



Human Rights Topic

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SIMULATION 2024

COMMITTEE GUIDE

Human Rights

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1. Simulation Topic: *Human rights abuses on factory ships*

I. History/Context

Factory ships are large vessels filled with tools and machines necessary to process and catch fish. The crew spends weeks at a time onboard catching and processing fish and other marine animals for consumption. These large ships originate from early whaling ships.

Whaling ships were large ships that were used to process whale oil and use other parts of the whale for different purposes and in a wide range of products. Because of the rapidly decreasing population of whales, the practice of whaling ships also declined, until in modern times these ships are rarely used at all. These ships were very useful and made catching and processing whales much easier and more efficient. Whaling ships are the inspiration and model for factory ships. Countries such as Russia, Japan, and South Korea used to have huge fleets of giant ships for this purpose, but now have fewer ships in modern times. The United States, on the contrary, has started using factory ships more and more often.

In order to maintain a whaling ship of such size, many crew members were needed. However, the



Figure 1: An old whaling ship from New Bedford, USA

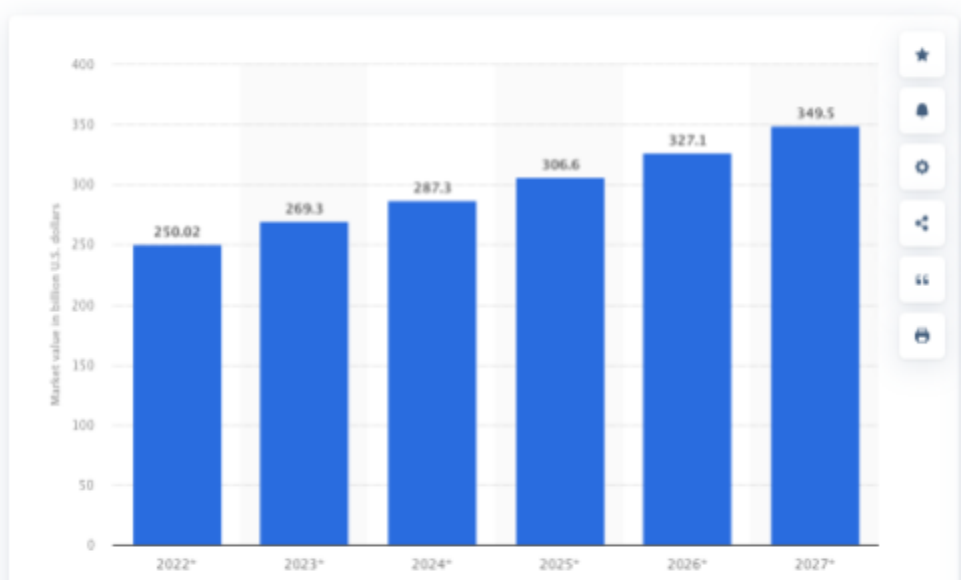
working conditions on such ships were not adequate for such a lot of people. Men who worked on these ships were in danger of various illnesses, drowning, piracy, and other injuries. Not only were these dangers present, but conditions were very uncomfortable, which led to a tense environment, especially during long periods of time when whales were not found. The work environment and conditions were not acceptable, and people living and working on a whaleship faced a lot of adversity and challenges with not enough pay to make it worth it.

II. Current Situation

Factory ships have become very important for the fishing industry because of the efficiency that they provide. The fishing industry has grown tremendously because of these large ships, creating a lot more income for the companies and governments involved. This industry is enormous, in 2023 its value is estimated to

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Forecast seafood market value worldwide from 2022 to 2027
(in billion U.S. dollars)



be around 269.3 billion dollars (“Global Seafood Market Value Forecast, 2019-2027”).

Despite the large profits to be made from factory ships, often the

Figure 2: Global forecast seafood market

people who work on them do not get paid fairly. Working conditions within factory ships can be appalling, with workers facing illnesses, physical injuries, sexual abuse, and even death. Many of these workers are victims of human trafficking and forced labour, and they may be coerced into working through some kind of debt bondage, where they are lent money by the company which they can then never repay due to high interest rates and low wages.

Migrant workers are the ones who are most recruited to work on these factory ships and are incredibly vulnerable, being in remote locations out at sea for months at a time. "Our money is with [the owner], so he can decide to give us permission [to change jobs] or not. They hold all the power, and we can't do anything. Sinuon Sao, a Cambodian migrant on a fishing vessel, Mueang Rayong, Rayong, November 2016 (Human Rights Watch).

Many countries have large fishing vessels that legitimately catch fish and other animals to sell or import for consumption. The issue that is being noticed the most is with illegal fishing, overfishing, and other illicit fishing markets, where these



Figure 3: The factory trawler Wiesbaden

markets and these industries go to developing countries in order to take advantage of migrant workers and coerce them to work for them. For these companies and people, it is much cheaper and more beneficial for them to have unpaid workers working for them, so they

don't need to spend as much money out of their revenue.

Fishing companies that participate in IUU, or illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, work with organised crime and human traffickers in order to do business. Due to the lack of training, the language barrier, and other issues that migrant workers and human trafficking victims face within the working space, it can become dangerous for them to work.

Many of the people who work on fishing vessels or factory ships are exposed to unfavourable conditions for long periods of time. The fishing industry is one of the largest, which means that there is a lot of income available for companies and the government to hire workers, pay them



Figure 4: U.S. navy inspecting a factory ship

fairly, and keep the conditions that they need to work in comfortable and safe, but many governments have found issues restraining and controlling fishing vessels from hiring victims of human trafficking.

Countries such as China have been found guilty of having enslaved workers in their fishing vessels, and in October 2020, many Ghanaian workers were reported to have been suffering in horrible conditions aboard these ships. (Daoust, 2021) Many of these workers were not allowed to bathe, were not given proper food in order to improve their productivity, and could not communicate with their bosses. They were often threatened and hurt physically, making it difficult for them to stay silent and continue to work.

Thailand has also been involved in this problem. (Human Rights Watch) The United States Department of State responded to evidence of human rights abuses on factory ships and moved Thailand to Tier 3 (the lowest possible) of their annual Trafficking in Persons report. (Human Rights Watch). South Korea has also been accused of allowing human rights abuses aboard ships, where workers were forced to work 18 hours a day and their captains confiscated their passports and cut wages significantly if they were not efficient and didn't work tirelessly. (Daoust, 2021)

The unjust treatment of workers aboard fishing vessels is not the only issue aboard factory ships; because of the large influence of organised crime and the mafia, there have been instances of people, drugs, and arms being transported aboard these ships. Many fishermen who were suffering from low wages and little income were coerced into joining organised crime and helping these criminals complete their operations, involving themselves in money laundering, tax evasion, document fraud, trafficking of persons, arms, and drugs.

For countries like the United States, it is very hard to punish and control these actors, which means that a lot of the seafood that is imported into the United States has probably been from a ship that has been participating in illegal activity and human trafficking. (Daoust, 2021). It is extremely important for countries in which there are large fishing industries and where factory ships are used often, that guidelines, laws, policies, and other means are used in order to control the working conditions of people aboard these ships. Not only this, but countries where a lot of seafood is imported need to be able to check, revise, and make sure that none of that seafood is from a ship that has been involved in organised crime

such as the transportation of drugs or arms, and is not using victims of human trafficking who are basically working for free.

III. Key points of the debate

- Income generated by the fishing industry
- Human trafficking in factory ships
- Debt bondage and other means of coercion in factory ships
- Policies and laws established for workers' safety
- Organised crime such as drug and arms trafficking in factory ships
- Controlling imports of seafood products to ensure they are ethically sourced

IV. Guiding questions

1. Is the fishing industry important to your country's economy? If so, describe the industry.
2. Does your country import large quantities of seafood? If so, what does it do to ensure the ethical origin of the products that it imports?
3. What are the laws and regulations in your country for employment and workers rights?
4. Does your country have any licensed factory ships or allow ships from other countries to enter its waters? If so, how are they regulated?
5. How has your country been affected by human trafficking, and what has the government done about the problem?
6. What has your country done, if anything, to tackle the problem of organised crime and human rights abuses on factory ships?

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