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Trauma, post-trauma, and support in the shipping industry: The experience of Filipino seafarers after pirate attacks

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Filipino seafarers who were taken hostage by Somali pirates and explores their experiences and sufferings both during the captivity and after release. It shows that during captivity the victims suffered from various forms of traumatic abuse which scarred them both physically and psychologically. After release, the data suggests that seafarers suffered from symptoms associated with mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. However, seafarers reported that they received no systematic attention or treatment for psychological problems. The issue reveals a deficiency in the regulatory framework governing seafarers' occupational health and safety in the Philippines.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade or so maritime piracy has returned as a serious global problem. The main reason is the rise and scale of pirate attacks near the Gulf of Aden. This problem incurs heavy costs not only to the global economy and the shipping industry but also to those individuals who are taken hostage and their families. This paper focuses on Filipino seafarers who were taken hostage by Somali pirates and explores their experiences and sufferings both during the captivity and after release. The examination suggests that whilst seafarer victims endure heavy physical and psychological abuse, available institutional support is largely limited to the material losses and treatment of physical violence. First, a review of the literature on the issue of piracy is presented next.

2. A review of piracy studies

With the return of maritime piracy as a serious international threat, 'piracy studies' has attracted considerable attention in the academic world and related publications have mushroomed [1,2]. For example, in 2010 the journal *Maritime Policy and Management* produced a special issue on maritime security which paid particular attention to piracy issues (Volume 37, Issue 7), and in 2012 *WMU Journal of Maritime Affairs* edited its special issue on piracy at sea (Volume 9, Issue 2). Bueger [2] recently conducted a literature review on piracy studies and noted that this scholarship consisted of three pillars. The first one explores the root causes of piracy and how it is organized and carried out in local contexts [3,4]; the second is related to international responses and interventions and the associated problems, with a particular focus on legal issues [5,6]; whilst theorizing piracy from a historical perspective constitutes the third pillar [7,8].

While Bueger's three pillars account is rather comprehensive, it nevertheless omits another line of inquiry – the costs of piracy. In terms of economic costs, it is reported that maritime piracy cost the world economy about US$6.6 to $6.9 billion in 2011 and about $7 billion in 2010 [9-11]. According to the model of Fu et al. [12], if the international community and governments did not take any intervention, the costs of pirate attacks near the Gulf of Aden would amount to US $30 billion a year.

Central to this paper is human costs. As of 2011, 3863 seafarers reported that pirates assaulted and abused them. Of these, the number of seafarers who were captured was 1206. Out of this figure, 555 merchant seafarers were attacked and captured in 2011 alone. In addition, 645 hostages captured prior to 2011 remained in pirates' hands, plus the 6 tourists and aid workers who were held hostages by Somali pirates. In 2012, 589 were taken hostages, of which 345 were seafarers and fishermen, three were aid workers, and one was a journalist [13].

Human costs surely cannot be reduced to abstract numbers of victims as the latter inevitably suffer from physical as well as

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psychological trauma. Piracy studies so far have largely overlooked this issue and its consequences. Limited evidence suggests that piracy victims are likely to suffer from mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [13,14]. Ziello et al. [13] clinically examined four Italian seafarers 5 months after their release from more than 200 days of captivity by pirates and made PTSD diagnosis to three of them. Dr. Idnani examined 21 Indian seafarers taken hostage by pirates and noted three cases of PTSD [14]. In this context, the question whether or not victims and their families receive enough support especially regarding mental health issues comes to the fore and remains to be addressed. This question is particularly important because seafarer hostages come predominantly from non-OECD countries especially from the Philippines, China and India [15,16] and the social security and welfare systems in these countries are likely to be under-developed. This paper aims to fill this gap and make a fresh contribution to the burgeoning pirate studies.

Given that the Philippines is one of the largest seafarer supply countries in the world, it is not surprising that a large proportion of hostages taken by pirates are Filipino seafarers – as of the end of 2012, 276 Filipino hostages had been taken, some of whom were still in captivity [15,16]. Furthermore, it may be the case that the exact number could be more than what is reported publicly.[1] Therefore, this paper focuses specifically on the experiences of Filipino seafarer victims.

Additionally, the paper will add to the work and studies addressing seafarers' mental health issues. According to the International Committee on Seafarers Welfare (ICSW) [17], while psychological problems are very common among seafarers, the mental health of seafarers did not receive much attention until very recently. One reason for this is perhaps because mental health is less visible. Stevenson [18] points out that 'neither traditional maritime law nor the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006 specifically addresses mental health care'. Another reason for the lack of attention perhaps is the stigmas associated with it [18], that is, being labelled as a person with mental health problems would have consequences for social acceptance and self-esteem. Furthermore, seafarers may perceive that being labelled with mental health problems poses a threat to their sea-based employment prospects [14]. Recently, however, seafarers' welfare organizations have embarked on projects to improve seafarers' mental health and raise awareness [17–19]. At the same time, maritime health professionals and scholars have also started research and collaboration on this subject [20,21]. Poor mental health among seafarers can be caused by many factors, such as loneliness, separation from families, stress, fatigue, lack of shore leave, criminalization, accidents, and piracy [14,19]. It is reasonable to assume that among those factors, being taken hostage by pirates is one of the most traumatic and therefore is more likely to cause mental health problems. In this context, this paper can also be seen as a special case study, serving to highlight some issues related to seafarers' mental health care.

3. Method

This paper is based on a qualitative study commissioned by One Earth Future (OEF) under their Oceans Beyond Piracy (OBP) project. The study consisted of 15 in-depth interviews, 12 of them conducted with Filipino seafarers who were attacked and/or captured by Somali pirates on the high seas, and the remaining three with partners or wives of Filipino seafarer victims. In order to protect the identities of the research participants, the names of the seafarers used in this paper are not their real names.

Snowballing, formal and informal networks of researchers were utilized to recruit participants. Given the sensitive nature of the original research, field researchers who conducted the interviews were given training on how to avoid triggering post-traumatic distress and how to support participants who show a negative reaction. Researchers were also provided with contact information for a 'rescue therapist' who could be called if an acute reaction was triggered. In addition, participants were provided with information about follow-up support and how to access local resources if they felt that they were having lasting distress either in general or related to the interviews.

4. Trauma during captivity

Being taken hostage is a traumatic event, which is described by *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV) as follows [22].

'Traumatic events that are experienced directly include, but are not limited to, military combat, violent personal assault (sexual assault, physical attack, robbery, mugging), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, natural or manmade disasters, severe automobile accidents, or being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.'

From the perspective of a victim, a traumatic event can consist of many types of traumatic experience. Similarly, being held hostage, seafaring victims are likely to experience various forms of abuse. The most traumatic one arguably is threat of death, such as witnessing deaths of crewmates, being fired upon with gunshots, being used as human shield, and being constantly held at gun point. Two participants, Bruno and Sigfried, from the same vessel shared what they and their other crewmates saw and felt when there was an intense gunfight between the pirates and the rescuers.

'We (crewmembers) were held at the ship's bridge, lying down on the deck. I was near the door of the bridge. They (pirates) just grabbed me, dragged me out of the bridge and pointed a gun at my head. I just closed my eyes, as I could not do anything. Then, the pirates picked each one of the crewmembers until there were 20 of us outside the bridge… We were all very scared. Some were crying. We were made to stand up on each side of the wings and you can see the bullets from the rescue vessel flying towards us. All we can do is just to close our eyes. … Joe died in the engine room by suffocation around 4 pm. Kevin got shot around 6–7 pm when the pirates and the rescuers were exchanging fire again in the afternoon.' (Bruno, deck rating)

'As the ship's paint room was burning due to the exchanges of high-powered gunshots from the pirates and the rescue vessel, we run and hid in the dock keel, or the belly of the ship, if you like. This area is not usually suited for crewmembers to stay in. We had no choice. We could not hide in the engine room because it was burning. We were heading to the dock keel and while passing by the control room we saw one of our crewmates, a Filipino, dead. He was an OS (ordinary seaman). We saw him face down, lifeless. He was suffocated in the engine room.' (Sigfried, engine rating)

The above quotations, heard in isolation, would seem to be coming out of war-torn areas rather than from a crew of a merchant vessel, where the presence of guns on board, let alone gunshots, is entirely out of the ordinary. Using the DSM-IV descriptions of a traumatic event, the above quotes fit the description of a traumatic event where there is violence, seafarers being used as human shields while being fired upon, a burning ship and the sight of dead associates, among other things.

[1] In an informal conversation with a government respondent, he mentioned that the exact number was greater than what was reported publicly.

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