

## Culture



# "Ten Days a 'Grass Widow' - Forty-eight Hours a Wife": Sexual Division of Labour in Trawlermen's Households

Marian Binkley and Victor Thiessen

Volume 8, Number 2, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085911ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1085911ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Binkley, M. & Thiessen, V. (1988). "Ten Days a 'Grass Widow' - Forty-eight Hours a Wife": Sexual Division of Labour in Trawlermen's Households. *Culture*, 8(2), 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1085911ar>

### Article abstract

A strict dichotomy of gender and work roles has long characterized the offshore trawler fishery. Men's constantly varying work period, about ten days sea time to every forty-eight hours ashore, forces wives to become reluctant matriarchs, a role they must drop when their husbands land. Incongruity of expectations and behaviour is thus built in. Successful adjustment to sea-time roles by both is often dysfunctional to family stability, and to the health and recreation of the labour force. Women's double-role strategies are described using ethnographic and interview data. These strategies vary with the historically changing structures of the industry, kinship and community; with their stage in the life cycle; with the expectations of husband and wife; and with the constraints imposed by vessel schedules and company policies.

# "Ten Days a 'Grass Widow' - Forty-eight Hours a Wife": Sexual Division of Labour in Trawlermen's Households<sup>1</sup>

Marian Binkley  
and  
Victor Thiessen  
Dalhousie University

A strict dichotomy of gender and work roles has long characterized the offshore trawler fishery. Men's constantly varying work period, about ten days sea time to every forty-eight hours ashore, forces wives to become reluctant matriarchs, a role they must drop when their husbands land. Incongruity of expectations and behaviour is thus built in. Successful adjustment to sea-time roles by both is often dysfunctional to family stability, and to the health and recreation of the labour force. Women's double-role strategies are described using ethnographic and interview data. These strategies vary with the historically changing structures of the industry, kinship and community; with their stage in the life cycle; with the expectations of husband and wife; and with the constraints imposed by vessel schedules and company policies.

*L'industrie de la pêche au chalutier en haute mer se caractérise par une dichotomie rigoureuse des rôles entre hommes et femmes. Les périodes de travail des hommes sont constamment variables exigeant approximativement dix jours en mer avec des périodes de repos à terre d'environ quarante-huit heures. Cette situation force les épouses à prendre, souvent avec réticence, un rôle matriarchal qu'elles doivent toutefois abandonner sitôt que les hommes reviennent de la pêche. Ceci introduit des disparités aux niveaux des attentes et du comportement. Un ajustement réussi aux rôles exigés tant des hommes que des femmes par les périodes en mer est souvent nuisible à la stabilité de la famille tout en agissant négativement sur la santé de la main d'oeuvre. Les stratégies des femmes dans leur double rôle sont décrites à partir de données ethnographiques et d'entrevues. Ces stratégies varient avec les changements historiques au niveau des structures de l'industrie, de la famille et de la communauté, varient selon les périodes de vie, et varient également selon les contraintes imposées par les horaires des chalutiers et les politiques des compagnies.*

What can you do with 48 hours? I could sleep the first day through.  
But no, by damn, I'll take the children out like I promised last trip and the trip before that.  
What am I talking about? They'll be in school.  
It's only the middle of the week.  
Is it this trip the youngest has a birthday? Or next?  
I hope the little woman looked after it.  
Christ! How I depend on her. Not much of a life for either of us.  
Why can't we share more time together? 48 hours....

Hope she doesn't want to go anywhere tonight.  
I just want to relax in my chair. Someplace where things don't move.  
Can't blame her though, if she wants to go out.  
I haven't seen her in that new dress she bought.  
When was that anyway? 48 hours....  
Jim Pittman (1985:5)

A key feature of the offshore fisheries is the punctuated rhythm of ten or so days of work at sea followed by forty-eight hours leisure on shore.<sup>2</sup> It is this feature which produces extraordinary pressures on offshore fishers' households. This paper examines how women's lives are dominated by the nature of their husbands' work in the offshore fisheries.

Using ethnographic material from Nova Scotia offshore fishing families, this paper describes how the

various demands of work and family responsibilities aggravate tensions between spouses, tensions common to all households where women are dependent on men as the primary wage earners (Luxton, 1980; Luxton and Rosenberg, 1986; Oakley, 1974; Porter, 1987).<sup>3</sup> Distinctive to these households is the degree to which these problems are exaggerated by the particular nature of the husband's work — prolonged absence at sea and high physical risks. These characteristics make comparisons with families of army and navy personnel, and seamen appropriate.

In these households, a woman assumes the responsibility of single parenthood while her husband is absent, and then resumes the role of loving wife on his return. It is hypothesized that adaptation to the demands imposed by their husbands' absence is detrimental to coping with their husbands' presence. We will argue that this dilemma is common to all offshore fishers' wives. The responses to this dilemma differ, however, and these differences in response are linked to variations in the structure of the fisheries, the history of the fishing communities, and the social origins and the life cycle stage of the fishing households. To understand these variations, it is necessary to examine briefly the historical and social context of the Nova Scotian fisheries.

### *Historical and Social Context*

Prior to World War II, the Nova Scotian fisheries, like all of the Atlantic Canadian fisheries, were composed primarily of an inshore small boat fishery and an offshore schooner fleet.<sup>4</sup> In both types of fisheries, most boats fished out of the harbours where their crews lived. In line with the recommendations of a 1920's Royal Commission report on the fisheries, the federal government of the day severely restricted the development of the domestic offshore trawler fishery (Canada, 1928). Following World War II, the climate of opinion changed dramatically to favour an industrialized and technologically advanced trawler fleet (Pross and McCorquada, 1987). This signalled the demise of the obsolete schooner fleet, the rapid expansion of an offshore fleet, and the beginning of additional difficulties for the inshore fleet. By the early 1970's the prevailing view in public policy divided the fisheries into two categories: one economic and the other social. The economic fishery was seen as the offshore fishery and the social as the inshore one. In one sense this viewpoint was correct: the income derived from inshore fishing hardly sufficed for survival, whereas the income earned in offshore fishing ranged from

modest to lucrative, depending on boat ownership and crew-captain status (Davis and Thiessen, 1986). A price had to be paid for these economic advantages. First job satisfaction dropped. Offshore fishermen were less satisfied with almost all aspects of their job than their inshore counterparts (Apostle *et al.*, 1985; Thiessen and Davis, 1988; Binkley, 1987). In addition, community solidarity was weakened. Inshore fishers continued to fish out of local harbours and were recruited from the local communities. This produced a strong sense of community attachment; reciprocally, the community provided social supports to the fishing households. These ties were substantially weakened by the necessities of offshore fishing. Here, the vessels were concentrated in a much smaller number of harbours and the crews were recruited from further and further afield. In the 1970's, the discovery of offshore oil and the establishment of industrial plants such as Michelin Tire, reinforced this trend. Both of these developments siphoned recruits from the offshore fishery, creating a scarcity of crew that was filled by recruitment from more distant villages and from Newfoundland. A third price was a substantial strain on the offshore fisher's household - a strain that is the subject of this paper.

Historically, fishing families exercised a strict gender division of labour. Men caught and gutted the fish while women and other family members, most notably children, processed the fish on shore (Antler, 1981; Faris, 1966). Although the labour was divided, the household was the locus of activity, and the wife's work was integrated with and necessary to, that of the husband. The industrialization of the fishery which is characterized by the offshore fleet, eroded this division of labour somewhat and removed it entirely from its household location. It is still mostly men who catch the fish, but now on company-owned and operated vessels. It is still mostly women who process the fish, but now in industrialized plants.<sup>5</sup>

This sketch of the development of Nova Scotian fisheries is important in three ways. It alerts us to the inshore tradition which surrounds some fishing communities; it traces the developmental continuity (from inshore and/or schooner to offshore) in others; and it highlights the contemporary contrast between inshore and offshore fishing communities.

### *The Common Problems*

The organization of family life in trawler households is dominated by the nature of the offshore fishery. As stated earlier, strict division of labour

typifies gender relations. Men work on the trawlers, women maintain the household and take care of the children. Women's work is defined and confined by the constraints on their husbands' work. A first constraint is the frequency and duration of husband-absence.

Prolonged periods of husband-absence generate stress for both the husband and the wife in any setting. In a study of the Canadian Forces, Truscott and Flemming (1986:21) found that:

Those who reported the most unaccompanied tours in the past five years, the most separation of more than one week duration during the past year, and the most total months away from the family in the past year were also most likely to report high occupational stress.

Besides higher occupational stress, a greater conflict between job and family activities was reported (Truscott and Flemming, 1986:13). Popoff, Truscott and Hysert (1986:8) document that the spouses of service members were more likely to have frequent symptoms of anxiety and depression than the service members, suggesting that separation and reunion create particular difficulties for the wife. The nature of these difficulties depends on the stage of the temporal sequence: separation, homecoming, and life together.

## THE SEPARATION

While trawlermen are at sea, their wives function as single persons/parents. They assume the day-to-day responsibility of running a household, managing on their own and/or with the help of family and friends. They must develop their own social networks and lives. In speaking of American Navy spouses, Decker (1978:114) comments that "What may be perceived as an opportunity at one point, may be a stress or crisis at another." The same is true for the separation period for offshore fisher's wives. This is particularly likely with issues such as wives' independence. The necessity of independence undoubtedly causes stress for some; the growing independence becomes a cherished opportunity for others. In a study of the wives of American prisoners of war, McCubbin and Dahl (1976:114) state:

The waiting wife, functioning as head of household, often matures, develops greater independence and self-confidence, and provides a life style for the family in the absence of a husband or father.

The port from which a fisherman sails affects the choice of community where his family will live. This choice of residence profoundly influences his wife's way of life, especially when he is at sea. Women with family or in-laws in the area of the port enjoy readier access to friendship support networks. In the case of migrant workers, their wives and families may follow them or they may remain in their home community. For women and their families to remain in their home communities does not present extreme difficulties, if the home community is not far from the offshore port. If the home community is distant, many problems can emerge. The wives of migrant workers seldom see their husbands if they live a substantial distance from the offshore vessel's port. For example, in Lunenburg a number of workers have families living in Newfoundland, whom they seldom see except when they take off a trip, the vessel is in re-fit, the Christmas break, or the wife/family comes to see them. This long-distance relationship adds stress on the family, although the wife usually develops a strong support network in the home community to meet the problems of everyday living.

A more frequent option for migrant workers, especially for those having seniority and some job security, is for their wives and families to move to the offshore port. This solution allows the family more time together, but the household is isolated from their extended family and friends in a community where they start off as strangers. Many of these women develop some support networks with other wives in similar situations either by making friends with other migrant women or with wives of other men who work on the same vessel. More common is a reliance on community and town facilities. They use church associations, clergy, social service workers, doctors and other medical support groups to a greater extent than non-migrant fishermen's wives.<sup>6</sup>

The choice of residence also affects the economic and social opportunities for fisher's wives. The industrial offshore fishery is located in a few large communities. These port facilities, associated with modern and industrial processing plants, are located in relatively large centers where labour is available for both plant and vessel needs. There are usually other businesses in the community which supply services to these industries, and to their employees, but they also supply similar services to related industries. These provide a wide range of economic opportunities to women, coupled with major social services facilities such as transition houses, detox centers, and day-care. Opportunities



for leisure activities are more diverse, and the more cosmopolitan nature of the community makes a wider range of activities socially acceptable.

In smaller communities, where the economy is based on both inshore and offshore fishing, fewer economic opportunities exist for women outside of the fishery except in the local restaurant, school, or hospital. In this type of situation, women are supported emotionally by family and friends while their husbands are at sea, but the opportunity to get out is confined mainly to Bingo, Church sponsored events, and family gatherings. Social services are few outside of clergy, the local doctor, and family; there are no local daycare facilities, detox centers or transition houses. When a relationship turns sour, impartial help is difficult to get. Moreover, family pressures are often used either to help or to hinder any reconciliation between the partners.

Uncertainty pervades a fisher's wife's life during the separation period. When her husband leaves on a fishing trip, she usually does not know when he will return, or where he is going fishing. He has simply gone on a trip. By listening to the Citizen Band, Ship to Shore transmissions or by talking to the wives of other crew members, she may get a sense of how the fishing is going. She knows he will not be coming home until he has a "trip" (a full hold) or the fish begin to spoil. She "expects him when she sees him." She just assumes he will not be there unless he takes off a trip for the specific event. As one woman explained:

With the union they're given certain times home: Boxing Day, New Year's, they used to be gone. Before you had children you'd look forward to New Year's, but they didn't have it, they had nothing. Now they stay home Christmas and New Year's. But other family times, Mary's graduation for example, he had to lose a trip....First communions, baptisms, all the family things you want to do together, he has to take a trip off. ... The contract gives you three trips off. So you take one for graduation and another if someone is ill, come summer when we want to be gone, he's still there. And then it's winter.<sup>7</sup>

So she can never plan for him to be home for anything - the servicing of the car, family outings, school activities, the birth of the latest child, a miscarriage, or the death of a parent. Even when tragedy strikes he cannot come home.

The following example illustrates the stress this creates on individuals and their relationships:

Then I got pregnant a couple of months later with my second little girl. She was born premature...

and Charlie was out [at sea]. They had to call him ship-to-shore ... I didn't know how he got the message. I just wanted him there and he wasn't. I had my father of course and Dad told him the little girl had died. This is how he got the message... that I was fine but the baby died. He couldn't understand it. He thought it was the older girl. You see you can't come in.

This lack of shared experience can undermine the relationship and pull the couple further apart. Each individual experiences the same event in quite different ways:

So I guess Charlie went through a rough time out there. By the time he got in, the little girl was buried. He didn't get a chance to see her. It bothered me for a while... I carried her, to me she was real, but it was so much harder for him to feel that same kind of loss because he didn't even get to see her. He still talks about it ... that he wasn't there to help with it.

Finances are equally uncertain. Offshore fishers are paid a share based on the quantity and quality of fish caught. Hence their income fluctuates from trip to trip. Not until the fish are landed does the fisher know the amount of his pay. This makes financial planning difficult. As one woman explained:

Before unions, those men had nothing. They'd come in, they'd land, they wouldn't see five cents until it was time to go out. They'd get their cheque the day they were leaving, so we handled the money. I would say most women still do. But since the union... the men get an advance when they land, \$100 or \$200.

But sometimes there isn't any money to draw on.

Now last trip was a 'broker'. They settled for seadays... You know, you're given so much a day... Once at Christmas time his cheque was fifteen dollars and some cents. ... But if that's your only income, I don't know what you'd do.

In difficult financial times, the wife may approach the company, local stores or family for an advance against future income, but short term credit does not help the long term budgetary problem of not knowing how much money will be available in a given month for family/household expenses. Many women have never handled finances before and this is an added strain:

The handling of the money falls to us women ... If the poor woman couldn't handle it, if it meant for

her sanity (if she had children) getting to bingo two or three times a week, that and a baby sitter, well a lot... ran into difficulty... Because the women had never been taught to handle money ... never observed someone else do it either.

Wives adopt various strategies to meet financial demands such as living with parents, living in a trailer, building a house bit by bit, or seeking full or part-time employment.

For a variety of reasons, some wives either choose to or must find employment. Paid work helps stabilize income and increases wives' independence by giving them money of their own. Getting and keeping a job presents additional problems for household management. The cycle of industrialized factory jobs is usually shift work with eight-hour shifts Monday through Friday with the weekend off or twelve-hour shifts for four days with two days off. The imperatives of shore jobs in industrial settings makes other temporal arrangements unattractive to the employers. Such a job schedule can not mesh with the offshore fishing cycle. Connolly and MacDonald (1985: 416) argue this factor accounts for the "persistently lower labour force participation rates" of fishermen's spouses compared to fishplant workers' wives. Few jobs will give, or indeed have, the flexibility needed for the type of short notice common for fishers' wives. Part-time work, when available, is a partial solution which imposes only part of the costs but correspondingly provides only some of the benefits: there is now a greater probability of her being at home when he expects her to be - although this is still far from guaranteed. A partial resolution, which has built-in risks, is for the wife to call in sick when the husband has shore leave. Thus, the independence and other benefits of having a paid job would be obtained at the expense of her "being there for him".

Seeking a paid job is substantially more likely among the younger wives. Partly this is due to economic necessity: there are no savings that one can draw on after a run of poor catches. Once they have children, financial problems worsen, especially when child care expenses are incurred. As one woman put it:

Then the finances! There were times, especially starting out when we were new, so little money and you didn't know, you'd rob Peter to pay Paul, you'd just love to be able to say to him 'Take it, you look after these' especially after we decided we'd be building our own home. Of course I was lucky I'd started back to work. That was another thing when I first got married that people here expected

that I was going to stay home and bring up children. That was fine by me until you had one and you realized you can't make it on just one income, not if you want a home ... Money can be a real problem. Some of those women alone that aren't working, I don't know financially how they did it.

In many fishing communities formal day care is not available, or is overcrowded, expensive, and seasonally operated. In addition, many women feel placing their children in day-care indicates failure as a good mother. A vicious circle ensues. First, formal day care centers are underfunded. This creates a reticence among mothers to use such facilities. They channel their energies into informal, individual child care solutions which at least permit them to think of themselves as good mothers. This perpetuates inadequate formal day care facilities.

For those with close relatives available, the employment of the wife can continue after the birth of the first child, but ordinarily not after the arrival of the second. For help in child care, most women rely on extended family, usually mothers and sisters and parallel in-laws, or on friends such as wives of other crew members who live in the area:

It's a new experience, especially your first child, and you're alone so much. Some of them wouldn't feel it as much as I did because I wasn't from here. Like Jane and Susan [two sisters whose husbands are on the boats], they have their mom there, and their sister Mary ... they made use of their extended family here ... That's probably common in fishing.

Although this arrangement may work well on the odd occasion or even when the wife has a full-time job, it creates a double dependency on husband, parents and friends which has both emotional and social costs. This dependency on kin and friendship-based child care leaves the wife vulnerable to social control. For example, one woman talked about how her mother-in-law would curtail her going out at nights by refusing to baby-sit on those occasions which the mother-in-law deemed as inappropriate. The frequent arrangement is for the wife's mother to baby-sit the first child. Once a second child arrives, there is resistance, on both the wife's and the mother's part, to this arrangement. At this stage, the wife's ability to work is limited by her child care responsibilities. There is no formal way out of this situation except by hiring a babysitter or putting the children in day-care. Thus she continues to rely on kin and friendship networks to help her with child care and pays the informal social costs.

Social contacts may also be limited further by community norms. Only certain social events are deemed as appropriate for the wife of an absent fisherman: social outings with the immediate and extended family, Bingo, church socials, and home and school functions, although usually in the company of other women or family members.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, such an arrangement is not even possible for many of the migrant fishing households. As one migrant woman noted:

I don't know how we coped that first year and a half, plus we had no car. The baby on top of it. At three o'clock in the morning, Janet'd be crying and I'd be crying... Because I just had no one. And my mom was in Newfoundland, I was the eldest of nine, seven of us living, and mom still had children at home. Mom couldn't drop everything and come. These women here had that advantage.

Migrant women are forced to use formal day care centers or friends in the community. No matter how much emotional support is available, these women must shoulder the responsibility of raising their children. They must make the day-to-day decisions concerning childcare and be the principal disciplinarians. This can be particularly difficult when the children are small. But as the following example illustrates, these responsibilities continue into the teenage years:

I don't know, I've only had girls, but I know the teenage years are the hardest... what to say 'yes' and 'no' to, and sticking to it, I found extremely difficult ...Some of those decisions you have to make then, not when Daddy comes home. It's too late you know, if it's a dance on Friday night. You can't say, 'Well, your father'll be in next Monday, we'll talk about it.' The dance is over. So those things are very hard. ... And then 'I know if my father was here he'd say yes' and maybe he would have, but I didn't want that kind of responsibility alone even if it was just a dance....

During the separation period, wives need to develop a social life separate from their husbands'. Frequently the wives of crew members form a social unit. This creates its own special types of difficulties, often particularly severe ones. These wives, having access to their husband's sporty cars, frequent restaurants and bars. Their activities are not constrained by kin and community sanctions, since they occur outside these boundaries. For the wives, there are distinct rewards from these activities. It is a form of mutual help where each supports the other in

discussing the common problem of being an off-shore fisher's wife. The wives feel that these occasions help them deal with their particular problems better than contact with kin does. These activities threaten social control, however, and the husbands feel in jeopardy. Fears of infidelity abound, and jealousies are aroused. The pattern just described is particularly common among young, childless, migrant wives.

The wife's work and leisure are dominated emotionally by the characteristics of her husband's work. Constantly they fear their husbands' returning from sea maimed or not returning at all. As one woman put it:

At first I was real frightened. If there was a storm I'd be crying, if they were delayed, a day late or hear they had ice, I was sure he was hurt. But after a short time I accepted it. I had to otherwise I would be 'brokeup' [upset] all the time. Still it's always there at the back of my mind, I just try not to think about it.

This woman's description of her best friend illustrates how the fear can be more pervasive:

She's my best friend but we're altogether different. I'll try to calm her down but she just paces, paces, and says 'We're never going to see them again, they're not coming back this time' .... She worries about everything. And she has one of those radio sets- a lot of women have them, but I can't imagine why they would want them ... the ship to shore ones, they can hear the plant talking to the ships, or to other boats, and you know everything then. You know if they've got problems with the winds, or in the engineroom. And you are better off not knowing.... So the women hear that there is something wrong with the main engine ... and they'll get all in a panic ... they'll picture the boat sinking, but you know if they're staying out there, if no one's sent to get them they must be okay.

Thus, uncertainty in the present and the fear of uncertainty in the future permeates their daily life.

Worrying also binds crew members' wives together with a common concern:

They burn up the phone lines ... because when I go to Carol's to visit, I can't stand the phone ringing like that, and hearing the same thing. It'll be the wives calling. The company couldn't stand it either, they just about drove management crazy... They had to set up a number that you can call in the mornings, and they have a taped report on the boat. Now I don't imagine if there was anything seriously wrong, they'd have that on the tape ....



But can you imagine all of us calling every time there is a storm.

The North Atlantic fishery is one of the most dangerous industries in Canada (Labour Canada, 1983:57). Men in this industry take these risks in order to provide for their families. A good wife must appreciate these risks taken on behalf of herself and the family. The way this appreciation is shown is by worrying about his safety while he is at sea. Davis (1983) argues that in the Newfoundland context, "worrying" provides evidence of being a "good wife". Although fishing ventures are considered dangerous, and indeed are dangerous in the Nova Scotian offshore fisheries, worrying has nothing to do with competency as a wife and mother during her husband's absence.<sup>9</sup>

## THE HOME COMING

The homecoming begins just before the vessel arrives. The boats usually dock between midnight and six in the morning. Despite the uncertainty of life alone, it is expected that the wife will drop everything to be available for the husband upon his return.<sup>10</sup> Men are adamant that their wives either pick them up or have their cars waiting on the dock. As one fisher explained:

When I come up over the dock, she better have the car turned around, the driver's door open, the trunk open and be sitting on the passenger's side waiting for me ... My car not being there really spites me... I just hate waiting to go home. I only have forty-eight hours.

In many cases, this means bundling up young children, putting them in the back seat of the car, driving to and parking on the wharf with a thermos of hot coffee and the sleeping children, and waiting for the vessel to appear on the horizon, steaming slowly to the plant's wharf. Time is hurried along by chatting with other waiting women. There is an air of excitement. As one woman describes her wait on the dock:

You know, they go out for ten days and you get all excited, especially now that the kids are bigger, because you hear the boat blowing and you've got to run right away. You stand on the wharf for half an hour or so. But I think it's a real plus ... I can't wait until he gets home.

When the fisher finally leaves the vessel, he is weary and tired. Together they return home.

The homecoming is stressful for both partners since their expectations usually differ. These expectations and the disputes that arise from them are not contextually different from those that take place at the end of the day in homes where men return daily (Luxton, 1980; Rubin, 1976; Oakley, 1974; Luxton and Rosenberg, 1986). Rather, the prolonged absence of the husband heightens the importance of these concerns.

The wife looks forward to her husband's return for four main reasons: (1) financial, (2) socialization of children, (3) social life, and (4) companionship. First, although she runs the household, she depends on his wages to pay for the expenses. She has no way of knowing what wages he received until he gets home. It may be a good or a bad catch, and she must budget without knowing what money will be available. This leads to tension because loving and caring are translated into questions of monetary responsibilities - his as earner and hers as consumer. This financial uncertainty may lead to domestic disputes where the wife is characterized as over-anxious for the pay cheque and not for the worker himself. She is portrayed as the woman on the dock who shouts to her husband still on board the vessel: "How much did you make and when are you leaving?" He is characterized as the reckless spender, not caring for his family's well being. He is portrayed as the man who spends the money on his pleasures leaving his wife with unpaid household bills.

Secondly, since the wife has been the sole adult responsible while the husband is away, she wants a break from parenting and wants the husband to take on some of the child care while he is at home. She feels the children need and want to interact with their father. As well, children may need discipline, arbitration and support:

Sometimes... oh if only he were here, to let them storm at him or go in their rooms pouting, for him to see it. Because his girls can do no wrong ... when he's home, and it's true, they're not bad kids at all, but he ... didn't see all the little things that brought them where they are, and he didn't have to listen to some nice crying. They came out and shouted 'You're just mean and I know Daddy would have said yes.' But those are things some parents go through even if their husbands are home. I am so glad when he comes home; then he can deal with it for a while.

Disputes also arise over disciplining of the children and authority relations. The husband may, unintentionally or not, contradict the decisions made by his wife during his absence. He may hand out



more or less lenient punishments or question the need for punishment at all. This undermining of the wife's authority not only weakens the couple's joint relationship as parents, but also the relationship between mother and children.

Thirdly, the wife awaits the opportunity of socializing with people other than extended family, women's groups (Church Auxiliary, Women's Institute) and Bingo. Finally, this is the only possible time for a renewal of the husband-wife relationship.

He, on the other hand, wants to (1) make up for lost time, (2) relax and (3) enjoy his children. Typically, he wants to make up for lost time - to live ten days in two. He wants to see his buddies, participate in recreational activities, and see his family. Many men say they feel like wild animals just let out of their cages. Nevertheless, he needs to rest and to relax after coming home exhausted. Sometimes the distance to the port is substantial and requires long trips to return home; often he has traveled as much as fifty to one hundred miles to come home. In some cases he may have landed in another province, been driven for two to five hours to the airport for a flight of several hours and then driven to his home port. In other cases, some men have chosen to live in small fishing communities where their families have lived for many generations, commuting to the port where their company's vessels are moored. In either case it is not unusual for these men to return home exhausted not only from their work but also from the subsequent long drive. Sometimes these men will have consumed alcohol on their way home, and their wives will meet a drunken, exhausted husband.

Finally, he wants to get to know his children but often feels like a stranger in his own home. His young children do not recognize him; the older ones ignore him. He may attempt to bribe the family's affection with expensive toys and other consumer goods such as four wheel recreational vehicles for his twelve year old son or a "ghetto-blaster" for the pre-teenage daughter. The family appears to function without him. He wonders why he is there or why he works so hard and so long. In some cases, the husband begins to resent the wife and sees her as the lucky one, the one who stays ashore and enjoys life and the family. This is reflected in the negative commentary so common among trawlermen at sea, about women's complaints. Lack of family life is a most common complaint about working the offshore and is cited as the most common reason for leaving the offshore.

There is more to homecoming than mismatched expectations; there is often a concern about the husband's reaction to progressive changes in the wife's behaviour. McCubbin and Dahl (1976:139) had this

to say about the concerns of the wives of returning American prisoners of war:

Realistic appraisal of the wives' concerns and apprehensions about repatriation also suggested that the anticipation of reunion posed a threat to one or more of the rewards that the separation had provided, e.g., the opportunity to assume greater freedom, an independent income with the latitude to determine its use, and the avoidance of any confrontation with their husbands about the manner in which the wives conducted themselves during the husbands' absence.

Nearly half the wives of these repatriated Americans were concerned primarily with what their husbands' reactions would be to their increased independence.

The homecoming is often characterized by a struggle between husband and wife. Disputes revolve around fears of infidelity, sexual jealousies, finances, discipline of children, and the husband's apparent lack of interest in the children or household concerns. These disputes are not always resolved through discussion. Domestic violence, usually within the first twenty-four hours of the husband's coming home, may be the consequence of this struggle. In many cases alcohol has been consumed by the husband. The recourses for the woman are to stay in the marriage and try to make things work, return to her family, live on her own, or move in with another person - preferably a landsman. The first and last choices appear to be most common.

#### LIFE TOGETHER

Life together requires readjustment for both spouses. He must integrate into his family, and leave his life at sea and his other family - the crew and its male world - behind. He enters a matri-focal household where he is the outsider. She must incorporate his needs into her daily routine:

When Paul is gone, I go to work, I come home, I look after the kids, I do a load of wash, I can iron if I feel like it, I go to bed any time I feel like it. But if he's home, he upsets my routine. Now that bugs me, someone else it wouldn't bug. Because Paul will say 'Oh leave that there and come sit down with me' ... There's nights that I'd ten times sooner be doing ironing and he'll say 'Come sit down, come watch this with me', so you'll leave it there and sometimes you feel they're underfoot.

For these two days his needs are paramount: his laundry must be done, his favorite meals cooked, his entertainment needs met.

How the fisher spends his shore leave depends on how the couple has worked out their relationship, the stage in the family life cycle, and the characteristics of the last trip. While she balances her daily routine with his presence, it is the characteristics of that presence that dominate her response. He, on the other hand, is torn between his commitment to his two families - his wife, children and extended family versus the crew of the vessel - the unfamiliar shore world and the supportive male world. Four patterns of behaviour for men emerge.

The first pattern is the "shipmate". He spends as much of his time as possible with other crew members, going home to change his clothes, sleep, and eat. He spends little or no time with his immediate family. His wife may come along with him to parties or dances, but most of his activities center upon male activities such as hunting and fishing, hockey and football, card-playing and drinking. Usually, the single men of the crew are the driving force in this group.

The second pattern is the "family man". Typically, he spends as much of his shore time as possible with his immediate and extended family, and his close friends. He works about the house, visits his parents, goes out in the woods with his kids, goes out with his wife. Seldom would he be involved in activities associated with the crew except for special functions such as a wedding reception for a crew member.

In between these extremes are those who forge a balance between commitments to family and crew. Here the husband is involved in some activities with the crew, but he has set aside time for his wife and family. For example he might play touch football during the afternoon with the crew and in the evening take his wife out to dinner and the movies. Women talk about "taming" their husband, that is, changing them from the "shipmate" pattern to the "family man" pattern.

The "honeymooner" is a variant of the "family man" pattern of behaviour. Here couples spend all their time together doing things they want to do. If there are children, the wife has usually taken them to a relative or friend who has agreed to take care of them for the duration of the husband's shore leave. Although this pattern may be conducive to maintaining and strengthening the husband-wife bond, it prevents father-child bonding.

The fourth pattern is the "man on a tear". This type of behaviour follows an extremely stressful trip, such as a major fire or an accident to a shipmate on

board. It can also occur after a series of trips with moderate levels of stress. In this case the fisher finds it difficult or impossible to adjust to shore life. He is unable to sleep; he cannot settle down. He may get in his car and drive for miles going nowhere in particular. He may go to a bar or the Legion and drink until he passes out. He talks about trying to catch up - and being all "broke-up". This is how one man describes being on a tear:

What I find is you're always trying to catch up - make up for lost time. Trying to live in 48 hours what the guy ashore does in 10 days or 2 weeks. Drink, drive, run around, watch TV, there's no time for sleep. You have to keep going, going all the time.

For some men, usually single or separated, this becomes a way of life. For most, being on a tear is a rare occurrence. Nevertheless, for the wife the uncertainty of the separation period continues, for she does not know what her husband's behaviour will be like when he returns - especially if anything has gone wrong at sea. As one woman said:

I never know what it is going to be like when he comes home. Mostly he's good...But sometimes its like an animal let out of a cage...When he's like that I take the kids and go to Mom's.

If this behaviour continues, most women cannot stand it and leave.

The summer refit, the winter layover, and time off for accidents and injuries each present particular problems. The summer refit is traditionally the time for the annual family holiday. In some companies the summer refit is in August when all the vessels are tied up and refitted. In other companies, there is no precise time for this holiday but everyone on the vessel knows the order in which vessels go for refit and where they are in that order. Thus, as the time draws close, plans for the vacation crystallize. This is the only time the whole family can go away together, and wives look forward to this event with great excitement.

It is traditional for the smaller trawlers (twenty to thirty meters) to have a winter layover, depending on the weather, from late November-December to March-April. Many men take advantage of this layover to work part-time, to go lobstering, to fish inshore, to bring in the wood, or to go back to school for further training.

## Discussion

The severity of the incompatibility between the demands of single parent and wife depends on a number of factors. The availability of kin and/or friends as social supports and for providing daycare for the children is one such factor. This availability is highly correlated with the migrant status of the particular household. As was mentioned earlier, with the development of the offshore sector came recruitment of crew from outside the boundaries of the local community. This was particularly the case in the industrialized offshore communities of the Lunenburg/Bridgewater area. A sizable proportion of crew members originated from Newfoundland. Those wives who came along find it particularly difficult, since they have no kin in the community to count on. The residential patterns reinforce their isolation, since they tend to live outside the core of the communities. The competition from the oil industry and the Michelin Tire plant was another force which resulted in "commuter crews", with the same result of social isolation. Fishing companies with plants in different locations, sometimes in other provinces, dispatch crews and vessels to these ports making it impossible to come home in between trips. As well, individual workers may take advantage of promotion opportunities by changing home ports; in some cases the home port is in a different province from that of their home community.

Another factor is whether the household comes from a schooner or an inshore fishing tradition. Coming from an offshore fishing tradition is a definite asset. There are many similarities between schooner fishing and trawler fishing with respect to its impact on the wives. The wife's mother can transmit an appropriate set of expectations and a repertoire of effective coping skills. In contrast, those from inshore fishing families are likely to hold expectations which are particularly inappropriate for offshore fisheries. The wife, having grown up in a fishing community, has developed strong expectations. However, there are few similarities between inshore and offshore fishing. As one offshore fisher's wife said,

My father was an inshore fisherman so I thought I knew what fishing was all about. But that type of fishing- dragger fishing- Why it was all different. I didn't know anything about it.

Hence the "taken-for-granted" world of the inshore fisherman's wife is suddenly challenged in the offshore setting.

A third factor is the extent to which offshore fishing retains some of the characteristics of a family enterprise. In some areas of Nova Scotia, particularly in the Digby area, inshore fishermen expanded the size and equipment of their boats to permit offshore dragger fishing. In these enterprises, the wife remains somewhat integrated in the husband's occupation. This usually takes the form of handling the accounts and doing the book work. In these enterprises, there is also a greater flexibility in working hours. Many do not work offshore from November/December to April, which means that these husbands are home most nights in the winter.

Our observation that successful coping with husbands at sea compounds difficulties to adapting to life with husbands at home requires further systematic comparisons. Clearly some wives adapt to both roles reasonably well and other wives adapt well to neither. Factors accounting for such differences need to be ascertained in future research.

## NOTES

1. This project was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grants No.410-85-0479 and 410-87-0548. The authors would like to thank Richard Apostle, Jack Crowley, Meg Luxton, David Millar and the anonymous reviewers for their critical comments. This research could not have been done without the help of the fishers and their spouses who provided the crucial information, and we are extremely grateful to them.

2. The ten days on and forty-eight hours off schedule typifies the schedule experienced by most trawler workers on vessels over thirty meters. These vessels fish all year except for an annual refit, usually during the summer months. During the winter, crews can be out as long as twelve to fifteen days and in the summer as little as five to eight days. In smaller vessels (twenty to thirty meters), the time on shore is usually slightly longer but never longer than five days except for refit or for winter lay-over.

3. This material is an off-shoot from a larger study on work organization, job satisfaction and safety in the offshore fishery. The ethnographic data was gathered in South-west Nova Scotia between 1985-87 to conceptualize work organization, working conditions and family life in the offshore fishery. Information was gathered by participation and observation of work on offshore vessels during the summers of 1986 and 1987. Information was collected from 334 captains, officers and crew by questionnaire-interview during the late spring and summer of 1986. Intensive follow-up interviews of fifty workers were completed in 1987. While interviewing these men, frequently the wives commented on various issues raised in the interview. Notes were taken on these interactions. Additionally 25 wives were interviewed at length specifi-



cally on the nature of their married life. Finally, close to 50 community leaders, social workers, medical doctors, ministers and company officials were interviewed to obtain their perceptions of various aspects of the fishing industry and the lives of offshore fishing families.

4. Although Canadian offshore trawlers were restricted, foreign trawlers from Europe and the United States continued to fish off Nova Scotia.

5. The controversy over women aboard factory freezer trawlers is the exception that proves the rule. As the Cape North Report (Gardner Penfold Consulting Economists Ltd., 1987) shows, it has taken unusual efforts by the company to break a community taboo. High crew turnover, low profits and community opposition by both sexes show the strength of the tradition. The taboo is based on fears for sexual and family stability.

6. This finding is based on information from the interviews with medical personnel, social services workers, and clergy.

7. This paper reports the results of research carried out in Nova Scotia fishing communities in 1987. All quotes cited in this paper without references are from interviews conducted as part of that research. In this quote, as in all the following ethnographic quotes, the names of individuals and their communities have been changed to protect the identity of the persons interviewed.

8. It should be noted that Bingo and lotteries are seen as magical solutions which will solve not only the financial problems but also relieve the boredom of everyday life while still acting in a sociably acceptable way.

9. Although fishing ventures are considered dangerous, and indeed are dangerous in Nova Scotia offshore fisheries, objective danger is not a necessary condition for worrying. For example, regarding a village in Peru, Degrys (1974: 40) notes that "according to the historical record, it appears that there has been only one death and no serious injuries at sea in the last seventy or eighty years." Yet the villagers "declare the extreme dangers of fishing as an occupation."

10. In a Peruvian fishing community where visual sighting of the vessel is the only warning, the women are expected to be at the beach when the boat lands (Degrys, 1974). There is a lapse of only about 5 minutes between sighting and landing. She remarks that "If a woman does not meet her husband on time, serious domestic trouble follows" (Degrys, 1974: 41).

## REFERENCES

ANTLER, E.

1981 *Fishermen, Fisherwomen, Rural Proletariat: Capitalist Commodity Production in the Newfoundland Fishery*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut.

APOSTLE, R., L. KASDAN and A. HANSON

1985 *Work Satisfactions and Community Attachments Among Fishermen in Southwest Nova Scotia*, Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences, 42:256-267.

BARRETT, M. and M. MACINTOSH

1983 *The Anti-Social Family*, London, Verso Press.

BINKLEY, M.

1987 *Working Conditions and Job Satisfaction among Nova Scotia Offshore Fishermen*, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Atlantic Association of Sociologists and Anthropologists, Sackville, New Brunswick.

CANADA

1928 *Royal Commission Investigating the Fisheries*, Report, Ottawa, King's Printer.

CONNOLLY, P. M. and M. MACDONALD

1985 *Women and Development: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same*, In *Women and Oil*, Institute of Social and Economic Research Conference Papers, No. 2: 392-428.

DANOWSKI, F.

1980 *Fishermen's Wives: Coping with an Extraordinary Occupation*, Sea Grant, Kingston, Rhode Island, University of Rhode Island, Marine Bulletin No. 37.

DAVIS, A. and V. THIESSEN

1986 *Making Sense of the Dollars: Income Distribution Among Atlantic Canadian Fishermen and Public Policy*, Marine Policy, 10(3): 201-214.

DAVIS, D. L.

1983 *Woman the Worrier: Confronting Feminist and Biomedical Archetypes of Stress*, Women's Studies, 10:135-146.

DECKER, K. B.

1978 *Coping with Sea Duty: Problems Encountered and Resources Utilized During Periods of Family Separation*, In Hunter and Nice (eds.), *Military Families: Adaptation to Change*, New York, Praeger: 113-129.

DEGRYS, M.

1974 *Women's Role in a North Coast Fishing Village in Peru: A Study of Male Dominance and Female Subordination*, Unpublished Dissertation, New School for Social Research.

DIXON, R. D., R. C. LOWERY, J. C. SABELLA and M. J. HEPBURN

1984 *Fishermen's Wives: A Case Study of a Middle Atlantic Coastal Fishing Community*, Sex Roles, 10(1/2):33-52.

FARIS, J.

1966 *Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, St. John's Newfoundland.

GARDNER PENFOLD CONSULTING ECONOMISTS LTD.

1987 *Socio-Economic Impact Study of the Factory Freezer Trawler the Cape North*, Halifax, Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES AND OCEANS

1987 *Social and Economic Impact of the Factory Freezer Trawler*, Ottawa, Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

- GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, LABOUR CANADA  
 1983 Employment Injuries and Occupational Illnesses, Ottawa, Labour Canada.
- LUXTON, M.  
 1980 More Than a Labour of Love, Toronto, Women's Press.
- LUXTON, M. and H. ROSSENBERG  
 1986 Through the Kitchen Window: The Politics of Home and Family, Toronto, Garamond Press.
- MCCUBBIN, H. I. and B. B. DAHL  
 1976 Prolonged Family Separation in the Military: a Longitudinal Study, In McCubbin *et al.* (eds.), Families in the Military System, Beverly Hills, Sage.
- MOORE, R.  
 1985 The Effects of Offshore Oil on Onshore Women In Women and Oil, Institute of Social and Economic Research Conference Papers, No. 2: 106-143.
- OAKLEY, A.  
 1974 The Sociology of Housework, Bath, Martin Robinson.
- PITTMAN, J.  
 1985 48 Hours, The Atlantic Fisherman, Jan. 4, 1985:5.
- POPOFF, T. and S. TRUSCOTT  
 1986 The Emotional Well-Being of Canadian Military Families in Relation to the Canadian Population, Ottawa, ORAE Project Report PR364.

- POPOFF, T., S. TRUSCOTT and R. HYSERT  
 1986 Military Family Study: an Overview of Life/Work Stress and its Relationship to Health and Organizational Morale, Ottawa, ORAE Project Report PR351.
- PORTER, M.  
 1987 Peripheral Women, Studies in Political Economy, 23:41-72.
- PROSS, P. and S. MCCORQUODALE  
 1987 Economic Resurgence and the Constitutional Agenda: The Case of the East Coast Fisheries, Kingston, Queen's University.
- RUBIN, L.  
 1976 World's of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family, New York, Basic Books.
- THIESSEN, V. and A. DAVIS  
 1988 Recruitment to Small Boat Fishing and Public Policy in the Atlantic Canadian Fisheries, The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, 25(4):601-625.
- THOMPSON, P.  
 1985 Women in the Fishing: The Roots of Power Between the Sexes, Journal for the Comparative Study of Society and History, 27:3-32.
- TRUSCOTT, S. and S. FLEMMING  
 1986 Occupational Stress Among Married and Single-Parent Canadian Forces Personnel, Ottawa, ORAE Project Report PR375.