

Trafficked at sea.

**The exploitation of
Ukrainian seafarers
and fishers**

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Rebecca Surtees



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International Organization for Migration (IOM)

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Foreword

The blight of slavery continues to afflict our world today, on a far greater scale and in far more insidious forms than many of us realise.

This paper addresses a manifestation of human trafficking that has yet to receive the attention it deserves from policymakers, practitioners or prosecutors around the world: seafarers and fishermen trapped for their labour at sea. The men interviewed for this report, young and old, experienced and novice, were led through a calculated maze into a world of imprisonment at sea, backbreaking labour, sleep deprivation, crippling and untreated illness, and, for the least fortunate, death. These men, seeking honest work at sea, ended up on slave ships without means of escape or reasonable prospects for rescue. Their unsettling stories are echoed by the experience of men in a number of countries around the world. Countries must find new ways to end the impunity of these floating safe havens for traffickers. This report also shines a bright light on the role played by unscrupulous labour recruiters, who repeatedly spin their deceptions to lure these men into the trap that waits for them at sea. In such cases, the recruiters are an integral part of a trafficking scheme under international instruments such as the UN Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons and the governments of the countries in which they operate – in most cases in the home countries where the men are citizens and live – need to investigate and prosecute these recruiters, and the agencies they work for, as traffickers.

Trafficking for forced labour has historically received less recognition than the more sensational sex trafficking cases. But as the groundbreaking research that forms the basis for this paper reveals, labour trafficking at sea is every bit as inhumane, and in dire need of a solution, as any form of slavery practiced today. This paper attempts to lay the groundwork for that solution by providing insight into the nature of this form of trafficking, analysis of its causes and patterns and recommendations for how to move forward.

This report represents some of the very first in-depth research on the issue of seafarers and fishers as victims of trafficking. The importance of increasing popular awareness of this phenomenon and of encouraging governments, organisations, and individuals to take action on it, cannot be overemphasised. It



was in that light that the NEXUS Institute, with support from IOM, was inspired to dig deeper into this understudied yet critical issue.

The challenges confronting the international community in addressing trafficking at sea are not few and they do not lend themselves to easy solutions. The very nature of trafficking at sea—the mobility of the vessels used, its camouflage within the traditional seafaring industry and the illegal fishing market that funds it, among other characteristics —make it one of the most challenging forms of human trafficking to seek out and eradicate. But that eradication remains, as ever, our goal.

Original in-depth research on human trafficking remains a rarity. The NEXUS Institute is committed to increasing the quantity and advancing the quality of research and analysis that can make a difference on this issue.

I am deeply grateful to the NEXUS Institute’s Rebecca Surtees, the primary researcher and the author of this paper, for applying her expertise to investigating and analyzing this important issue. The wealth of primary source material produced for this report by her interviews and observations should aid the fight against trafficking at sea for many years to come.

This paper has been produced within the context of our research partnership with the International Organization for Migration. I am grateful to IOM for its support for this research, particularly Sarah Craggs, Anvar Serojtdinov and the IOM mission in Kiev.

The stories of the seafarers in this report shock the conscience. I believe that the day will come when this report stands as a record of a dark moment in our history, rather than the present-day tragedy it is. Until then, we must continue to work together on behalf not only of the men trapped at sea like those described in this report, but for all who are subjected to a day, a month, a year, or a lifetime without freedom.

Stephen Warnath
President, CEO & Founder
The NEXUS Institute

