



2021-22

Stella Maris International Migrants Service Center,  
Kaohsiung, Taiwan

# STELLA MARIS KAOHSIUNG

PROTECTING AND EMPOWERING SEAFARERS & FISHERS



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# Introduction

***"Without the seafarers, the global economy would stand still and without the fishers, many parts of the world would starve." - Pope Francis***

The Taiwanese fishing fleet employs approximately 32,000 migrant workers, with almost two-thirds of these fishers working on distant water fishing vessels all over the world. Mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines, these migrant fishers were first recruited to solve the so-called 'labor shortage,' and to purportedly maintain the safe operation of the vessels. However, there are concerns that there was no real labor shortage, but that instead employers were seeking cheap labor which was compounded by local workers finding fishing work to be less desirable, perceiving the work as difficult, dirty, and dangerous. Operating the second largest distant water fishing fleet in the world, the Taiwanese fishing industry has also not been immune to reports of migrant labor abuses, culminating in Taiwanese seafood being included on the United States Department of Labor's List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor in 2020.

First arriving in Kaohsiung in February of 1996, Stella Maris has thus become an integral part of the Kaohsiung community, taking care of the migrant fishers and seafarers. In many cases, Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers are the initial point of contact and support when a fisher is abused and they facilitate grievance and remedy processes in a manner that empowers the fisher and support the overall mental health and well-being of fishers and seafarers – many who may be out to sea for months at a time with little to no contact with their families.





More recently, Stella Maris Kaohsiung has also been instrumental in the development and implementation of the Taiwanese Fisheries Agency's National Plan of Human Rights, approved by the Executive Yuan in May 2022, and revisions of the Regulations on the Authorization and Management of Overseas Employment of Foreign Crew Members. Both of these regulatory improvements share the goals of increasing wages for migrant fishers, improving working conditions, and increasing government oversight over labor recruiters (i.e., manning agencies, labor brokers) and onboard conditions.

As a result, from 2021-2022 Stella Maris Kaohsiung assisted 5,308 fishers, including responding to more than 150 cases of abuse from 36 vessels, through the following core activities:

- Ship and port visits
- Education on rights and obligations
- Legal assistance and counseling
- Wellness and mental health activities
- Advocacy in policy making
- Networking with other organizations
- Spiritual assistance.



# Port and Ship Visits



Ship and port visits are instrumental to understanding the working and living conditions of the fishers.

As part of routine activities, Father Yance and Stella Maris volunteers regularly travel to the ports to visit ships and meet, listen, and talk to fishers. Besides listening the fishers' stories, Stella Maris also inspects the facilities onboard the vessel to assess whether or not they are adequate and compliant with Taiwanese law. Because of the size of Taiwan's distant water fleet, there are many times throughout the year where the distant water vessels come back to Kaohsiung after months of being at sea in far away places. For example, around June, squid jiggers that fish around South America and the Falkland Islands will dock at Qianzhen port. While the vessels are waiting for new crew members, refueling, and stocking up on supplies for these long voyages, Stella Maris distributes clothing, rosaries, magazines, newspapers, toiletries, and other supplies and gifts for the fishers.

Annual Statistics  
at a Glance:

- **30+** ship visits  
per year
- More than **1,200**  
fishers visited per  
year

# Ship Visiting Highlights

Approximately 70% of the fishers visited onboard vessels are Indonesian with the remaining 30% of fishers being from the Philippines, Viet Nam, and Taiwan. More than 100 volunteers have joined these visits, including Indonesian, Filipino, Taiwanese, German, and US volunteers.



## Clothes Donations

Every winter, there are fishers in need of winter clothes because they come from tropical areas and are not used to winter weather.



## Peacemaking

Sometimes miscommunications and language barriers triggers conflict between different nationalities. Stella Maris helps mediate and make peace.



## Departure Blessings

Many of the migrant fishers do not have families to see them depart for the sea, so Stella Maris sends them off to sea with a blessing for safety, peace, and brotherhood

Being with fishermen is always precious time, and Stella Maris is blessed to listen to their struggles and their dreams as they share information about their lives at sea. Through these visits we can make suggestion to the competent authorities for improvements that reflect the wants and needs of the fishers.

# SURVEY FINDINGS: Understanding the Lives of Fishermen



To better understand the experience of migrant fishers, in 2021 Stella Maris surveyed 49 migrant fishermen working on Taiwanese vessels.

Key findings included:



## Education Challenges

Approximately **1/3** of the migrant fishermen surveyed only completed primary school, or less than primary school. Low levels of education and literacy can make it more challenging for fishers to be informed about their rights and exercise their rights.



## Importance of Wages

**100%** of surveyed fishermen said their income was the main income source for their families, with more than **75%** reporting they supported three family members or more. As a result, fishermen may tolerate poorer working conditions out of fear and shame of losing their wages.



## Fishing Experience

More than **80%** of the surveyed fishermen had worked in fishing before coming to Taiwan, and two out of three had 6 years or more of experience in fishing before migrating to Taiwan.



## Documents

More than **90%** of surveyed fishers reported having an alien resident certificate (ARC); however less than **15%** had a national health insurance card - an entitlement for citizens and alien residents under Taiwanese law.



# Areas for improvement

While few fishermen reported being abused (less than 15%), contracts, wages, and working hours still require improvement. Additionally, ever surveyed fishermen reported being paid in cash, with one participant stating he was paid in cash by his agent and every other participant stating they were paid in cash by the employer. Cash payments present challenges for monitoring and enforcement of minimum wage laws and illegal debt.

Indicator	Key Finding(s)	Key Finding(s)
Contracts	<b>Less than half</b> of the surveyed fishers had a translated contract, and <b>1/3</b> relied on their agent to explain their contract.	Approximately <b>60%</b> of contracts discussed wages; whereas less than <b>10%</b> provided information on grievance procedures.
Wages & Debt	More than <b>80%</b> of fishers received less than \$24,000 TND per month.	<b>60%</b> of fishers had between \$1,500 TND and \$4,500 TND deducted from their salary each month.
Working and Rest Hours	<b>1 in 5</b> reported working on average more than 13 hours per day and <b>50%</b> reporting never getting a day off.	More than <b>40%</b> reported sleeping less than 4 hours per day and resting less than 2 hours per day when working.

# Education on Rights and Obligations

Based on the survey conducted by Stella Maris, most fishers are elementary and high school graduates. As a result, they lack knowledge on the labor laws and regulations related to their work. This lack of knowledge also makes them vulnerable to labor abuses and exploitation. To protect their rights, Stella Maris empowers migrant fishers through education on vessels and in ports on their employment. This was particularly important in 2022 when the new regulations went into force.



**1,054**

Migrant fishers provided with education on their labor rights and obligations.

## Sparking a Dialogue with Fishers

In 2022, Stella Maris started a "Dialogue with Fishers" wherein government institutions were invited by Stella Maris to speak directly with the fishers. In this events, the competent authorities have given the chance to explain the regulations on employment in Taiwan and the fishers can share their experiences living and working on a fishing vessel with the authorities. During these dialogues, the fishers ask the authorities many questions. To date, there have been 3 dialogues.

- Pictured: July 2022 dialogue where 117 fishers from various ports in South Taiwan attended an event at Haibin Seafood Restaurant near Cianjhen Fishing Port. Also in attendance were representatives from the Taiwanese Fisheries Agency, the Bureau of Labor Affairs, the American Institute in Taiwan, the Indonesian Economic and Trade Office Taipei, and the Manila Economic and Cultural Office Kaohsiung.

Educating others about the living and working conditions of migrant fishers.

Stella Maris is also active in educating others about the experiences of migrant fishers. This is done through seminars in the universities, trainings for newly hired government employees, especially in the Taiwanese Fisheries Agency, discussions with manning agencies, and other seminars related to fishers' rights. Highlights include:



## Fisheries Agency

Training for approximately **80** new inspection personnel from the Taiwanese Fisheries Agency for distant water vessels.



## New Regulations

Seminars with over **600** fishers and Indonesian manning agencies on the new revisions to the laws for overseas migrant fishers.



## Worker Organizing

Education session with fishers on how to form a labor union.









# Legal Assistance and Counseling



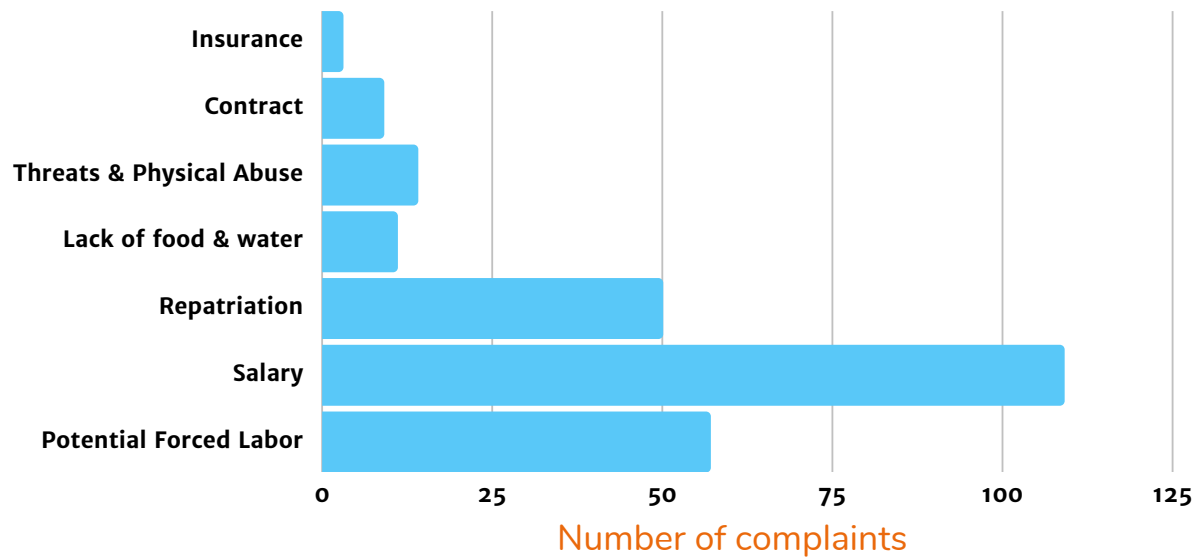
In 2022, Stella Maris offered legal assistance to 88 fishers, most of them working on distant water vessels. Fishers came to Stella Maris for all kinds of reasons, but mainly asked for legal assistance in getting withheld and delayed salaries or security deposits paid, repatriation, assistance with early termination, assistance with court cases, and assistance with shelter while waiting for a job transfer. Additionally, Stella Maris assisted with an insurance claim after a debilitating injury, and with the standing of crew on two different vessels that sank in Mauritius. Stella Maris also contacted and met, in some instances, with families to update them on the case status.

Most cases were referred to the competent authorities with follow up conducted by Stella Maris. Usually cases were resolved within two days to two weeks.

## 2022 Legal Assistance Highlights:

- **63** complaints filed with the Fisheries Agency on behalf of fishers (representing **10** vessels)
- **61** complaints about wages, totaling an estimated **\$160,000** USD in owed wages to migrant fishers

## Types of Complaints (2021-2022)





# Wellness and Mental Health Activities



Migrant workers fishing on distant water vessels are at sea for at least six months at a time, often longer. When at sea they are restricted to the same vessel every day, and have few activities to refresh their minds and bodies. For that reason, Stella Maris offers programs for the wellness and mental health of the fishers. When distant water fishers are in port in Kaohsiung, for approximately two months between trips, Stella Maris organizes social events at the Stella Maris Migrants Center, takes the fishers to scenic and cultural sites in Taiwan, organizes sporting activities, and assists them in celebrating organizational and national holidays and anniversaries. The hope is that when they return to sea they will be comforted by the beautiful memories from land.

## Program Highlights:

- 14 wellness activities
- 1,005 fishers served
- 66 volunteers engaged
- 500 Indonesians celebrated the anniversary of FOSPI





# Advocacy in Policy-Making



In 2022, Stella Maris actively engaged in advocacy for improved policies for fishers, including their implementation and enforcement. These efforts were wholly informed by the ongoing and regular conversations with fishers on ships and in ports. In total, there were 24 governmental meetings including with the various competent authorities in the Taiwanese government, including Minister Lo Ping Chen the House Speaker of the Executive Yuan, the Indonesian Economic and Trade Office, the Manila Economic and Cultural Office, the Thailand Trade and Economic Office, the American Institute in Taiwan, and the British Office. Stella Maris also visited the Department of Migrant Workers in Manila, Philippines and The National Board for Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers (BP2MI) in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Additionally, in 2021 Stella Maris started accompanying the Taiwanese Fisheries Agency on vessel inspections. Specifically Stella Maris supported the fishers during inspection interviews, encouraging the fishers to tell the inspectors the true conditions on board the vessel. and ensuring that the fishers were not under pressure to falsely report their experiences.

## Regulatory Revisions:

- Standard salary increased to **\$550 USD** per month
- Life insurance coverage increased to **1,500,000 NTD**
- More port inspections
- Installation of onboard CCTV
- Direct payment of salaries to bank accounts





Stella Maris Kaohsiung Direct, Father Yance, assisting with port inspections conducted by the Taiwanese Fisheries Agency.



# Expanding Collaborative Networks

To strengthen advocacy work, Stella Maris expanded their network.

Beyond networking with the Scalabrinian Missionaries, Stella Maris collaborated with various local and international organizations that shared similar concerns for the welfare of fishers. These included migrant and fisher organizations in addition to academics. In 2022, Stella Maris had 16 cross-organizational meetings. In November 2022, these meetings culminated in a first of its kind, two day summit (pictured) hosted at the Stella Maris International Migrants Center. During the summit, both Indonesian and Filipino migrant workers from different fishing sectors in Taiwan met with 20 different organizations.





This report was prepared on behalf of  
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