargo handling.

By flag of registry, Panamanian-registered ships took in a little over a fifth (20.4 per cent) of the base figure of 329,728 seafarers. They are followed by

ships registered with the Bahamas (10.9 per cent), Liberia (9 per cent), Marshall Island (5.4 per cent) and Singapore (4.7 per cent). Ships registered with European countries (Malta, Norway, United Kingdom, Cyprus and the Netherlands) account for 16.8 per cent of seafarers in 2009, (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Deployment of Seafarers by Top Ten Flag of Registry: 2007 - 2009

	2007	2008	2009
Total	226,900	244,144	329,728
1. Panama	51,619	53,912	67,361
2. Bahamas	29,681	29,177	36,054
3. Liberia	21,966	21,632	29,796
4. Marshall Island	9,772	11,859	18,068
5. Singapore	10,308	12,130	15,674
6. Malta	7,513	11,025	14,786
7. Norway	8,188	8,883	11,447
8. United Kingdom	8,172	8,232	10,313
9. Cyprus	7,052	7,446	9,425
10. Netherlands	7,017	7,796	9,281

Source: 2009 Overseas Employment Statistics, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

At least 96 per cent of Filipino seafarers are men. (See Table No. 2) Table No. 3 shows the top 10 occupations they are in. Those working as able seamen constitute the biggest segment at 14 per cent in 2009, followed by oilers.

Recently, there has been an increasing number of women joining the seafaring business serving as service, technical and administrative employees, particularly in passenger and industrial ships. In 2006, a total of 6,436 female seafarers registered with POEA, increasing slightly to 6,619 in 2007.

Table 2. Deployed Seafarers by Sex, 2007, 2006

Sex	OFW Deployment			Share to Total	
	2007	2006	Growth rate	2007	2006
Male	216,874	222,575	-2.6%	96%	97%
Female	6,619	6,436	2.8%	3%	3%
Not Stated	3,407	1,011	237.%	2%	0.4%
Total	226,900	230,022	-1.4%		

Source: Overseas Employment Statistics 2007, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

Table 3. Deployment of Seafarers by Top Ten Occupations: 2007 - 2009

	2007	2008	2009
TOTAL	226,900	244,144	329,728
1. Able Seaman	31,818	34,563	45,338
2. Oiler	19,491	20,941	27,483
3. Ordinary Seaman	17,355	18,715	23,737
4. Chief Cook	7,778	9,022	12,651
5. Second Mate	7,873	8,694	12,119
6. Bosun	7,737	8,603	11,555
7. Messman	7,810	8,320	10,536
8. Third Engineer Officer	7,056	7,995	11,307
9. Third Mate	6,559	7,349	9,857
10. Second Engineer Officer	6,369	6,878	9,557

Source: 2009 Overseas Employment Statistics, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

Data from the POEA for 2009 indicate that 38 per cent of seafarers are in bulk carriers and passenger ships. (See Table No. 4) Passenger ships include cruise ships which, compared to other types of vessels, require more personnel.

Table 4. Deployment of Seafarers by Top Ten Vessel Type: 2007 - 2009

	2007	2008	2009
TOTAL	226,900	244,144	329,728
1. Bulk Carrier	42,357	46,732	62,229
2. Passenger	47,782	44,866	61,705
3. Container	31,983	36,614	44,276
4. Tanker	25,011	24,056	30,459
5. Oil/Product Tanker	14,462	15,702	22,366
6. General Cargo	10,754	11,763	14,695
7. Chemical Tanker	7,902	10,891	17,179
8. Tugboat	6,610	7,205	10,347
9. Pure Car Carrier	5,743	6,398	7,918
10. Gas Tanker	3,471	4,235	6,187

Source: 2009 Overseas Employment Statistics, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

Filipino seafarers are reportedly in demand because of their industriousness and relatively good communication skills. They also have a good attitude towards work and high level of adaptability to various situations. Compared to other nationalities, Filipinos are one of the groups capable of establishing good interpersonal relationships, even with co-workers of different nationalities and culture.

Seafaring and National Development

The seafaring industry serves a vital function in the arena of global development. It plays a very important role in the delivery of goods such as oil, chemicals and machineries that are needed in the operations of important industries, and the production of food and other basic needs of countries and economies. Without it, many countries will suffer problems in running their industries, programs and services, eventually leading to chaos.

In the case of the Philippines, the seafaring industry is doubly important particularly in view of its archipelagic nature and the economy's import dependence and export orientation. Much of the country's needs come from overseas because it purportedly does not have the capacity nor the capital to produce basic machineries for industrial development. In fact, even rice and other agricultural products are already imported inasmuch as large tracts of agricultural lands are rapidly being converted into residential and commercial ones.

Seafarers play a key role in domestic trade and passenger shipping. They are largely involved in the operation of domestic shipping for river, coastal and inter-island trades, and passenger shipping. Without seafarers, goods and services cannot be transferred from one location to another and the domestic economy will slow down tremendously. Products will be spoiled, local industries will stop and basic goods and services that people need will not be delivered on time. Such a situation will have serious repercussions to people's health and their everyday life and could lead to serious problems on peace and order.

Seafarers are not only required to man domestic shipping but they are also important in harbor craft, and ports as well as a range of commercial marine-related services. These include personnel in government transport ministries, marine departments and agencies, port operations and management, rescue vessels, cargo surveyors, shipbuilding and repair, cargo agents and freight forwarding, offshore oil exploration and production and a host of other marine-related activities.

As overseas contract workers, seafarers, particularly those on foreign merchant ships, are a significant source of remittances. In 2009, they wired home a total of US\$3.4 billion, up by US\$366 million from \$3.034 billion in 2008. The 2009 remittance figure reflects a 12.06 percent growth which was nearly three times faster than the 4.15 percent or \$555 million year-on-year increase in the cash sent home by their land-based counterparts (Inquirer.net, Nov. 2, 2010). Overseas Filipinos' remittances keep the Philippine economy afloat, specially amidst global economic and financial crisis.

Issues and Problems

Contrary to the common belief that seafarers live a privileged life, the truth is they are one of the most vulnerable groups of workers. They are exposed to the physical dangers of life at sea, unscrupulous ships' masters and a life of boring routine and constant loneliness. It is a life of severe peril and exertion (Terry, 2009). While many of the sea vessels have modernized, they are still affected by climate changes and movements of the sea. The system that operates in the seafaring industry have evolved, too, giving rise to a host of problems for seafarers (Terry, 2009).

The three focus group discussions conducted by the author reveal the following issues and problems of seafarers:

- 1. Increasing exposure to danger as a result of the rise in piracy and other transnational crimes like trafficking in drugs and in persons, and smuggling*

Many Filipino seafarers are either languishing in jails in other countries, having been involved wittingly or unwittingly in said crimes, or are being kept as prisoners by hijackers who constantly attack sea vessels, especially those that pass by the South China Sea, East and West Africa and the Indian Ocean.

According to the report presented by then Administrator Ma. Elena H. Bautista of the Maritime Industry Administration in July 2009, a total of 20 sea vessels were attacked and robbed by pirates from April of 2008 until April 2009. Of the total crew members affected, 257 were Filipinos.

This situation creates fear among seafarers and political tension between nations as well. But, perhaps the greatest effect is on family members and relatives, not only in terms of stress but also in the interruption of economic support, or at worst, the loss of life of the seafarer.

2. High level of health hazards (occupational, psycho-social, STDs/HIV-AIDS)

Occupational

Although the number of accidents and disasters at sea has dropped over the years, occupational hazards remain a challenge to seafarers because of the very nature of their work and work environment. Ships founder during storms, typhoons and heavy gales. Collisions at sea occur because of poor visibility.

Accidents happen even during good weather. There have been fatalities due to falls inside and into cargo holds; asphyxiation or exposure to hazardous chemicals; or accidentally being stricken by cable wires or equipments aboard.

Psycho-social

Seafaring is associated with work-related mental, psychosocial and physical stressors. Most contracts of Filipino seafarers are from 8 months to 12 months, and in some cases, up to 2 years at a time. So, the seafarer is away from his/her family for long durations, and the only social group s/he is in constant contact with are other crew members and officers (Oldenburg,

et al., 2010). Contact with family members may be limited by the absence or the high costs of offshore telecommunications. Consequently, a deep feeling of isolation sometimes develops among seafarers. It could lead to psychological and emotional stress which, in extreme cases, end in suicide. One FGD participant related that one of his crewmates was found dead by hanging in his cabin. Another participant had a friend who also committed suicide a week after he returned home. Although the suicide did not happen in the ship, he believes that the trigger may have started in the ship. A few months before disembarking, crewmates already noticed some unusual behavior from his friend.

This sense of isolation and loneliness may sometimes push seafarers to resort to alcohol. Alcohol consumption is high among seafarers. People accept it as a natural consequence of being away for a long time and as a necessity by those who are assigned to cold countries. But, according to the FGD participants, they usually drink to entertain themselves, to put them to sleep or simply to forget their loneliness.

STDs and HIV-AIDS

Seafarers have a culture of risky sexual behavior which includes having multiple sexual partners. Unlike their Western counterparts, Filipinos have a low consciousness about protecting themselves. They prefer to engage in unprotected sex in the belief that using condoms and other protective methods lessen the pleasure of sex. They are also fond of having penile implants, again with the notion that these increase the sexual pleasure of both partners.

The tendency to engage in reckless sexual activity is a result of interlocking factors. Due to the nature of services of the shipping industry, seafarers are very mobile, moving from one location to another at a fast pace; hence, the length of stay at ports of call is limited, and does not leave much time for rest and leisure. This uncertainty as to when the next

opportunity for rest will come explains the their tendency to enjoy to the fullest their rest days in between travels, most of the time making them reckless and irresponsible in their sexual behavior.

The FGD participants said that sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are very common among them. In fact, STDS are just like an ordinary cough or fever which is no cause for alarm. When one of them contracts an STD, the simple solution would be antibiotics. Even HIV-AIDS does not scare them. As of December 2007, seafarers accounted for 33% of all OFWs infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Seafarers are often one of the hardest hit by the economic and social impacts of HIV infection. They are also more likely to transmit the virus to their wives or female partners and children (ACHIEVE, 2005).

3. Decreasing job opportunities as a result of limited capacity to respond to fast-changing international standards in seafaring

With the modernization taking pace in the international seafaring industry, changes in standards that are being implemented have adversely affected Filipino seafarers in terms of job opportunities. Although the Philippines remains to be the number one source of seafarers for international vessels, it is starting to be challenged by other Asian countries like China and India. China and India have been more aggressive compared to the Philippines in upgrading the quality of education provided by their maritime schools, as well as the knowledge and skills of their graduates so they can be competitive and at par with international standards.

According to the Drewry Annual Manning Report of 2008, there is a global shortage in deck and engineering officers by as much as 34,000 and this could double by 2012 given the rate of growth of commercial vessels worldwide (Manila Bulletin, April 21, 2008). Unfortunately, the Philippines cannot immediately respond to this opportunity given its limitations in producing qualified seafarers. Such limitations result from weaknesses of

training institutions which may be considered sub-standard in their instruction and facilities.

4. *De-skilling and depersonalizing of seafarers as a result of intense global competition*

The international seafaring industry was one of the sectors hardest hit by the recent global recession. Compared to previous years, the last 3 years has been marked by closures and folding up of a significant number of multinational companies. This has greatly reduced the volume of business of the shipping industry which consequently prompted ship owners to streamline its operations resulting to the retrenchment of some seafarers.

Modernization is also being done continuously for greater efficiency and optimum profits. As a consequence, many ship owners have also been doing retrenchments and reductions in crewing levels. Such changes have exacted a heavy toll on the remaining crew because of overload, longer working hours, and shortened sleeping time and rest period. Ideally, seafarers should render a service of 8 hours a day or a maximum of 10 hours a day. Today, many seafarers work 80-90 hours a week, specially on busy waterways. This is a dangerous situation because over fatigue and information overload could lead to serious miscalculations and accidents (Binghay, 2007).

5. *Lack of standard policies to protect and promote the rights and welfare of Filipino seafarers resulting to discrimination and abuse.*

“In the last ship where I was assigned, I found out that there were plenty of illegal things that the captain and the chief mate were doing. They were not giving us (Filipino crew) the right amount of basic supplies that were supposed to be provided to us. They were not providing us also with enough and quality food, and we were not allowed to communicate with our families. Later we found out that that they had better food (the officers and the other crew who were of the same nationality with them), they had over supplies and

they even had their own parties in one of the officers' cabin. There were several occasions too when our salaries were delayed, and our families back home were already in debt." (Jorge, A Visayan seaman)

There is discrimination between Western and Asian crew. It is not only manifested in terms of food and supplies but even in salaries and working hours. Filipinos are oftentimes assigned longer working hours and heavy workloads.

Within the Philippines, there is also a practice of abusing marine graduates applying for a job in a manning agency. There is a widely accepted practice of getting new graduates as "utilities" in the office with the promise that if a job opening becomes available then the "utility" can be considered a priority in terms of being hired. In practice, however, many of the so called utility personnel become forced and unpaid laborers not only of the office but even for personal use of some officers and staff of the manning agency.

"When I was applying for work, I started as a "utility" doing errands for the office but most of the time serving as a personal driver to the children of 'Capitan', I did it for almost two years. I had free food and sometimes I was given some cash, but most of it was volunteer work. Ironically, it was another company which gave me the first opportunity to work onboard."(Dan, Able/Seaman).

Many seafarers are contractual in terms of employment. As such they are vulnerable to abuse of officers and even by manning agencies. While there are existing unions among seafarers, the greater number of seafarers are not unionized, therefore it is very easy to abuse them and to threaten them. The nature of employment in seafaring is such that the word of the Master or Ship Captain is the rule and any negative remark from the captain can make or break a seafarer's career.

There are numerous abuses by ship captains but much of it is not checked because of the culture of silence among seafarers. They specially fear being

“blacklisted”. When a seafarer is blacklisted his/her name is circulated among the shipping lines telling ship owners and manning companies not to entertain and to hire said person because of several reasons which can be made up specially if the person got the ire of his/her previous officers.

“I preferred to go home rather than quarrel with my Captain, although I really wanted to wring his neck. He was always mad at me and I didn't know why, and it came to a point where we almost had a boxing spree. I thought of reporting his abuses to the ship-owner and some organizations of seafarers but after a consultation with some fellow crewmembers, the common sentiment was to let it go for fear of my being blacklisted and losing the chance of another contract in the future.” (Rod, Bosun)

Conclusion

The Filipino seafarers play a very significant role not only in the country's development but also in international development. They are instrumental in the transfer of goods and services vital to the needs of people, industries and communities and nations in general. In terms of resources, they were able to contribute US\$ 3.4 Billion to the country's (Philippines) coffers for 2009. However, while they are making significant contributions to development, in general, they are beset by problems affecting their personal lives and that of their families as well as their professional lives.

If their significant role and contribution to the country's development is to be sustained, then the right support and environment should be provided to allow their sector to grow and develop at par with the needs of the international seafaring industry and equal if not better than the quality of its international competitors.

Recommendations and Way Forward:

- 1. Lobby for a government's strong support to strengthen and develop the local shipping industry**

The Philippine government developed a Maritime 2000 Program which served as a blueprint for the Philippine maritime industry to include shipbuilding, repair and manning and accelerated implementation of Republic No. 7471, s-1992 (Act to Promote Development Overseas Shipping Company) which exempts companies in overseas shipping from import duties on vessels and spare parts.

To date, only a limited output in upgrading our domestic fleet have been achieved, the maritime industry continues to be beset with problems. The Philippine merchant fleet engaged in international shipping is continuously declining. Seafarers' organizations and other development advocate groups should lobby for a stronger government support to strengthen and expand the Philippine Maritime Industry so that more jobs can be created both for local and international destinations for Filipino Seafarers. An improved maritime industry will eventually lead to a more dynamic trade and industry with better shipping capacities. More government financing programs for shipping undertakings will encourage and strengthen local investors' capacity to compete with foreign-funded and owned companies.

2. Streamline agencies and policies related to the maritime industry.

There is a number of agencies expected to coordinate on matters of maritime industry. On safety policies, the agencies include the national Disaster Coordinating Council, the Philippine National Police (PNP), the Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA), Philippine Ports Authority (PPA), Department of Local and Interior Government (DILG), Department of National Defense-Armed Forces of the Philippines (DND-AFP). With so many agencies involved, it has created confusion as to which agency should take the lead. There are overlapping functions, therefore certain interventions has to be done to help rationalize things.

3. Strengthen and standardize learning institutions for seafarers

There is quite a number of learning institutions for seafarers in the country both for formal (4 year courses) and for skills upgrading purposes. However, there is no monitoring and regular evaluation of said institutions to ensure that the quality of instructions are indeed at par with acceptable standards nationally and internationally. With the ongoing changes happening in the local and global maritime industry, the quality of graduates being produced should be capable of taking on the evolving challenges of seafaring.

Include new courses which can help prepare future seafarers adjust and work well with crew of multinational origin. Such knowledge and skills will help establish good rapport, effective communication and strong teamwork under ordinary situations and crises situations.

4. Strengthen medical and psychosocial support services for seafarers onboard and off-board.

This should include facilities for rest and recreation, services for proper medical information and treatments e.g. HIV-AIDS, other medical concerns. New maritime competencies can also be developed to produce seafarers who are competent on medical and safety functions.

5. Enhance government's services and resources for Filipino seafarers and their families

Considering the amount of contribution of seafarers in terms of remittances, the government should give equal importance to the needs of the seafarers and their families. Efforts should be made to assist seafarers who are detained abroad for whatever reason. Upgrading programs for seafarers should be developed and made available, insurance coverage program, which should include life insurance, burial benefits, disability and dismemberment benefit and reintegration program, livelihood programs.

The government must also address policy decisions which work against seafarers like the new standard employment contract and the application of local wages to Filipino seafarers working for international-bound vessels, the practice of blacklisting and watch listing and the protection of seafarers in cases of bankruptcy and abandonment of principals.

6. Strengthen bilateral relations and push for stronger and fairer partnerships

These will foster equal support for seafarers no matter what their nationalities are in terms of salaries and wages, benefits and other support services. This should include support in times of disasters at sea as in the case of piracy and ship robbery.

7. Push for the passage of Senate Bill 214, "An Act Instituting the Magna Carta of Filipino Seafarers"

This bill will help bring together the various provisions on seafarers scattered in various laws, institute well-meaning reforms in the maritime industry and create a holistic approach to recognizing, emphasizing and advancing the issues and concerns of Filipino seafarers.

At present, there is no law addressing the specific needs and concerns of Seafarers. The major sources of Filipino seafarers' legal rights are:

- The Philippine Constitution of 1987 mandating the State to "afford protection to labor, local and overseas, organized or unorganized, and promote full employment and equal employment opportunities for all."
- The Philippine Labor Code of 1974 which sets provisions on overseas employment of our workers, the hiring and employment of seafarers, the creation of the National Seamen's Board or NSB, operations of crewing agencies, unionism, dispute settlement, the right to collective

bargaining, the right to strike, and related aspects which have implications on seafarers

- The Philippine Republic Act 8042, otherwise known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995, which is an essential source of legal rights for our seafarers. The Act provides for specific policy thrusts such as the guarantee of migrant workers rights; deregulation or phase out of regulatory functions of specific government agencies, stricter rules on illegal recruitment and the corresponding penalties for such activities, selective deployment, repatriation of workers, and reintegration programs for return migrants.
- The contract is the most important document concerning seafarers' employment. Philippine laws require that the POEA should approve the said contract before seafarers begin to work overseas. Shipping companies and employment agencies are required to use the Revised Standard Employment Terms and Conditions Governing Employment of Filipino Seafarers On-Board Ocean-Going Vessels, this is designed to protect seafarers' rights, or a collective bargaining agreement that meets or exceeds the minimum requirements of the POEA Standard Employment Terms and Condition. Any deviations from the terms of this contract shall be made only with the approval of the POEA (Center for Seafarers' Rights, 2001).

Looking at the above-mentioned legal mandates it could be observed that the policies were general and actually covers migrant workers in general, and has not made mention of specific concerns and issues of seafarers.

Internationally, there is no standards in terms of salaries and wages for Filipino seafarers. The rate of salaries and benefits are defined by the company or employer.

8. Aggressive and continuous advocacy and organizing of seafarers

There are existing seafarers' organizations in the Philippines. Among them are the Philippine Seafarers Union (PSU), Mariners and Allied Transport Employees Union (MATEU), United Filipino Seafarers (UFS), International Seamen's Mutual labor Association (ISLA), Master and Mates Association of the Philippines (MMAP). Despite the number of seafarers organizations a lot of seafarers remain un-unionized and therefore unprotected. Despite the challenge of organizing seafarers due to the nature of being scattered geographically, it is still imperative and should be a task by advocates and friends to continuously look for them and reach out to them.

Seafarers should be united not only in the Philippines but with all other seafarers globally. The task is gargantuan but it is the only way to push and demand for the issues and concerns of seafarers. The union is the only viable instrument that can truly help protect the rights of the seafarers.

Thelma B. Magcuro is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Community Development, UP College of Social Work and Community Development. She has extensive exposure to community development work, particularly in the field of socio-economic work. She is also actively engaged in gender and development work-related projects and has worked with families of overseas Filipino workers on sustainable livelihood projects. Among her other interests are community education, participatory action research, and project monitoring and evaluation.

References

- ACHIEVE. (2005). *A qualitative study of the risks and vulnerabilities of Filipino seafarers to HIV infection and an assessment of current intervention policies and programs.* (2nd draft).
- Ang, D. (2008). *Philippine international migration: Causes and consequences.* Lecture At Dalhousie University, Canada 16 April 2008. Retrieved September 18, 2010 from <http://www.cfo.gov.ph/pdf/messages/DAA%20speech%20on%20migration.pdf>
- Ang-See, T. (2006, May 25). From king to peasant. The saga of the Sultan of Sulu. *The ManilaTimes*. Retrieved September 15,2010 from <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-104189848.html>
- Bautista, V. (2002). *The Filipino Americans: Their history, culture and traditions* (2nd ed.). Naperville Illinois: Bookhaus. Retrieved September 12, 2010 from <http://www.msc.edu.ph/centennial/bautista.html>
- Binghay, V. (2007). *Ensuring occupational health and safety for overseas Filipino seafarers.* Quezon City: University of the Philippines, School of Labor and Industrial Relations.
- Commission on Filipino Overseas. (2006). *Filipino seafarers' rights under Philippine law.* Retrieved October 15, 2010 from <http://www.seamens church.org/CSR%20Website/philippines.htm>
- Flores, R. (2010). *Deployment of RP seafarers continues; many from Cebu.* Retrieved October 15,2010 from <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/cebu/deployment-rp-seafarers-continues-many-cebu>
- General information on seafaring. *Martin's seafaring page.* Retrieved on October 12, 2010 from <http://www.dieselduck.ca/seafarer/index.htm>
- <http://www.payscale.com>. Retrieved September 20, 2010
- <http://www.shipping facts.com> retrieved October 11, 2010
- Inquirer.net.* Retrieved November 2, 2010 from <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/region/Philippines/view/20101102-301025/Filipino-sailors-remittances-up-250M>
- International shipping-carrier of world trade. *ISF-worldtradeflyer.pdf.* Retrieved October 2, 2010 from:<http://www.dieselduck.net>

- Oldenburg, et al. (2010). Occupational risks and challenges of seafaring. *Journal of Occupational Health*, 52, 249-256. Retrieved January 20, 2011 from http://joh.med.uoeh-u.ac.jp/pdf/E52/E52_5_01.pdf
- Philippine Department of Labor and Employment. *2003 yearbook of labor statistics*. Retrieved September 25, 2010 from <http://www.dole.gov.ph/about/moving.htm>
- Ramos, F. (2009). *The maritime industry*. mb.com.ph: Manila Publishing Corporation. Retrieved February 10, 2011 from <http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/211570/the-maritime-industry>
- Terry, W. (2009). *Working on the the water: On legal space and seafarer protection in the cruise*. Retrieved October 18, 2010 from: <http://online.library.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1944-8287.2009.01045>