



Mahidol Migration Center
Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR)
Mahidol University

POLICY BRIEF

Hazardous Waters: Occupational Injuries for Migrant Fishers and Seafood Processors in South-East Asia



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Benjamin Harkins

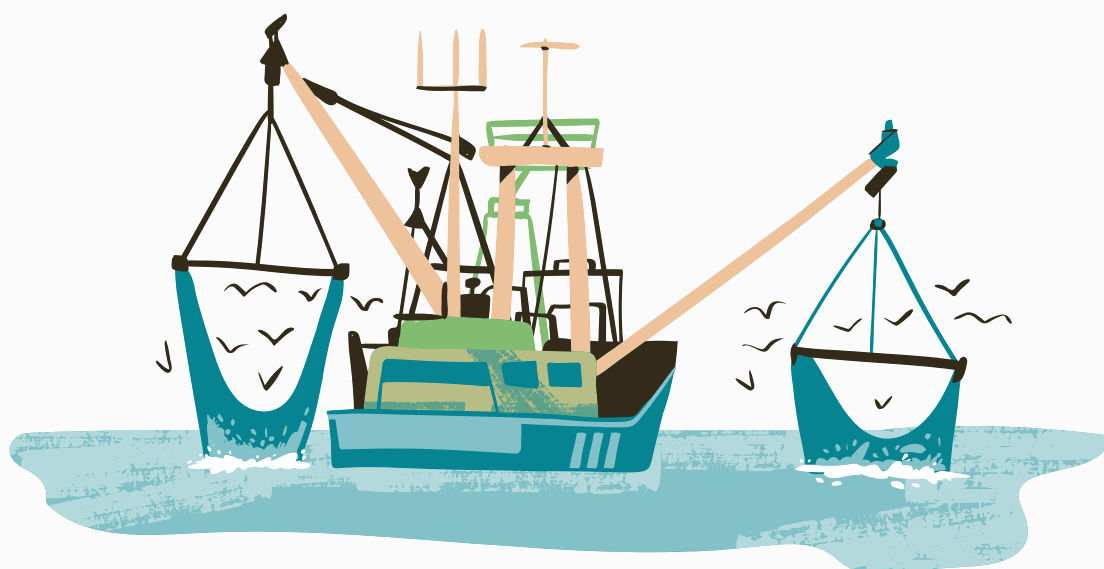
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Summary

This research study finds that at least 27% of migrant fishing and seafood processing workers in South-East Asia experience serious work-related injuries requiring medical treatment. A clear correlation was found in the survey results between working excessively long hours and experiencing serious occupational injuries.

Introduction

During the last 30 years, the labour force in the fishing and seafood processing has shifted dramatically in response to the rapid but uneven social and economic development in the South-East Asian region. Migrant workers now fill a substantial share of these jobs because of the reluctance of nationals to pursue work that is often viewed as low-paid, physically demanding and dangerous. Meanwhile, poverty and unemployment in many countries of origin within South-East Asia continue to represent substantial push factors for seeking work abroad.



Work in fishing is widely recognized to be one of the world's most hazardous professions (ILO 2023a). A fishing vessel is an unstable platform in perpetual motion. When the weather is particularly rough, the movements may be extreme and unpredictable. Vessel decks are slippery and often covered with nets and fishing gear. As there are typically no fixed working hours, fishers may experience fatigue that increases the likelihood of accidents (ILO 2013). When accidents occur, it can require a long journey back to shore to access medical attention. While the availability of official data is limited, a recent global study estimated that more than 100,000 fishing-related deaths occur each year, many of which could have been prevented through greater attention to occupational safety and health (Klein and Horn 2022).

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Although the safety and health risks in seafood processing work are generally considered to be lower than for marine capture fishing, workers in the industry are still exposed to hazards from heavy processing equipment, cold working environments, slippery surfaces, long working hours and repetitive motions. A survey among Cambodian and Myanmar migrants employed in seafood processing factories in Thailand found that more than one out of five had experienced an accident at work during the last 12 months. The study identified several risk factors – such as challenges with multicultural communication, lack of safety equipment and insufficient safety training – which contribute to an increased risk of occupational accidents for migrant seafood processors (Jiaranai, Sansakorn and Mahaboon 2022).

The ILO considers “a safe and healthy work environment” to be a fundamental right for all workers. However, a key global challenge in regulating safety and health within the fishing sector is that labour inspectors are not typically engaged in the inspection of fishing vessels. Paradoxically, this contributes to a situation where some of the most vulnerable workers to occupational accidents are not covered by the mandate of labour inspectorates. Although coverage is relatively better for seafood processing factories, the scope and quality of inspection is nonetheless affected by the generalized decline in the number of labour inspectors and the lack of adequate investment in training (ILO 2023b).

The ILO Ship to Shore Rights South-East Asia programme, funded by the European Union (EU), conducted a large-scale mixed methodology research study to examine the working and living conditions of migrant workers in the fishing and seafood processing sectors across the region, including occupational safety and health. During May–July 2022, a total of 1,262 return migrant workers were surveyed in Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar and Viet Nam. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 return migrants and 16 key informant interviews were completed.



Prevalence of Occupational Injuries

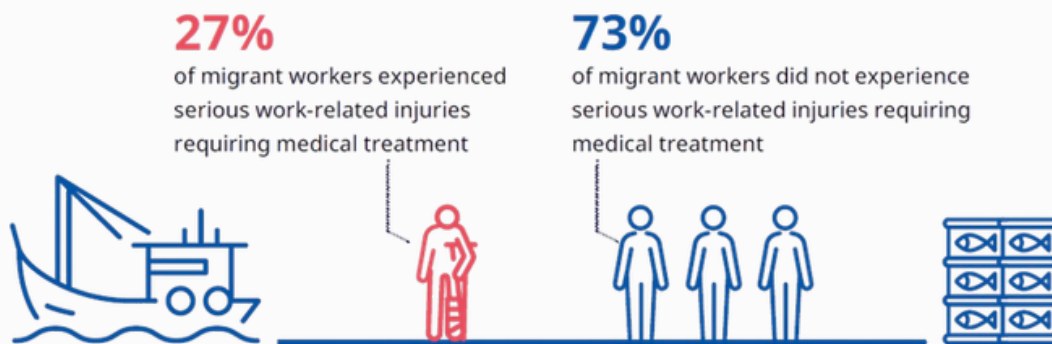
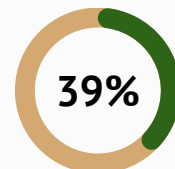


Figure 1

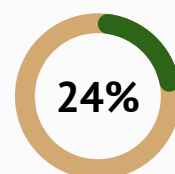
Occupational injuries for migrant workers requiring medical treatment (n=1,262)

As shown in figure 1, more than a quarter of migrant fishing and seafood processing workers (27 per cent) had experienced serious work-related injuries requiring medical treatment. During key informant interviews, respondents generally downplayed the severity of the injuries in the seafood processing industry compared to work in fishing but nonetheless acknowledged that both sectors have safety and health risks. A civil society organization (CSO) representative from Cambodia said: “Seafood processing workers do have accidents but they are less likely to lead to serious injuries. Sometimes they get cuts on their hands from a knife or in the processing machinery. But for migrants working in the fishing sector, they are at higher risk of severe accidents, such as losing hands or legs when bringing in the fishing nets. It’s also a fairly regular occurrence for fishers to fall overboard and drown.”

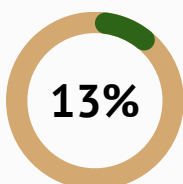
Among the 340 surveyed migrant workers who were injured, the most common types were cuts or lacerations (39 per cent), slipping or falling (24 per cent), crashes and collisions (13 per cent) and muscle strains (12 per cent). A key informant from an Indonesian trade union said: “For fishers who are injured, it is mainly cuts, becoming entangled in the fishing gear and falls that are most common, particularly during the process of setting the nets. It can be the result of inadequate training, adverse weather conditions, rough seas or physical fatigue. In many cases, it is some combination of those factors that leads to injuries.”



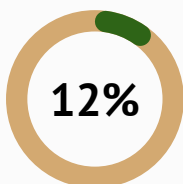
Cuts or Lacerations



Slipping or Falling



Crashes and Collisions



Muscle Strains

In addition to an increased likelihood of physical injuries, systematic reviews have found that migrant workers often report higher rates of mental health problems than local nationals due to the hazardous environments and poor working conditions they experience (Hasan et al. 2021). For migrant fishers specifically, prior studies have shown that they commonly face challenges related to depression, anxiety, substance abuse and other mental health concerns, which may be exacerbated by the stressors of family separation, loneliness, fatigue, language barriers among multinational crews, limited shore leave and sleep deprivation (Pocock et al. 2018).

A key factor behind the neglect of occupational safety and health standards for migrant workers in the fishing and seafood processing sectors is the relatively small amounts of compensation required should accidents occur – even when they result in fatalities.



Some of the workplaces provide first aid kits and medical care for injured workers. Other employers just don't care at all. They literally dump migrant workers at the hospital if they get hurt and then just forget about them.

– Key informant from a CSO in Myanmar



Relationship Between Excessive Working Hours and Occupational Injuries

Unsurprisingly, a clear correlation was found in the survey results between working excessively long hours and experiencing serious occupational injuries (figure 2). Among the migrant fishers and seafood processors who worked 8 hours or less per day, one in five (20 per cent) reported an injury; while nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of those who worked over 20 hours per day were injured on the job. The findings demonstrate the linkage between abusive labour practices in the form of excessive work hours and negative occupational safety and health outcomes. A CSO representative from Myanmar said: “The most common cause of serious injuries we see are when workers in the fishing or seafood processing sectors are forced to work very long hours. If they don't get enough rest, they are likely to make mistakes that lead to accidents.”

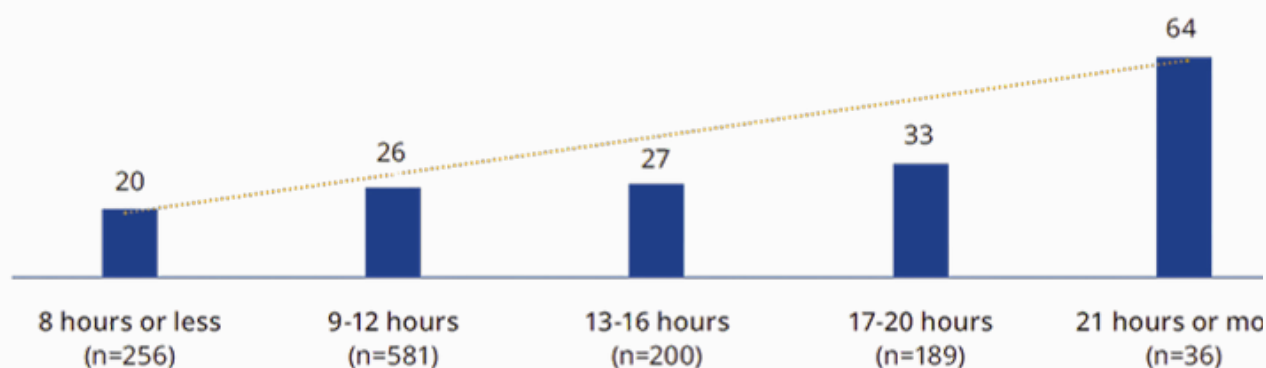


Figure 2

Occupational injuries among migrant workers requiring medical treatment by working hours (n=1,262)

Problems with excessive working hours and lack of rest have been particularly highlighted in recent research studies of Taiwanese and Chinese distant water fishing vessels. Fishers on longline tuna fishing vessels in these fleets were found to be particularly at risk of excessive working hours due to the considerable amount of time required to set and retrieve fishing lines (EJF 2024). An Indonesian fisher working on a Taiwan (China) flagged vessel explained:

“ You almost never get enough rest on longline boats because it takes a long time to set and haul back in the fishing lines. My experience was that I normally had to work up to 19 hours while I was on a Taiwanese vessel for several months. ”

The gruelling working hours often involved with fishing can lead to high levels of fatigue and make an already hazardous job even more risky. Previous studies have found that long hours can be a major cause of onboard accidents (Sparks 2022).

As a Vietnamese fisher who worked on a longline tuna fishing vessel in Taiwan (China) said:



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“ The working hours were not at all as we agreed in my contract. I had to work a lot more, sometimes as much as 20 hours per day and with no days off. My shifts often started at midnight and lasted until the next night. We really had no time for sleep, so we just took brief naps when the nets were pulled out of the water. At one point, I actually fainted from lack of rest and hit my head when I fell. ”

Research conducted by the ILO has clearly demonstrated the increased risk of occupational injuries associated with fatigue from long working hours. Working excessive hours means that the window of opportunity for rest and recovery before returning to work the next day is reduced. If this pattern of long work periods and inadequate recovery is repeated day after day and week after week, the resulting in a substantial accumulation of fatigue. The effect of this fatigue leading to slower response times, attention deficits or failure to suppress dangerous acts has been identified as a key factor behind many accidents (Tucker and Folkard 2012).

Conclusion

Globally, migrant workers face greater occupational safety and health risks than other workers. Migrants tend to be placed in particularly dangerous, unhealthy and low-paid jobs because they are considered undesirable by the national workforce. As a result, these hazardous industries are often dependent on a migrant workforce, as is the case for the fishing and seafood processing industries in South-East Asia. The regulation of these high-risk segments of the labour market is often neglected and is where the most serious occupational accidents occur.

As the fishing sector represents a particularly hazardous sector of work and both migrant fishers and seafood processing workers commonly experience occupational accidents, more needs to be done to improve safety and health conditions in South-East Asia. Based upon the findings of this study, the following key measures are recommended:

Recommendation #01

Deliver participatory and action-oriented occupational safety and health trainings to migrant workers and their employers.

Recommendation #02

Require that employers provide adequate personal protective equipment at no cost to migrant workers.

Recommendation #03

Strengthen inspection of occupational safety and health issues on fishing vessels, including through the adoption of multidisciplinary approaches to law enforcement and sector-specific regulatory guidelines.

Recommendation #04

Improve reporting of occupational accidents in the fishing industry, thoroughly investigate their cause and ensure that negligent employers are held liable.

Recommendation #05

Provide access to fully-stocked first aid kits and immediate medical treatment for migrant workers experiencing occupational injuries.

Recommendation #06

Ensure equal social protection coverage and fair compensation for migrant workers experiencing work-related injuries.

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About this Brief

This brief is based upon [a large-scale ILO research study](#) examining the working and living conditions of 1,262 migrant workers in the fishing and seafood processing sectors across the region, including an assessment of the prevalence of serious occupational injuries requiring medical treatment and their relationship to excessive working hours. The contents of this brief are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ILO.

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