NO PLACE FOR WIMPS: WORKING ON WESTERN AUSTRALIAN TRAWLERS

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Abstract: This article is part of a larger project, undertaken as a doctoral thesis, analyzing gender relations in the Western Australian fishing industry. The article is based on qualitative research and the primary focus is the sexual division of labour on prawn and scallop trawlers. Few women own or operate boats or companies and I argue that the trawler, as a worksite, is dominated by a competitive and aggressive heterosexual masculinity that sustains an inequitable division of labour.

Résumé: Cet article fait partie d'un plus grand projet (thèse de doctorat en cours) qui analyse les relations entre les sexes dans l'industrie des pêches en Australie occidentale. Dans cet article, il s'agit d'une recherche qualitative dont l'objet principal est la division sexuelle du travail sur les chalutiers pour la pêche aux crevettes et aux pétoncles. Peu de femmes possèdent ou font marcher des bateaux ou des compagnies de pêche. Par conséquent, l'argument proposé est celui qui dit que le chalutier, comme lieu de travail, est dominé par une masculinité hétérosexuelle agressive et compétitive qui contribue au maintien d'une division inéquitable de travail.

Introductory Remarks

In 1995 I conducted qualitative research on the work experiences of women and men associated with the prawn and scallop trawlers of the Shark Bay fishery in the north of Western Australia. The research was conducted in preparation for a doctoral thesis on the labour of women in the Western Australian fishing industry. Throughout the industry there is a vertical and horizontal sexual division of labour, and few women own or operate boats or companies. This is due to the industry being dominated by a competitive, aggressive and heterosexual masculinity. Many women have worked on the trawlers, but men resist their incursion by fetishizing the occupation, exaggerating the hazardous nature of the work and living an alienating lifestyle.

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Methodology

Using a "snowballing" technique, I tape-recorded 60 interviews with skippers, cooks, deckhands, wives and partners of fishers, trawling company administrators, staff from the Western Australian Fisheries Department and WorkSafe (Western Australia's Occupational Health and Safety Department). A conversational style of interviewing with prompts was used to highlight issues relating to work experiences and gender relations. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 men and 12 women who have worked on the trawlers, and this information has been combined with notes from conversations and observations made when I went on board some of the fishing vessels. Most of the research was undertaken in Carnarvon, the port from which fishers work the Shark Bay fishery. Some interviews were conducted while boats were undergoing a refit in Fremantle, which is Western Australia's main port and home to many boat owners, fishers and their families. Of the women interviewed, two (described by other fishers as female "pioneers" and "legends" in the prawning industry) used to be skippers but are now employed on land. Ten other women have worked as cook/deckhands, and four of these ceased work after marrying the skipper. One woman was sitting her Marine Engine Driver's ticket, two were working up their sea-time in order to undertake formal training and three had decided not to continue in the industry.

Background

Carnarvon is 1000 kilometres from the capital city of Perth and the port of Fremantle. It is an isolated and small rural coastal town in the Gascoyne Region of the North West adjacent to the Shark Bay fishing grounds. Shark Bay is in an area prone to tropical cyclones, and includes the most westerly point of mainland Australia. It supports a wide variety of marine life: dugongs, humpback whales, dolphins and other plant and animal life, which led to its declaration as a World Heritage area in 1991. By 1993 there were 10 beach seine and 5 wet-line licences operating in the Bay as well as 27 prawn and 14 scallop trawlers. The town's main source of income are the $A70 to $A100 million dollar per annum fisheries developed since the early 1960s to meet the demands of an overseas luxury seafood market. The population of the region is 10 000, and about 8 percent are Aboriginal people (Gascoyne Development Commission 1995). Aboriginal people have traditionally fished the tidal creeks and shoreline of the area, and were involved in the 19th-century establishment of the pearling industry. A few families have also operated wetliners, but historically Aboriginal people have been excluded from the major commercial fisheries, especially trawling (Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories 1995:26). The population increases between March and November with an influx of tourists and itinerant seasonal workers including fishers.

In 1995 there were approximately 30 side trawlers working the Shark Bay area, 14 owned by one large processing company and the others owned by smaller companies, families or individuals with one to four trawlers. Skippers, including those employed by companies, have the responsibility for employing their own crew. The crew of a trawler can be a close-knit group of friends or relatives or a disparate group of itinerant workers. The seasonal nature of the work, the isolation of the town and the need to be at sea for long periods influences the availability of experienced crew members, and there is a high turnover. It is relatively easy for a visitor in the town to get work on a boat simply by walking up to the wharf and asking. The industry attracts casual labourers with no previous or familial links to fishing, and many are not interested in a fishing career. They are mostly Anglo-Australians who have been unable to get work elsewhere, or people who work for a short period to earn the money to put themselves through university, purchase some capital item or establish a small business. Some are local or international travellers, commonly referred to as backpackers, working their way around Australia. Others simply have a sense of adventure, are running away from personal problems or even the law. People who wish to achieve a more permanent career in the industry, especially as skippers, can earn themselves a good reputation within the community by living permanently in the town with their families or returning year after year to work the same boat. Deckhands mostly come from outside the town, but may also work for the same people each year, work up their sea time and study for their skipper tickets; Master Class IV or V and/or Marine Engine Driver tickets.

A number of skippers and deckhands leave their families hundreds or even thousands of miles away while they work the seasons, and can be away for as long as 10 months of the year. The prawn season at Shark Bay is from March until November, and the boats stay at sea for three weeks at a time, only coming in on the full moon for a few days. This is in accordance with Fisheries Department regulations, but it also provides some rest and recreation for the crew. The scallop season is slightly different and the boats only come in to unload; once a week or every three weeks. There is a belief within the community, expressed by business people, public servants and some skippers and their wives, that the itinerant fishermen—mostly single men who live at backpackers' hostels or in the hotels between trips—constitute a "rough element" and give the industry a bad name. When the fishers are "in on the moon," the usual number of police in the town is increased from 30 to 40 or 45.

The trawlers operate on a share basis, and contractual agreements vary considerably. Some workers board the boats with only a vague verbal agreement, but there is a general view that the pay is good. Given that a weekly income for those other than the skipper may average out at only $A1000, and costs to cover stores and the running of the boat, as well as insurance and tax have to

be deducted, it is really no better than many other forms of casual labour. If the catch is down the pay can be very poor, and some inexperienced workers, especially women and backpackers from a non-English-speaking background, find they have worked only for the cost of their food. They are referred to as "tucker deckies" and the situation is justified on the grounds that they are undergoing informal training. The more experienced deckhands and skippers earn a much higher percentage of the catch; between $A20 000 and $A100 000 each season.

Most fishers have been trained "on the job," but a recent spate of fatal accidents has resulted in increased attempts to provide and encourage formal training. These initiatives, primarily implemented to "meet the needs of the industry," are still in an experimental phase. There has never been a fishermen's union in Western Australia, and any suggestion that there should be is resisted by both individual fishers and owners or operators of boats. The individualistic itinerant and seasonal workers have little desire or opportunity to build workers' solidarity through joining a trade union. Those with the potential to make a career of fishing aspire to owning and operating their own boats and join professional fishers' associations formed to protect the interests of fishers as self-employed businessmen or employers of labour. The peak organization representing these fishers is committed to maintaining a "union-free" industry.[1]

Women on Boats

There are no statistics available to confirm the actual numbers of people who crew on trawlers in any one season, but my estimate, based on interviewing the major employers in Carnarvon, is that more than 300 people were employed in the 1995 season. During the month that I sought these figures there were probably only three women actually working on a boat. A few others had been employed during the season, but only for short periods of time. It was repeatedly suggested to me that there used to be more women, and a few female skippers, but that "women can't stick it." Although I was given the names of 10 women who had operated trawlers, I met no woman currently employed in Western Australia as a skipper.

Women can only get work on the trawlers if they are invited on board by skippers who like to have at least one woman in the crew. Some are blatant about expecting them to work as cooks and keep the boat clean, because the men refuse such demeaning "women's work." Others expect them to work as the "wheelhouse whore" or a moral guardian exerting a "civilizing" influence on the men. Several men interviewed said women were less likely to get drunk and are better to talk to because "you get sick of all that ockerism after a while."[2] Some skippers also claim that women are better than men, because many seasonal workers, whether overseas backpackers or itinerant Australian

workers, have no interest in developing a career in the industry. Women who have an interest in a career are described as more conscientious and reliable, because they have to work so hard to prove themselves. Women, only two or three out of 13 crew members, are more frequently employed on the scallop trawlers. Scallops used to be brought in shore to be shucked by women in processing plants, but since the 1980s this has been done at sea so that a greater amount of meat can be brought in. On prawn trawlers, where there is a crew of five, the product is not processed but bagged and frozen whole. If grading (sizing the prawns) is undertaken and there is a woman on board, then she is more likely than the men to be grading.

The main reason women are invited onto boats, however, is so that they can cook for the crew. One woman, who started her career as a cook and skippered prawn trawlers during the 1970s and 1980s, suggested that this was an "advantage" women had over "boys" as they could use it as a "kind of apprenticeship." However, there is a danger for women in this strategy because they are expected to do all the domestic service work, including providing emotional and sexual labour, and find it difficult to work their way up. If they also work as sorters and graders of the product this only increases their hours and their work load. The men go to bed, but the women clean up afterwards. Even women who undertake some formal deckhand training prior to taking work on a boat find they are still expected to go on as cooks. It is assumed that as women they have the "natural" skills for servicing the crew. Men are not expected to have this skill and are taken on because they are assumed to have a "natural" capacity for manual labour and for learning the skills to operate the boat and the gear. Being invited on to cook is therefore not an advantage that women might have over the men, but many accept it as the only way to get work on the boats.

Lester, a skipper for 20 years, acknowledged that the men on the boats give women a "terrible time," and stated that fishermen do not know anything about equal opportunity and anti-discrimination policies or legislation. He emphasized the point that "they make sure they don't." Other fishers interviewed about women working on boats used the dualistic and contradictory discourses of "equal opportunities" and "practical considerations" (Wetherell, Stiven and Potter 1987:61). They claimed that women "should be given a fair go," or "could work as good as a man," and then countered this by justifying their subordinate role on boats with biological or naturalistic assumptions about their inferior strength, ability to "hunt," and their predisposition for coping with boring repetitive work such as cooking, cleaning or processing. They also said that women should not expect to be treated any differently from the men, but then went on to describe just how differently they were treated. Bluey, who is not a qualified skipper and has only a few years experience on trawlers, tends to speak and act as though he is the skipper. He said

that as far as he was concerned, when "a girl gets on a boat . . . she's not a girl no more she's just a deckie." He also said, "a girl can drive a boat just as good as a bloke can . . . although [when I work with a woman] . . . I reckon I am the captain and she's the crew, and that's the way it is. . . ."

Some women willingly settle into a subordinate, "housewife" role, enter into relationships with the crew or marry a fisherman. Shipboard romances can be temporary, short-lived or even multiple, but some are based on a mutual commitment and undertaken because both partners enjoy the lifestyle. Such couples take advantage of accumulating two shares of the catch to establish a home and a family business. But the woman's fishing career then becomes intermittent or ceases altogether as she meets the demands of running the business and being "mother and father" to the children. Some have taken small children on boats with them. Ray and Gail informed me that they had strapped their baby in a motor vehicle safety seat in the wheelhouse; others referred to having used netting to fence off an area on the deck especially for children, but this requires a lot of co-operation on the part of the skipper and crew. Most women find it is easier to bring up children on the land.

For a woman to use her experience as a cook and move into full-time deckwork or qualify as a Marine Engine Driver or Master of a vessel, she has to ally herself with a skipper, prove herself "better than the men" and treat them as her mates. In Australia, being a mate implies that one adheres to a code of conduct based on equality and friendship—among *men*. For a woman to be referred to as a mate she would have to prove to the men that she was "one of the boys" and demonstrate complete loyalty towards them as men and work mates. She may then be successful in demanding a more equal share of the manual work and a higher percentage of the catch, but it is a tenuous position for a woman because in the eyes of the men she can never really be a mate since she is not a man. Women have to constantly be on their guard because those who prove themselves competent fishers claim "the men will try anything," even sabotaging the fishing operation when a woman is driving the boat. With or without a male mentor, the women have to "learn how to handle the men" and stand up to them. Sandy stated that

> Some men think they got a job and it's theirs and no one else can do it—I tell 'em they gotta share—I can pull up the winch and shoot away as good as they can, if not better. And if they expect me to be the only cook doing all the washin' they are sadly mistaken. I tell 'em, I'm not your mother, we share it. If I cook you wash. . . .

If the men complained about her cooking Sandy said, "If you want a feed get it yourself." After her first season as a cook she convinced the skipper that she wanted to learn about the engine and that for safety reasons it was important for her to learn how to drive the boat. When men "muscled" in on her to prove how tough they were lifting giant sea sponges, sting rays or sharks, she

pointed out that they would do themselves an injury, and told them, "we gotta winch—use it!" She said, "It's all up here," and implied that women were more willing to use their brains than men. Sandy's skipper now backs her if she has a dispute with the crew because she has proved herself better than many of the men. She acts as his mate in both senses of the word—second in charge and a workmate.

The sexual division of labour on the trawlers can be very much like that in a family household. Women as cooks work either as the married partners of the skippers, or act as though they are by providing domestic, sexual and/or emotional labour. If they do other work they may still be in a "helpmeet" or assistant role, providing service to the skipper, the Master of the boat. As Rosemary Pringle (1988:28-56) notes, this sort of relationship is common in the workplace and maintains unequal gender relations. Like the boss and secretary, doctor and nurse partnership, the relationship mirrors that of a complementary heterosexual couple working in a team as husband and wife or mother and father. Cynthia Cockburn (1991:142) points out that under the "original terms of the sexual contract a woman's proper place is at home. If she is drawn into the paid workplace, then her proper place is in clearly-defined women's work at or near the bottom of the organization."

Sexuality

The trawler is a highly sexualized workplace. Crew referred to fishermen "getting an enormous horn while hunting prawns," men and women admitted to indulging in "terrible orgies," protecting the skipper's wife from the knowledge that he was "banking the cook" and enjoying working in the sunshine in their underwear. Gender and sexuality are, as Pringle (1988:84) points out, central in all workplace power relations. She adds that:

> Far from being marginal to the workplace, sexuality is everywhere. It is alluded to in dress and self-presentation, in jokes and gossip, looks and flirtations, secret affairs and dalliances, in fantasy, and in the range of coercive behaviours that we now call sexual harassment. (Pringle 1988:90)

The implications of Pringle's arguments are that, rather than "banning" sexuality from the workplace or relying on legislation to protect women from sexual harassment, women should be empowered so that sexuality is a mutually pleasurable part of one's working life. She suggests that women assert their own sexuality and engage in subversive strategies to turn the tables on the men (Pringle 1988:250-266). Some of the women I interviewed, or observed on the boats, did flaunt their sexuality, play with it or use it to their advantage, but others resented being drawn into heterosexual games and were oppressed by the men's sexuality. As cooks, deckhands or skippers, and regardless of how good a rapport they had with the men, all of the women I interviewed had

either experienced or witnessed sexual harassment. Men used their sexuality to threaten, intimidate, control and dominate women, and women used different strategies for dealing with it. Some confronted it, some lodged complaints, some even acquiesced, but others simply left. No matter what strategy was used there was no guarantee it would work.

When I first met Elaine, playing pool in a hotel bar with fishermen she worked with, I asked her what it was like working on a fishing boat. Her response was, "It's not the work that's hard, it's the sexual harassment." She regarded the men as her mates and thought she could fit in by being "tough"; dressing in shearers' boots and a lumberjack's shirt, drinking with the "boys" and using their crude language. She had worked on two boats during the 1995 season, and the first skipper had told her she was a good worker and could come back to work for him the following season. The second skipper taunted, teased and verbally abused her, put her down and "hassled her out." When she attempted to lodge a complaint with the company management she was told that if she could not get on with one skipper, then she would not be able to work with any others. This was despite the fact that the company had recently issued a policy statement, a token one-liner, stating that sexual harassment would not be tolerated on its boats. When I interviewed management, they denied any knowledge of the incident. The first skipper closed ranks with the other one and persuaded Elaine to drop the complaint. She said, "they really had me by the balls." I observed Elaine's male crew mates in the hotel telling her that she had to learn to play the game. She had tried desperately to fit in, boasting to me of having spent $A800 on "piss" in the pub, but she could never be "one of the boys," and in trying to assert her rights as a woman she demonstrated to the men that she was not their mate either.

Sandy is a woman who would prefer to stand up to the men and confront the situation rather than lodge a complaint. She told me how she dealt with "a guy who put the hard word" on her. She said:

> One night this guy was giving me the shits and I was that pissed off with him I walked outa my room and said you say that to me one more time I'm gonna stab ya . . . and he said oh yeah? an' he went off at me one more time and I went into the galley, and you know those big knives in the movies—I grabbed that and he went out of the galley and shut the door.

Sandy then humiliated this man in front of the other men by calling him back to remind him that he was on kitchen duty. She said, "I thought right, I'll get him. Give me the shits, I'll give him the dishes." Sandy survives quite well in this environment; she treats the men as her mates and enjoys sexual power games with them. She claims women have more sexual power than men and should use it. She says, "they think they're such ladies' men," and teases them about it. When they have been into town "on the moon" and not been successful in "getting a lay," she tells them she's only got to snap her fingers

and she can choose from half a dozen men. Sandy has a strong sense of her own sexuality and enjoys "giving as good as she gets." She seems to find it easier to assert herself than some of the other women. She lives in the town with her "bikie" husband and rides a Harley Davidson, which she rebuilt herself. She says her father taught her mechanical skills and that she was brought up to "take no shit from no one." Other women flaunt their femininity and sexuality by working in their bikinis or walking around the deck naked amidst accusations that they "get off on the men's attention." I suspect that some do this to avoid being labelled lesbian or too "butch" or unfeminine, but others do it because they do wish to attract the attention of men and engage in relationships with them. One young woman, Nicky, who was very capable at doing the "hard yakka" on the deck, referred to taking time out for a bath, painting her toenails and "doing nice little things for the men." She was engaged in a sexual relationship with the second in charge, the Mate, and hoped one day to qualify herself, marry a good skipper and work towards establishing a business and a family. But when a younger deckhand joined the crew and "gave her a hard time," her boyfriend, Brett, refused to back her up. She said he told her it was not his problem and that she should handle it herself. She told me, "he just wanted to maintain that sort of steady-steady going between him and Adam—to make things easier for himself—so in that sort of case they really don't take a lot of notice of what's happening to the girls."

Women who objected to unwanted sexual attention or harassment frequently found that the men closed ranks against them when they complained, or joined in with the harassment. Even the skippers referred to as "good blokes" passively allowed it to go on by staying in the wheelhouse to let the crew "fight it out among themselves." This was justified by the need to have a compatible team working the boat. But it also meant that inexperienced or somewhat naïve young women were particularly vulnerable. No one ever asked them if they had been trained to cook, and they often had difficulty learning how to perform the manual labour. Men used the mistakes they made to justify throwing tantrums about the quality of the food, complaining about their work on the deck and threatening to throw them overboard if they did not meet sexual demands. Jan, an ex-skipper, recalled the following:

> I had a Dutch girl once, a cook, who was getting harassed by the only crew [member] I've ever sacked . . . but they all let it happen . . . everyone was sitting around one night on the anchor [drinking] and we were all singing and it was fine and then she went off to bed . . . in my cabin, and Syd went in and closed the door and she was just you know um, . . . started yelling "get out of here, get out of here," and they were all laughing and I just got up and . . . said to Jimmy, "I don't like this," . . . and so I stopped it. Made him get out of there, and Jimmy had a lot of respect for me too but you know even he [joined in] . . . that didn't ever happen again as I said, that was one night when I just saw it come out in them though, yeah.

Jan said she had worked her way up through choosing suitable mentors; Nicky and Sandy are attempting to do the same thing; but most women who complained or confronted the unequal division of labour, division of the catch or sexual harassment had more difficulty finding a mentor and adapting to the male camaraderie. A pattern I noticed in several interviews was that the man most likely to harass women on the boats was often the youngest and least experienced. Jan explained her involvement in such a situation:

> . . . a young bloke, came back on the boat when I knew the deck . . . had my side of the boat . . . and he actually picked up a lump of steel and [menaced me with it] . . . I just stood up to him . . . well then he didn't talk to me for . . . five or six weeks. . . . he was a tough little surfie nut . . . and they'll really zone in on the female of course, because they think she'll crumble first.

A young man like this may be expressing his frustration with being at the lower end of the hierarchy, but his actions also result in a consolidation of the dominant position of all the men on the boats as controllers of women and their workplace. As already noted in Elaine's case, it filtered up through to the company management and across to other boats. Cockburn points out that "Men's power in the extra-organizational world, in the family, the state and civil society, enters the workplace with them and gives even the most junior man a degree of *sexual* authority relative to even senior women" (Cockburn 1991:143). The women on the boats can become fair game for the "fraternal gang" and their best strategy for survival is to seek a male mentor but even then many are discouraged from seeking a career in fishing.

Several women told me similar stories and spoke about men throwing sea-snakes at them, "you know—one bite and you're dead, eh? . . . Big joke. . . ." The men also teased them by shooting at dolphins, cutting the fins off turtles to "teach them a lesson" and refusing to talk to them if they would not speak crudely or did not share the men's redneck ideals. One young woman who tried to turn the tables on such men by putting detergent in their cordial bottles was sacked because, as her senior deckhand told me, she was "dangerous . . . could have poisoned us all." Carol, a university student working her way around Australia, said, "it is all putdowns, shit, crap, sexual innuendos and direct, crude sexual demands." She was also put off the boat for being a trouble-maker when she complained. She was told that her 24-year-old tormentor, who had only a few months experience, could keep his job because he was a more "productive" worker than she was. Nicky dealt with the young man hassling her by refusing to talk to him or provide him with cups of coffee, but she would not use underhanded subversive strategies such as contaminating the men's food. She said, "you can't retaliate [like that] because the guys will actually turn around and lay into you—a lot of them have got no qualms about punching a girl," if she asserts herself.

If the harassment does not actually drive a woman off a boat, or she has no choice but to stay, it can seriously undermine her confidence and affect her health and ability to work. Carol and Nicky both recalled having violent dreams about how to cope with the men harassing them. Christine said she "felt like shit" following weeks of harassment. She was muscled out of the way when she tried to do anything on the deck, had the meals she cooked thrown into the sea and was verbally abused. Her hurt response caused her to lose face with the rest of the crew. She said, "I was basically just hiding from them and just doing my work and then not socializing with anyone else." She removed herself to the roof over the work deck and wrote in her journal:

> My stomach is in knots, I am so nervous, but I am trying to keep going. I am pathetic at this, I still can't get anything right. Kenny hates me, and I am trying to do the right thing by him but it is like talking to a brick wall. I am going to persevere and just try and try to do everything he tells me and not get aggro and defensive. I know now that he just gets a macho big click over telling me what to do and making life hard. He said his last cook got the same treatment so it's not personal. [I must] be positive, [but] I need to hide my feelings out here and just do what I have to do without losing my soul . . . I should be able to act it out . . . my new personality out here will have to be—initiative, obedience, strength, patience and tolerance [towards their attitudes and behaviour].

Christine had signed up for four months at sea on a vessel that rarely came into port. She was determined to get her fair share of the catch and had to accept the harassment, the longer working hours in the subordinate position as cook and part-time deckhand, as well as the smaller percentage of the catch. She resisted capitulating to sexual demands, risked losing her soul by ignoring the more blatant cruelty towards some of the sea creatures and eventually earned herself a bonus. This bonus she earned by allowing her labour to be incorporated into the workplace on the men's terms. She stated she would not work on a trawler again.

Sexual harassment is a masculine political weapon used to maintain male dominance in the workplace. In the fishing industry it can be used to maintain a workplace not "contaminated" by women. Some fishermen still claim the boat is no place for a woman, not because of old superstitions, although these may be invoked occasionally to justify exclusion, but because women as "The Sex" are seen as problematic (Cockburn 1991:159). They are feared because they are perceived as being either too sexy or not sexy enough (ibid.:150-151). Many fishermen and their wives expressed this view of women by stating that a flirtatious woman can come between a fisherman and his wife or cause trouble among the crew. A woman described as "too feminist" can cause conflict when she objects to sexual harassment or discrimination. But, as Cockburn points out, it is not women's sexuality that is problematic, it is men's. Some

fishermen made it clear that they regarded women as problematic simply because they were not men. Bluey stated:

> You know, if some of them'd had balls you'd a just kicked 'em all round the deck, mate, see that's where you gotta draw the line with women, if they're lazy and most of 'em are anyway—you [they] can't go round complaining about hours and safety issues—they're just useless and lazy you know. . . .

Bluey invokes biological difference to justify treating men and women differently. He uses verbal sexual abuse to deal with "lazy" women rather than physical abuse directed at men. He recalled threatening to "bait his hook with a cook to catch a shark," and continually referred to women as "useless cunts." Dishing out abuse is seen as a traditional right of the skipper, as the Master of a team of workers, and flows down through the hierarchy on the boat. Women are told not to take it personally; however, there is a difference between being yelled at for being a "lazy bastard" and being called a "useless cunt," especially when men use this latter expression to insult each other and imply that being female is despicable. It is directed at the centre of a woman's sexual identity; nothing could be more personal or indicative of the masculine view that women as "The Sex" are different from and inferior to men.

The experiences of the women I interviewed show that when women exercise their own sexual power to deal with sexual harassment on their own terms, use direct confrontation or subversive tricks, men continue to play power games that maintain their hierarchical positions. Whether a woman is driven out of the workplace by threats of sexual violence, sacked because she cannot or will not accommodate the demands of the men, the underlying assumption on the part of the men is that they have the right and the power to dictate the terms under which women may be incorporated into "their" masculine workplace. When women leave, this confirms the men's view that they are the superior workers—women are not tough enough. Carol, who lasted only eight days on a trawler, said she would not go to sea again because "you have to give so much, you lose so much of yourself—give up what you believe in . . . adapt, conform to them. They think they rule the world because they ride the high seas . . . they won't adapt to you."

The Masculine Lifestyle

The requirement for women to adapt was referred to by Bluey as "lovin' the lifestyle . . . as much as we do. . . ." He made it clear that he was not referring to fishing or being at sea. His lifestyle included working to the point of exhaustion, "without anybody having to tell you what to do . . . 24 hours a day," not "stopping for a yarn" while you work, nor admiring the scenery or the wildlife. Then you have to "unload the mind," go into the hotel on the moon to "have a fat time, . . . get pissed, have a fight, have a fuck, if you can get

one," and then "steam out" the next day with the heavy metal music blaring and "go back out there for another month." He added that ". . . you might be a bit drunk and a bit Sissy . . ." and "the DOHSWA [health and safety officers] mob are trying to cut that out," but "you need that sort of shit." "Anyway," he said, "everything's gonna be alright," because someone will be sober enough to drive while the others sleep it off.

Bluey stated that the fishing was "a pretty high risk sorta thing you know, like it's not for everyone," and listed hazardous work practices performed without life jackets or safety harnesses: "[you could] fall in the water, or get somethin' dropped onya, you get ate up by the winch or . . . fall outa the riggin', that'd be a bastard." He also described working on the otter boards that open the nets and are attached to the outriggers:

> . . . like it's, y'out on the boards and that . . . and that can be a bit hazardous, especially if you're out in the rough weather and stuff like that, cause you gotta sort of run out on the stick [gantry or boom] and climb down . . . and there's two boards that sort of bang together . . . they weigh about 250 kilos each . . . if there is a really bad swell, it'll sorta throw "em around and it's just um part of it. . . .

He listed "monsters" that came up in the net as by-catch such as manta rays with "thousands of tiny teeth" and jaws capable of "squashing your hand off" and the beaks of loggerhead turtles ". . . that'll just take your arm off . . . plus you got sea snakes and stories [stonefish], blue ring octopus and sharks and the little striped cobblers . . . sting ray barbs through your foot."[3] He went on and on, proving how tough he was, how hazardous the work was, and then added: ". . . it's not for wimps eh? . . . like it's a hard life, geez, mate, you only gotta check out my face you know, yeah you gotta be a hard cunt—it's the only way to put it—it's the sort of general drill on the boat—you either go hard or you go home, you know, that's it." *Go Hard or Go Home* is a common slogan fixed to the wall of the work area on boats, and yelled at people to encourage competition. The share system of paying skippers and crews contributes to this. The skipper makes an agreement with a company (if he is not running a company of his own) for a certain percentage of the catch and then allocates percentages to the crew. The percentages vary from about 5 to 20 percent, and may be negotiated while the work is under way or decided at the end of the trip. It is often not finalized for crew members, especially newcomers, before leaving port. It is therefore in the interests of the crew to prove themselves worthy of a "decent" share while at sea. If a man, for example, can demonstrate that a woman or a backpacker from overseas is not working hard enough, he can increase his share of the catch by decreasing the perceived worth of the other person. He will also display and assert his own superiority as a worker. As each crew member is drawn into this competition the catch and its value increases and so does the income of each individual crew, skipper and boat owner and/or owner of the company. The capital interest in

how well the trawler crews work together therefore interlocks with the interests of individual men who have fetishized their physical work situation to exclude competition from outsiders. This creates, attracts and supports a dominant male culture that believes that fishing is the work of "real men."

Bluey made it clear in his own words that he gets a "buzz" out of the "hazardness" and generally making it so hard that "women just can't handle it." He said: "... if it was easy, everybody would be doin' it, wouldn't they?" This clearly demonstrates the effort made to exclude others: women and men who complain about unhygienic, unfair and unsafe conditions, express an interest in carefully handling the by-catch in order to return it to the sea or refuse to be obsessive about hard physical labour. The men who complained about the attitudes of fishermen included an Anglo-Australian university student and seven backpackers from a non-English-speaking background. These men also complained about the amount of alcohol consumed, especially when compared with the quality of the food—"too many meat pies and red meat." They were also offended by what they referred to as narrow or intolerant ideas, in other words, the misogynist, homophobic and racist attitudes. Aboriginal people who operated a snapper boat with funding from the federal government were referred to by fishers as "lazy," or as members of the "most lazy race," because they did not work all day and all night every day of the week. Sandy said that fishers had attempted to sabotage this boat by cutting the bilge lines, and told her they had done it "because the niggers shouldn't have a boat like that."

In presenting himself as a rugged individual who "needed nothing and no one," Bluey denied feeling physical or emotional pain and said he could not be bothered talking to anyone but his fishing mates. When I asked him if he had a family, he drawled, "I gotta 1950 Thunderbird, fuckin' beautiful that." He exaggerated his hard and tough qualities and his superiority as a worker. Most of his time on the boat is spent shucking scallops, work traditionally regarded as women's work. He is studying for his tickets, and cannot wait for the time when, as he said, he is the Captain and "she's the crew." When telling me about how tedious shucking "all them little white buttons" was, he said, "no matter what you do to 'em, you can't make 'em bleed. No, you can't make 'em bleed." I found myself wondering, does this mean that a "real" man's work is that which requires him to kill?

Karen and Gail, who both married skippers they worked with, were loyal to their husbands and their industry, but Karen said that, as far as all the men were concerned, being a woman on the boat was synonymous with providing domestic and sexual service to them. Gail said the crew always treated her "as a woman—a second-class citizen." However, all the women interviewed made a point of saying that "not all the fishermen are like that," and that there are men willing to share their skills and knowledge with women. The lifestyle

they love is different from that of the more "macho" crew, but the trawler is a worksite of hegemonic masculinity. To many fishers loving the lifestyle, playing the game, being part of the team means accepting misogynist, homophobic, racist attitudes and displaying a blatant disregard for the natural environment, rules and regulations. Those unwilling or unable to adapt are marginalized, subordinated or ridiculed. Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1987), in developing the concept of hegemonic masculinity, explain how "particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance" over other groups of men as well as women (1987:179). They point out that, while the "culturally exalted form of masculinity" may only correspond to the actual characters of a small number of men, very large numbers of men are responsible for sustaining the hegemonic model. This may be due to "gratification through fantasy" or "compensation through displaced aggression." However, hegemonic masculinity "embodies a successful strategy in relation to women," and the primary reason for men's complicity is that most men benefit from the subordination of women (ibid.:180).

Health and Safety

The crews on trawlers usually work from about 3:00 p.m. through to 9:00 or 10:00 a.m., taking only short breaks for rest when they can. During this time the nets are "shot" away and the catch brought up and dumped on a sorting table. The crew works at a frenzied pace, standing up sorting, processing, grading and packing the product away in the freezer hold before the next "shot" is brought up. This is done three or four times between 4:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. every day of the week for weeks or even months at a time. The occupational health and safety hazards of this work are high. During the interviews people referred to having tools dropped on them from the rigging, brine tank lids crushing people's heads and being rescued after being poisoned by freezer gas or engine fumes. Reference was also made to being stung, bitten and spiked by "nasties" brought up in the net. I observed one young woman who had the soles of her feet peeling off from severe "athletes foot," caused by working barefooted in the humid and wet conditions. Fishers also spoke about infections from prawns pricking them and rashes developing into "sea boils" from the shells of the scallops. But they all tend to say, "he shouldn't have been there," "I should have got out of the way" or "you get used to it." No one seemed to consider that health and safety might be the responsibility of the boat owners. Sleep deprivation is also a hazard, but fishers were more intent on impressing me with their stamina as "tough guys" than questioning the necessity to work all night and half the day, day after day.

In a 1992 report the Chief Inspector of WorkSafe (then DOHSWA) noted overcrowding and inadequate quarters and sleep deprivation among scallop

fishers, and stated that he found the conditions "in this day . . . incomprehensible." These conditions, he stated, were defended by members of the industry on the grounds of economic necessity. He suggested that standing for long hours shucking scallops, which requires quick repetitive movements while standing on an uneven and cluttered floor space, must lead to accidents from knife cuts and occupational overuse syndrome. Occupational overuse syndrome, or repetitive strain injury, was mentioned by two deckhands and one skipper I interviewed, but I met few deckhands who complained of it, presumably because no one would listen and they simply got off the boat. Sandy said, "I had RSI once—but I worked out what I was doin' wrong and changed the way I was doin' it." According to WorkSafe investigations the common attitude among fishers is that fishing has always been hazardous and "that's the way it is."

The first detailed study of work-related, traumatic fatalities in Australian fisheries was published in 1994 (Driscoll et al.). It was based on data relating to 47 cases over the whole of Australia for a period of three years: 1982 to 1984. The incidence of fatality was 18 times higher than the incidence of fatality for the entire work force and higher than that of mining and agriculture. During the 12 months prior to June 30, 1990, 72 accidents were reported to the Western Australian Department of Marine and Harbours, but most accidents go unreported. In the four years from 1991 to 1995, 14 deaths occurred on the North West trawlers operating around the Shark Bay fishery. Two were individual accidents involving faulty equipment, and the other 12 were on boats that sank. Two of these 12 deaths were young women, itinerant workers working as cooks for the first time. The causes of these fatalities have been attributed to unsafe and crowded work spaces, a lack of routine maintenance of boats and equipment, the use of alcohol and drugs, inexperienced crews working in unsafe weather conditions and fatigue associated with the poor work conditions. It is also an indication of the failure on the part of owners and skippers to pay sufficient attention to their legal responsibility—their General Duty of Care under the *Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act*, 1984-1987. Owners have been accused of being more concerned about cutting the cost of running the boat and accumulating profit than they are about the condition of the boat and the safety of the crew.[4] The 1992 incident that cost five lives involved an overcrowded, overloaded scallop trawler that capsized. The crew of this vessel had also been implicated in drug charges. The 1995 incident, described by the local press as Australia's worst maritime tragedy in 20 years, was the result of five vessels being caught in a cyclone five nautical miles off the North West coast. Two of them sank with the loss of seven lives. Following investigations involving the Police Department and the Department of Transport, WorkSafe recommended charging the owners of the two vessels that sank with failing to provide a safe workplace, and the owner of another

vessel that got into difficulties with failing to ensure the crew's safety by not monitoring the weather. One of these owners also owned the trawler that capsized in 1992. A Coroner's inquest was held in June 1996, and the Coroner delivered a finding of death by misadventure and accident. The case was complicated and the finding controversial because the Coroner had not called for the WorkSafe reports on the incident. His finding was that the skippers "made monumental errors of judgment" and were responsible for failing to find safe anchorage for their vessels. He did not apportion any blame to the owners of the boats (Buck 1996).

In this case the question as to whether the owners failed to provide a safe workplace or whether the skippers took unnecessary risks may never be resolved. However, resistance to undertaking training or using safety equipment, together with risk-taking by fishers, does play a part in the continuation of unsafe work practices. Although acknowledging that owners have a responsibility for the safety of boats and crews and pointing out that fisheries legislation aimed at reducing "fishing effort" by restricting vessel size and horsepower contribute to unsafe conditions of work, the WorkSafe Investigation (1995:60) also states:

> The trawling sector does not appear to be aware that safety involves a partnership between safe work environment and safe workplace behaviours. This would include the fact that most safety activity focuses mainly on reducing physical risks in the environment and a lot less effort focuses on increasing safety behaviour, mainly because people see it as too difficult to change. The industry has many people who still relate to the old adage that "they have been doing some things the same way for years, therefore it must be right." Behaviour and attitudes must be seen as a major challenge if the loss of lives is to be prevented in this industry.

Crews are notoriously stubborn in adhering to old practices and adopting a "she'll be right, mate" attitude. Some deckhands made an analogy to working on land-based factory sites when talking to me, claiming that "it is no worse than working in any other factory." But this contradicted the view that the work was a "pretty high-risk sorta thing" and too hard for most people. Whether denying risk or exaggerating it, such men are confirming their hypermasculinity and maintaining their perceived right to work free from government interference. If they were working on land they would have to wear protective clothing, safety boots, ear muffs and safety harnesses in riggings. Attempts by work-safety authorities to introduce improved life jackets, harnesses and safety training are fiercely resisted.[5] Most of the cooks and itinerant deckhands I interviewed were not aware of the storage place for life jackets or safety beacons and told me they had not been shown how to use them. One woman said she thought the life raft was rusted onto the top deck; another described a "scary" trip down the coast in 1995. She said it was terribly rough,

the door fell off the wheelhouse, the cook fell over and under a table and that, when she took the initiative of preparing a bag in the event of having to leave the boat, no one knew where any of the safety gear was. She could not pry the safety beacon off the wall because of the rust. This young woman and her friend, also a cook/deckhand, stated that they thought it was always the women who worried about health and safety on the boats. One of them had undertaken a maritime college training course, but agreed with her friend that such safety training seemed ludicrous when she actually got on the boat and the men told her that such things as safety lines were unnecessary.

Laughing off health and safety hazards was a common response to my inquiries, and the same thing happened when I asked about alcohol or drug abuse. The WorkSafe inquiries, like my own, found only anecdotal evidence of these practices, and there has been no other quantitative research undertaken in Australia. The attitude of fishers leads me to believe that alcohol and drug use is seen as part of the lifestyle. According to Bluey, it is an essential part. It can also enhance the heroic, risk-taking status of the men. Many people associated with the industry stated that they believed the prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse had diminished since 1992 because "attempts have been made to clean up the industry." The majority of informants, however, discussed the current availability of alcohol and drugs such as "grass," "speed" and "acid" on boats and admitted an interest in using some of them. No one admitted to using heroin, and several said they could not understand why anyone would use it because it "made you too laid back." Amphetamines or "speed," they suggested, would make more sense because the work is so tiring.

Attempts have been made by some companies and skippers to prevent alcohol and drug abuse by running a "dry boat," alcohol and drug free. Others turn a blind eye or find such rules difficult to enforce. When I asked crew members whether they were on "dry" boats, they tended to laugh at me and say, "nobody gets wet on our boat." I collected several stories about fishers who had died from a drug overdose or required treatment for drug abuse. One informant recalled a deckhand who died in her arms, another spoke about a 15-year-old girl being found dead in the toilet with a needle in her arm. But a lot of people asked me to turn off the tape-recorder while they spoke about such painful experiences. They either did not want to give the industry a bad name, because it would make it even harder to find suitable crew, or they feared retribution from unscrupulous, unnamed people. My research assistant and I were refused interviews with several people because they feared we were undercover police with the Drug Squad.

This suspicion of government regulations, fear of policing and bureaucracy was expressed by owners, processors and fishers alike. During the course of my research I was accused of being "with the union," collecting information to write "bullshit reports" or a "spy" with the taxation department" or "that

DOSHWA mob." Some of the more powerful members of the industry have made attempts to implement changes to the industry, but companies and professional fishers' associations maintain a right to "self-regulation" in the industry, and resist government intervention in employment, training, health and safety issues.[6] This self-regulation is similar to, but clashes with, the fisher's belief that he has a right to control his own work space, which should be free of restrictions and regulations.

The work on trawlers can be hard and dangerous with long hours worked in cramped, uncomfortable accommodation on an often unpredictable sea, and the individualistic and self-sufficient fisher, while willing to share heroic tales of the hazards, has little regard for health and safety issues. As a "brave" and "free" man he believes that he alone has the responsibility for his own health and welfare, even if this involves risk-taking. Posters in some of the men's sleeping quarters read: *Apocalypse*, *Immortality* and *Escape*, and a self-destructive, "live fast and die young" mentality is apparent. Adapting to or coping with difficult work conditions and hazards is a challenge, and success confirms these men's confidence, dominance and self-sufficiency (Donaldson 1991:10-11). To complain about conditions or accept the imposition of regulations would challenge this self-perception and blur the distinction between warrior/hero and wimp.

A Career for Women?

There appears to be some truth in the men's claim that "women can't stick it," and to my knowledge there is no woman currently skippering in the Western Australian trawler fishing. One woman who is said to have been the first to obtain the qualifications to skipper a trawler during the 1970s has now retired with her husband, a skipper with whom she worked. Two other women, referred to in the introduction, worked their way up from the position of cook to Master Class IV and Master Class V by carefully choosing male mentors and now teach in a maritime college. However, both gave up fishing when faced with the responsibilities of single parenting.

There are four main reasons why women leave the industry: the demands of marriage and children; their choice of a different lifestyle; the continual resistance from men; and the pressure of a highly competitive industry. Some successful female skippers have also left the industry. They include some who, according to my information, worked in Shark Bay during the 1980s or 1990s and were "tough" or had learned to "handle the men" or "really showed the men up." At least three (not interviewed for this project) left after suffering the effects of drug abuse, which some observers attributed to "cracking under the pressure." A most successful female skipper, widely acknowledged as "beating the boys at their own game," sought assistance for drug addiction and also lost her license after being caught fishing in a restricted zone.[7] This is

a practice sometimes undertaken in order to maintain a consistently high record as the "most efficient skipper," something she had achieved several years in a row. These women seem to have paid a price for striving to beat the men at their own games. The two younger women mentioned above, Carol and Christine, left the boats during their first season because they felt that adapting to the men's lifestyle could lead to them losing their own values or sense of self.[8]

Conclusion

The fishing industry is dominated by rugged individualists, some of whom are itinerant workers, and by entrepreneurs, but these two categories of men have more in common than first meets the eye.[9] They can be both competitive and aggressive, believe in the freedom of the individual that their work is their life and separate themselves geographically and emotionally from women or their families. They can both have a "rapacious" attitude to the natural environment and attitudes and actions that identify them as racist, homophobic and misogynist.

I am not arguing that there is any inherent difference between men and women, or that, if more women worked on the boats or in the management of the industry, it would "humanize" the conditions or result in a more benevolent attitude towards people from different cultures or the natural environment. I am arguing that the fishing industry is dominated by an exaggeratedly masculine culture that has the power to control and exclude others and sustain an unequal sexual division of labour. This makes the work unnecessarily competitive and hazardous, and men actively create the "lifestyle" or adapt to it in order to prove toughness and superiority. This is either tolerated or embraced on the grounds that it promotes competition and increases the income of each individual crew member, as well as the profits of owners of trawlers and fishing companies, the majority of whom are men. The ruggedly individualistic masculinity is consonant with the entrepreneurial and managerial culture. That is why owners name their boats *Top Gun*, *Deadly Weapon*, *Supersonic* and *Predator*.

Women will continue to challenge and resist hegemonic masculine ideals and negotiate their way through the resistance of men. But all that is really needed for them to participate in the industry is that they receive appropriate maritime training, have a love of the sea, an enjoyment of fishing and manual labour and the ability to cope with long periods of being away from friends and family on the land. For a permanent and economically equal place in the industry they also have to ally themselves to the overall goals of an increasingly competitive, capital-intensive industry, one which has been referred to as having a history of "rape and pillage. Bugger up one species then move onto the next" (Cribb 1995:4).[10] This is an aim that has international global, social

and economic ramifications. Any change, therefore, must not simply be about getting more places for women in the industry but about challenging and transforming the exclusive, masculine culture that promotes an heroic ideal of risk-taking, a ruthless exploitation of the natural environment, a competitive hierarchy and a negligent attitude towards the rights of others to work in a safe environment.

Notes

1. This was apparent in my conversations with fishers, crew and owner operators, and demonstrated by a "warning" about attempts to unionize the industry appearing in the *National Fishing Industry Council Newsletter* (1993:5).
2. An "ocker" is an archetypal "uncultivated" Australian worker who exhibits and exaggerates uncouth and chauvinistic behaviour (*The Macquarie Dictionary*, 2nd ed. [Sydney, New South Wales: Macquarie University, 1995]).
3. Several fishers claimed they "hated" turtles because they were "stupid" and "stink." Turtles, sharks, rays and other large animals caught in the trawlers' nets were referred to by fishers as "monsters," and they decried the use of turtle extruders (TEDs), which can protect them. The devices have been used in the United States since 1978 and incorporated into conservation regulations. In 1995, the U.S. government ruled to prohibit the importation of prawns from countries who have not adopted such measures. This prohibition was to come into effect after May 1, 1996 (see Marine and Coastal Community Network, Australia 1996).
4. Discussions with Chief Inspector, Fatalities and Special Investigations, WorkSafe Western Australia (previously Department of Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare) on January 19, 1995. All these incidents were referred to during interviews with fishers and confirmed by access to reports (see DOHSW, Western Australia 1991, 1992a, 1992b, and WorkSafe Western Australia 1995).
5. There is a need for quantitative research on working conditions in Australian fisheries. While I agree with Marian Binkley (1995) that off-shore fishing is an extremely hazardous occupation I have not made extensive use of her work here because my major concern is the impact of fishermen's attitudes and behaviour on women. There are no women on the boats in Binkley's study on the Nova Scotia fishery, and the cultural, historical and climatic conditions are different from those in Western Australia. I do, however, agree that fishers need to feel in control of their work site and that land-based safety recommendations are not always appropriate for implementation at sea.
6. Nor-West Seafoods Pty. Ltd. has formal employment contracts and provides some health and safety training to crew at the beginning of each season. None of the deaths that have occurred recently have occurred on that company's vessels. The company also supports the new employment and training programs being implemented by Skillshare in Carnarvon. See also *The Northern Guardian* (1992:2). The peak body representing fishers is the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council (Incorporated), which has since 1992 employed an independent consultant to assist with occupational health, safety and training issues. In the Council's Annual Report (Western Australian Fishing Industry Council 1995) the chairman states that among challenges of the future for the industry is the need to "ensure that we shape our future the way we want it and not have it moulded by outside influences." A list of aims of the Council included: "Ensure that the industry remains union-free" and "Minimise Government Regulations."
7. This information was confirmed by her employer, colleagues, friends and a Fisheries Officer during informal and recorded interviews.

8. In 1991 Carpenter and Acosta wrote: "Even if the women become more skillful than the men at the men's games, they might win only to find that winning has cost them their souls." This is quoted in McKay 1994.
9. These two categories have been used by fishers and researchers. Fishers have "an attachment to and expression of a way of life that emphasizes self-reliance, independence, and individual control of the labor process" (Jentoft and Davis 1993:357; also see Thomas et al. 1995:143-150). Entrepreneurial fishers may be competitive, independent owner-operators or companies that own boats and processing plants. The two groups are dependent on each other. While the relationship has potential for conflict, it also promotes competition among the independent fishers.
10. See Cribb 1995:4. No fisher interviewed expressed any concern for the ecology, the depletion of stocks or the future of the industry. One skipper said in response to my question about having such concerns—"No. That's the good thing about capitalism, they will always find something else."

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