

# GENDER CONSTRUCTION AND DIVERSITY IN ICELANDIC FISHING COMMUNITIES

Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir  
*Faculty of Social Science*  
*University of Iceland*

*Abstract:* This article combines an analysis of the social construction of gender inequality with an examination of the construction of other kinds of diversity among women in small fishing villages in Iceland. This combination is necessary in order to avoid the creation of a static categorization of women in the fisheries. The construction of commonalities and diversities among women and between women and men is examined. Gender and diversity are generated locally, and in relation to the larger world. Women have a common identity as inhabitants of small fishing villages, an important identity they share with men to some extent. However, among them there are important dissimilarities based on many factors, including, for example, the different relations to the fisheries experienced by fishermen's wives and fish processors.

*Résumé:* Cet article associe une analyse de l'interprétation sociale de l'inégalité des sexes à un examen de différents types de diversité parmi les femmes dans les petits villages de pêcheurs islandais. Cette association est nécessaire afin d'éviter la création d'une catégorisation statique figée chez les femmes dans les pêcheries. Nous avons examiné l'interprétation des éléments communs et celle des éléments différents parmi les femmes tout d'abord et ensuite entre les femmes et les hommes. L'inégalité sexuelle et la diversité sont créés localement mais en relation avec le reste du monde. Les femmes ont une identité commune en tant qu'habitantes des petits villages de pêcheurs, une identité importante qu'elles partagent dans une certaine mesure avec les hommes. Cependant, parmi elles, il existe d'importantes dissemblances basées sur de nombreux facteurs, incluant, par exemple les différentes relations existant dans les pêcheries telles que vécues par les femmes de pêcheurs et par les ouvriers des pêcheries.

### **The Social Construction of Diversities and Commonalities**

Multivocality, multiple identities and diversity within given areas are common themes in anthropology and gender studies at the present. The picturing of culture as a bounded unit has been seriously put to the test. In studies of gender construction the emphasis is no longer only on the differences between women and men but also on diversity among women. Henrietta Moore has pointed out that this emphasis on the variance among women has “occurred simultaneously with and been a part of a movement towards a post-modernist trend along with a focus on multi-culturalism and new questions regarding the concept of culture” (Moore 1993:194). In gender studies the focus on diversity is in part a reaction to an earlier essentialism found among those anthropologists who attempted to find universalistic explanations for the inequalities between women and men. Today many who theorize about gender relations assume that there is no single cause for the different positions of men and women in society.

Nationality, class, sexual preference, ethnicity, age and residence (rural vs. urban) are often intertwined in the discussion of diversity among women. Multiple identities have been seen as formed by these various factors and as intersecting within individuals. A few questions must be raised with regard to the diversity among women and the differences in the social construction of maleness and femaleness. How important is gender, compared with these other factors, in forming people’s identities and in defining their position in society? Does a focus on diversity mean that there is no common ground for political organizing among women? How far can we go in our focus on diversity before becoming such relativists that we begin to justify inequalities and political apathy?

There is no simple solution to the question, “Where should we draw the line between universalism and relativism when we are dealing with power differences based on gender in particular localities?” However, too much of an emphasis on culturally constructed differences can lead to a new reification of these differences which may then be communicated in static terms, such as those based on class, religion or ethnicity. As Pratt and Hanson (1994:6) have pointed out, “There is a very real danger that old systems of closure may simply be shifted on to a new set of categories.” Thus we find today new, static categories of Islamic women, lesbian women, single mothers, etc. This kind of reification can to a certain extent be seen in studies of women in fishing communities in the North Atlantic. Since the focus has primarily been on the commonalities among them as fishermen’s wives and fish processors, and on their potential power, the diversities between the various North Atlantic fishing societies, as well as within fishing communities, have largely been ignored.

An attempt has been made in the last decades by those who have studied fishing communities to correct the former stereotypes of women in the

fisheries, make such women visible and give a more realistic view of their social and economic contributions as well as examining their position. Nadel-Klein and Davis in their edited volume on women in the fisheries warned against the tendency to overemphasize the similarities found in women's lives in fishing communities. They wanted to show "that to understand fishing communities and economies, the adaptive challenges of fishing must be placed within the specific context of history, political economy and gender ideology" (1988:6). Focussing on the differences among women, such as those between women in fishing communities and others, may under certain circumstances be useful but it may also draw our attention away from the commonalities that exist among them—commonalities which are not natural or universal but socially constructed. Commonalities are important to take into account, because gender, along with ethnicity and age, continues to play an important role as social categories defining and delimiting people's position in today's world. Gender remains a fundamental aspect of social relations of power. As Scott has pointed out, "Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (1988:42). A focus on diversity among women without an analysis of the social construction of gender inequalities can therefore draw our attention away from the many ways in which gender-based inequalities are maintained. It is necessary to counter the tendency that can be seen in postmodernist discussions of diversity to take difference as a starting point instead of seeing it as an end product (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:16). Diversities and similarities are created by the same social processes and can therefore only to a limited extent be analyzed separately. Thus to avoid the creation of new static categories of women one can examine the processes through which differences as well as similarities are socially and historically created, both locally and in relation to the larger world. One way to do this is to examine the process of differentiation and identity construction in a particular place. Then it is possible to examine how the different social groups are structured relationally. The relations between them can be characterized by conflicting interests as well as by common interests. Moreover, power differences play a role in this process, although they are not necessarily conceived of as such because they are mostly maintained not by force but are integral aspects of daily life and dominant discourses. In my study of women in Icelandic fishing communities I examine how differences and similarities among women, and between women and men, are created in relation to domestic life, work experiences within the community and the larger world outside the village. I consider work-based identities and those based on location as parts of a social process, not as static signs. As Pratt and Hanson have suggested,

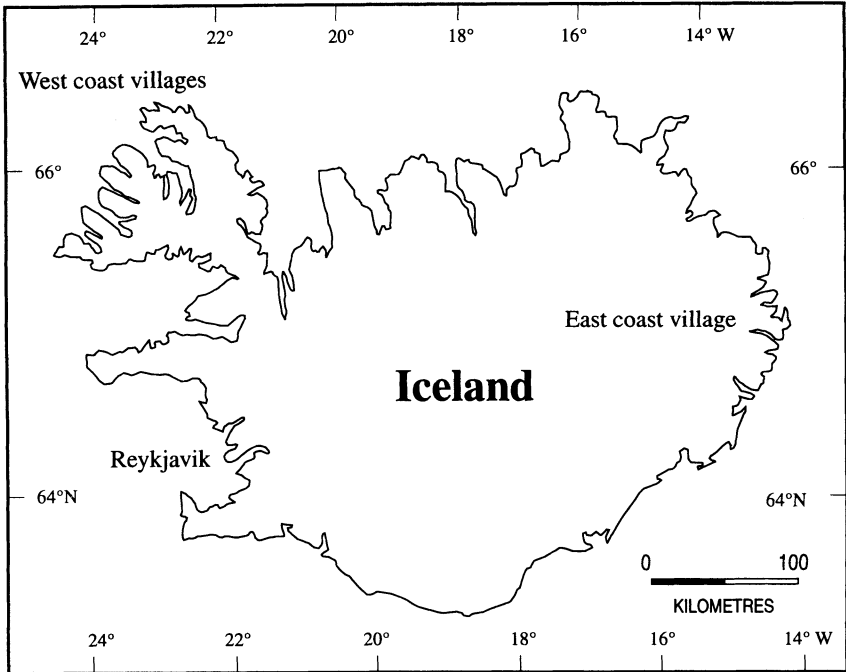
Studying identities in particular places can help counteract the current tendency within feminism to rigidify the differences among women and can be an important means of rebuilding affinities among women. A close ethnographic study uncovers interdependencies and connections. By studying lives in context one can probe similarities as well as differences. (1994:26)

How can we approach diversity in small and geographically isolated communities, such as the fishing communities in Iceland, which most commonly have about 1000 inhabitants? We can, for example, examine what women as members of fishing communities have in common which distinguishes them from women in the city or women in rural areas. We can also examine differences generated locally, such as those based on class, age, marital status, nationality, participation in the labour market and different relations to the fisheries as fishermen's wives and fish processors. Gendered identity can also depend on the context, e.g., marital relations, sibling relations or workplace interaction. This kind of examination will help avoid creating new stereotypes of women in fishing communities to replace earlier ones. We will thus contribute to producing a more realistic picture of women's lives. For this, however, we also need to examine how gender inequalities are maintained.

### **The Research Setting**

Fish constitutes the largest export in the Icelandic economy and the country's most valuable resource, accounting for about 80 percent of the export commodities and about 50 percent of the total export earnings. The fishery plays not only an important economic role, but also figures significantly in the national identity of Icelanders. Icelanders see themselves to a large degree as a proud fishing nation. The fishery is, however, not the biggest industry in Iceland and only about 10 percent of the population is directly involved in the fisheries. The number of people directly involved in the fisheries has never exceeded 15 percent of the economically active population, and less than 20 percent of the population live in communities that can be defined as fishing communities (Skaptadóttir 1995). The relative importance of the fishing industry varies greatly from one area to the other. It is much more important in the northwest peninsula than in the southwest part (Árnason 1992:31). In areas such as the northwest peninsula (the West Fjords) and the east coast, areas where field research was conducted for this study, fishing and fishery-related activities are crucial for continuity of employment and habitation. The study presented here is based on field research in three small fishing communities in Iceland in the years 1989, 1990 and 1996. Two of the villages are in the northwest part of Iceland, called the West Fjords, and one of the villages is in the eastern part of Iceland. Two of these villages have a little over 1000 inhabitants each and one of the villages in the West Fjords has only about 400 inhabitants.

**Figure 1**  
**Geographical Locations of the Villages in the Study**



Fishing villages in Iceland are for the most part geographically very isolated and relatively inaccessible. They are commonly located in fjords with very little lowland, having come into being when proximity to good fishing grounds was much more important than it is today. Villages began to form where there had been seasonal sites or merchants' hamlets at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. In these villages women have always made an important contribution to the fisheries, but their work has been seen as less valuable than men's work. Their participation has been, and continues to be, in processing the catch, baiting and in preparing men for fishing. Before the freezing plants were established, they were seasonally involved in the processing of salted fish. Today their work in the processing plants is no longer seasonal, and the plants themselves are clean, high-technology factories.

Most fishing villages in Iceland developed as one-company villages where a single dominant company owned the main processing plant as well as some fishing vessels which provided fish for the plant. Some of these companies were individually owned, others were owned by the community or with municipal participation, and all have to a different degree been run with some

support from the state (mostly in the form of loans from investment funds). Since the 1930s official regional policies have been concerned with maintaining employment in villages and small towns. Numerous measures were taken, such as improvement of local social services, especially in health care, education, the construction of roads and bridges and assistance in building new harbours. Recently there have been many indications of diminishing national support for regional development in Iceland. Small villages have increasingly come to be seen as uneconomical, and political sentiments have shifted toward market-oriented policies. The clearest indication of the dominance of a market mentality is the present fishing policy, the implementation of an ITQ (individually transferable quota) system. With the ITQ system, fishing stocks have, in effect, been turned into the private property of boat owners, who can then sell and lease out their quota unhindered (Pálsson and Helgason 1996).

Even though fish is acknowledged to be the most important resource for Icelanders in the dominant discourse, and Icelanders pride themselves on being a proud fishing nation, Icelandic fishing communities are often described as cultureless entities. Inhabitants of fishing communities have been stigmatized, as in many other societies where the fishing plays a less central role than in Iceland (Cole 1991; Löfgren 1979; Nadel-Klein 1991). Fisher folk are considered to be hard working and a bit on the rough side. Men go out on the dangerous ocean to bring wealth to the nation, and independent women wait for them on shore (Skaptadóttir 1995). In spite of geographical isolation, these villages are neither culturally nor economically isolated. They have, like many other northern areas, been tied into an international economy since the turn of the last century when fishing villages began to form. Fish products are produced for a global market in high-technology freezing plants which are usually within walking distance from the homes of the workers. Villagers are consumers of mass-produced products from all over the world. They use these products to build and furnish their own homes, making them part of their identities and culture. In Iceland there is now a great fear of losing the "national identity," fear that the global English-speaking culture will engulf and absorb the fragile national culture and language. This fear is, for example, clearly represented by numerous television and radio broadcasts which dwell on different aspects of this perceived problem. A related fear of the loss of local culture in particular regions such as the northwest coast can be seen linked to a fear of future depopulation. The fear exists that global market forces or new European standards in production will drive locally based industries out of existence. Due to economic problems many people have been moving away to larger towns and in particular to the southwest corner around the capital area. Those who feel they have been unfairly penalized by the present fishing policy (the quota system) are particularly worried.

**Women: Common Local Identities**

Life in the fishing villages is very localized. Home, work, shops, friends and family are close by, and people's daily lives are interwoven. Most of the people work in the few workplaces that exist in the villages, such as the fish plant, the grocery store, the car repair shop or the bank. Although these workplaces are close enough to the homes for people to walk to work, the car is commonly used to go from one place to another within a village. The villagers meet each other at the one or two grocery stores or at the video rental shop, they go to the swimming pool and sauna, send their children to the same day-care and school and their sons play on the same soccer team. As the villages are geographically isolated from one another, services have to be provided locally. However, with better cars, better roads and the construction of tunnels it is becoming more common to seek services in larger towns during summer months. The inhabitants participate in local choirs, women's associations and rescue teams. Moreover, although most people work long hours, short social visits among friends and relatives are important parts of daily life in the villages. Many women also participate in monthly sewing circles with friends and relatives. In the summer villagers prepare the Fishermen's Day and other communal celebrations. In recent years a "new tradition" is coming into being in many of the small villages around the island. A celebration is held on a summer weekend with returned migrants, most of whom have moved to the southwest part of the country around Reykjavík (the capital). For this celebration, old pictures of the villages are displayed and historic walking tours and other entertainment are organized. People in the fishing communities studied commonly emphasize the particularity of their local culture (although they did not use the concept of "culture" but would rather talk about way of life), which they see as distinct but, at the same time, as an important part of Icelandic national identity and culture. They emphasize aspects from their local history which are important for their identity. That the village itself is an important unit can be seen by the aerial photographs of the home village and paintings of local landscape to be found in most homes and institutions.

Many women emphasize their common interests as women of fishing communities independent of their particular connections with the fishery itself. Some of them may work in a freezing plant, some may be married to truck drivers, some may work in the local store or be married to fishermen, but they all have a common identity as members of the village. This identity de-emphasizes the diversities found among them, such as those based on age, class and occupation. Moreover they may, in this regard, perceive themselves to have interests in common with men. These identities are seen as related to the welfare and continued existence of their communities, which in turn contribute to the well-being of the fisheries as a whole. The welfare of their families depends on the fisheries, fishing itself, work in fish processing and other

activities related to the fisheries, such as net making and fish-oil processing. The common identity as members of a community is often expressed in relation to the fisheries. Ólöf, a young single woman who works in fish processing, explained: "We all follow day by day where the trawlers are and what they are getting, even when you are not working in fish at that particular time you ask about them. It is as if one has become part of it all." Where the different ships and boats are and how much fish they are getting is a popular topic of conversation in all the villages of this study. Locally based identity is also expressed by emphasizing the cohesiveness of villagers. That the community was one family, where everyone was taken care of, was often said to be the main advantage of living in a small village. As one middle-aged woman said: "You see, this here, such a small community, it is like one family. If something happens to you or if you have problems then you can always ask for help from your neighbours." Another woman, a mother of two children aged nine and four, also emphasized the close-knit nature of the village and added: "You can put your children out in the morning and take them in at night, I mean you wouldn't do that in Reykjavík. If you need to go to the store or to the doctor, you just tell your neighbours. If your children disappear, everyone knows who they are and can take them back home." At the same time the inhabitants of each village also discussed the importance of the impression the village community made on outsiders, both foreign tourists and, more importantly, members of the surrounding communities. Erla, a 35-year-old woman, talks about how improved roads have led to increased inter-village travel.

They have begun to come here and they go to the swimming pool and they see that we are not lousy. And I also think that the people who live here are very ambitious, everyone is ready to do their best, and working hard on their houses and yards. And I am happy when other people come here and see this and we get compliments, and people come here and see how really good everything looks.

Similar expressions of being proud of the village and the surrounding landscape often came up in interviews and informal conversations with the people in this study.

If we consider the identities of fish-plant workers we can sometimes see the same emphasis on common interests. Women's work as fish processors in the freezing plants is looked down upon in Iceland. It is seen as boring work that requires no special skills. Even though women are aware of this, they take pride in their work in fish processing, in being part of the most important economic activity in the national economy. They are very much aware of the fact that the fishery is not peripheral to the economy as in many other countries in the North Atlantic. It is central to any discussion of the Icelandic economic situation and a part of the modern national identity. They see the work they do as a major aspect of the entire fishing industry, as Anna explained in an interview



about her work in the fisheries: "There is no shame working in a freezing plant. It is more honourable working in fish processing than merely working in an office, because you are providing for the whole nation." Moreover, and maybe more importantly, women in the fish plant do not see their identity solely as fish processors. There is not a very clear line between their identities as fish processors and as members of fishing communities and families or households which include husbands, brothers or sons who are fishermen. A stronger difference is perceived between "us," the fisher-folk who produce the wealth on which society builds, and "them," the city dwellers who spend the wealth. The latter see fishing villages as a burden, but depend on them without realizing it.

This strong sense of common local identity has inspired women in several fishing communities on the northwest coast, who have recently been searching for new employment opportunities, to start handicraft centres. In their production of handmade things to be sold to Icelandic and foreign tourists during the summer months, they prefer to use local material and patterns. The women knit wool sweaters and mittens, make dolls, handbags and jewellery, work with clay, make baskets and do wood carving among other things. In their marketing strategy they emphasize their particular, locally based culture in contrast to the rest of the world. They are participating both in the global economy and, at the same time, in the process of localization (Friedman 1994). They have, for example, rediscovered old knitting patterns which they claim are authentic for the West Fjords and they make jewellery from fish skin. In this way they participate in the making and remaking of local culture, using natural materials and emphasizing the closeness of fishing communities to the resources of nature. One such worker is Inga, a fisherman's wife, who carves figures in driftwood which is found locally. When I asked her how she got involved with the craft centre, she said: "It had to do with work. I needed something to do, because I have had insecure jobs and have been in so many workplaces. Then I began to think if I could make something on my own. That the resource was not necessarily elsewhere, but maybe here at home. That is how I began to think." In spite of the emphasis on local rootedness, not all of the women make crafts which are necessarily Icelandic or from the area. Some make clothes and furniture for Barbie dolls, paint on bed sheets with Walt Disney figures copied from colouring books, cross-stitch pictures from magazines or patchwork wall hangings and blankets influenced by American country-living magazines. In the designing of patchwork quilts one however often finds themes depicted which relate to the fishery, such as fish or boats. It is important, they say, to have such things for the locals to buy as gifts or to use in their own homes.

### **Diversities among Women in Icelandic Fishing Communities**

When I first did research in two fishing villages in Iceland (1989-90), I found different views regarding the past and present among women who were involved with the fisheries. I found diversities among them based on such things as marital status, age, occupation and class. I asked the older women to describe to me their life in a fishing village early in this century when they were young women. Listening to their descriptions I found that, although at first sight they seemed to belong to a homogeneous group of poor people attempting to make a living by the seaside, their lives were in fact diverse. Among them there were servant women who lived in other people's homes (some of whom never married); married women with children who worked for others, cleaning and doing laundry; women married and unmarried who worked as day labourers on the pier, washing and drying the salt fish for the merchant. In each village there was usually one dominant merchant who provided the fishermen with supplies and to whom the local fishers were obliged to sell their fish, an arrangement similar to that historically found in Newfoundland (Sider 1986). Then there were the fishermen's wives who worked in their own homes, often managing the work of women servants. These women prepared their husbands (and sometimes seasonal fishermen) for fishing and were involved in baiting or other aspects of the fishery, depending on the size of the households. These households had more control over their production process as they sold already-processed salt fish to the merchant. This was at the time when the formation of fishing villages was beginning in Iceland and thus many of these women had moved from farming areas to coastal settlements. I found that these migrations had a different meaning for these women depending both on their contemporary social position and their former position in the farming society. Widows, for example, had more prospects of keeping their homes and their children with them in the village when there were opportunities for wage work both for them and their children (Gunnlaugsson and Garðarsdóttir 1996; Skaptadóttir 1995).

Then, as today, it was hard to delineate a single profile of women in a fishing village. Women are not only fishermen's wives or fish processors. Some are both fishermen's wives and fish processors; others are neither. Although the greatest number of women work in the fishery, there are also other jobs for women such as working in day care, in shops or cleaning offices or other workplaces. Others are housewives married to local men who are not fishermen. Among all of these women we find class-based differences and those based on age and marital status. Then there is a difference based on national origin, a difference that remains to be studied in Icelandic fishing communities. In almost every fishing village one will find a population of foreign workers, a majority of them usually women, who come to work in the fishery temporarily. At present, most of these workers are from Poland. In the past dec-

ades there have been women from Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean and other areas. Some of them have stayed and married local men.

Even when we look at fishermen's wives we find important differences among them. Being a wife of a fisherman who is on a large ship that fishes off shore and stays out long is different from being married to a small-boat owner who returns home every evening. In the former case the wife has to stay alone with the children for long periods, in particular if the husband is on a freezer trawler. The freezer trawlers usually stay out for a month at a time and sometimes longer, fishing in international waters, with very short stops in between tours. When the husband is on a small boat fishing locally, the family life is closer to the Icelandic norm of the nuclear family. The position of the wives of small-boat fishers is also different because they are commonly involved in managing the finances of the boat. Some wives are involved in baiting or hiring others to do the work for them. They have gained experience running a small business, even though they usually do not view their work as that of a manager of a small firm. Instead, they usually talk about this work as helping their husbands and as work that can easily be combined with housework. Most fishermen's wives, whether married to small-boat owners or trawler fishermen, have the sole responsibility for the finances of the household and many of them work for wages as well.

### **Gender Inequalities in the Fishing Communities**

Icelandic fishing communities are characterized by a clear division of labour between women and men. This division has become more clearly defined with industrialization (Skaptadóttir 1995). In spite of the fact that women's participation in the labour market is high and they have a great deal of independence both in their homes and at work, gender relations are characterized by inequalities. This can be seen in the freezing plant as well as in other jobs in these communities. Although fish processing is commonly thought of as a woman's job, we find both men and women in the freezing plant. Men and women work there in the same place, but there is a clear gender segregation in tasks. Men and women rarely intermingle either during work or during breaks. Their work is located in different parts of the factory, so they do not see each other much during working hours. Moreover, the jobs performed by women are described as feminine and the jobs performed by men are described in masculine terms. It is more common to find women doing jobs defined as men's jobs than the opposite. However, this is for the most part only true in the lowest paid jobs.

There are fewer jobs within the plant which are defined as women's jobs than as men's jobs. Women cut, clean out worms and pack the fish, and a few are floor managers, although there are fewer female than male supervisors. The work on the pier—driving forklifts and unloading the fish from the ship—is a man's job, although there are some very rare exceptions to this. Men work

in the freezing room, they are commonly floor managers and only men do machine maintenance work. The jobs women perform are generally more monotonous and have become even more monotonous in the last few years with the conveyor belt. They stand at the same place almost all day long, performing the same job. Moreover, with the most recent technological innovations, every aspect of each individual worker's output on the conveyor belt can be monitored. Men have jobs that allow them to move around more, which in turn allows them more control over the work process itself. For example, they can more easily control the speed of their work. They also have more opportunities to talk to others in their jobs. One woman who works in a newly modernized freezing plant in the West Fjords, when I asked her about men's jobs, said: "One does not know what they do. If I were asked 'What does he do?' I would answer 'I don't know, he is just walking here back and forth.' They don't have to stay put in the same place all day."

Only a few men work in fish processing. In one freezing plant where I interviewed women, they tended to de-emphasize the clear gender division and said that there had been men doing this work in their factory and they had been able to do it as well as the women. An older woman, who works in fish processing, explained that it is only very recently that men are to be found in the processing room, cutting and packing fish. She said: "In fact there were two men working with the women when I began in 1962. It was naturally because they were handicapped." When visiting this freezing plant I saw some men (from Poland) in the processing room; they were in fact cutting and cleaning fish, but they were not working on the conveyor belt along with the women. I have also seen foreign men occasionally working in the processing room or packing fish in other factories, but have not seen men working on the conveyor belt except for some whose job was to feed the fish onto it. A woman in her 30s who has worked in the freezing plant of her village, mostly during the summer months in her youth, spoke about men doing women's work in processing: "When I was there [at the freezing plant] then it was 'homo' if a man was cutting, cleaning or packing the fish." Thus it is seen as threatening to masculinity to do such jobs, and many men said to me (but only off the record—not on tape) that they would find it humiliating to have to accept such jobs and would rather be unemployed.

The gendered division of labour is premised on gender-based inequalities. This can be seen when the pattern is broken, as in the pride women evince when they perform men's jobs either in the freezing plant or at sea. By contrast, when men perform work defined as women's, they talk about it as a humiliating experience. They do perform "women's work" in fish processing at sea, on freezer trawlers, but this work is described in more masculine terms as hard work and is much higher paid. A similar division of labour is described by Munk-Madsen and Husmo (1989), based on their research in fish plants in

northern Norway. Although the majority of women I talked to in fishing communities thought it was only fair that men who stay out so long away from their families should get higher wages, not all women agreed with this. Sigrun, who is a recently divorced mother of two who has worked in the freezing plant, expressed some dissatisfaction when I asked her what she thought about her wages in the freezing plant:

Given how hard this work is, there is an unfair division of labour, that is, the fishermen who are doing the same jobs now in the freezing trawlers naturally have much higher wages than we who work the same jobs on land, but we work hard. This is hard work, people come home very tired. If you see it this way then this is naturally very little salary. But you can live on it.

All the workers in a freezing plant are on the same wage scale. However, it is noticeable that the men who work at the freezing plant are commonly either old or young or not Icelandic and there only temporarily. There are not many Icelandic men there who are middle-aged and consider themselves to be breadwinners, except those in management positions or in maintenance work. By contrast, women of all classes and ages work side by side, foreign and Icelandic, women who are married to skippers or fishermen on trawlers who receive high wages, and others who are married to men who earn low wages. Then there are the few single women who try to make a living for themselves and their children on the low wages earned in the freezing plant. The first group of women usually only work half days but the other works full-time or even more than that and accepts all the extra work they can get. All of these women in many ways lead different lives from each other. However, when they have put on their hair nets, their white shirts and their rubber boots, they all have common identities as fish processors and housewives. At this time gender becomes the more important attribute of their identity and status.

In spite of the high participation of women in paid employment, there is very little evidence to be found of men's increased participation in housework—contrary to what one would expect, I could not find any difference between age groups in this regard. Thus the gendered division of labour is very clearly maintained in the home as well. Cole (1991) described households in Portuguese coastal communities as woman-centred. Households in Icelandic fishing communities can also be said to be woman-centred since the home is very clearly a woman's domain. Men may help their wives to a varying degree but housework continues to be the women's responsibility. A similar pattern was found by Sinclair and Felt (1992) in their study of unpaid domestic work in Newfoundland coastal communities. They found that "an extensive division of labour persists, even when women are employed" (1992:59). Many women pride themselves on being good housewives and keeping clean houses, including those who work full-time. Women are, however, in no way limited to this sphere, and some aspects of their household duties take them outside of

the home. For the women being a good housewife is part of their local identity. For men, working long hours and staying away from the home constitute the more important aspects of being a "real" man in the local community. Just as doing women's work in the freezing plant is not considered manly, so too similar views are expressed concerning men who are considered to be doing too much housework.

Gudrun, a woman in her early thirties, is married to a fisherman and is the mother of two children, six and eight years old. Gudrun works full-time on the pier unloading fishing vessels, a job that is considered to be very "manly." She usually has to go down to her work on the pier when her husband returns from the sea. When I asked Gudrun in the course of an interview whether or not her husband participated in housework when on land, she replied:

No he does not do that, but he is good at building for the kids and doing things for the kids. Do you understand? . . . No he does not cook and such. No he would probably die in front of the refrigerator, I think he is one of those men. He would not think of opening it.

When I asked her if she thought this was common in the village or among those she knew she said: "Yes, you cannot take those women seriously who tell you that their husbands participate. I don't think they can be taken seriously. They just would not dare to tell you otherwise." In fact most women in her village agreed with her, although in the other villages I found some variation in this regard. Kristín, for example, is a fish-plant worker and has two children. I asked her about her husband's participation in housework and if there were some jobs that he in particular took care of. She said: "No, I take care of it all. It is just when I tell him to do things such as helping with the care of the children, and helping when I am putting them to bed."

One can debate whether these clearly defined gender roles in the household should be seen as an expression of an equal but different position of men and women or as an expression of inequality between them. There certainly are positive images associated with being a housewife and especially a fisherman's wife in Icelandic fishing communities. Fishermen's wives are seen as strong and independent. They act as heads of their households while their men are away at sea. They run their households from day to day, make decisions regarding their children and maintain kinship and community relations. However, as we have seen, not all women in fishing communities are in fact fishermen's wives. Even though they are not seen as independent in the same way as fishermen's wives, the women interviewed in this study who are not married to fishermen share the responsibility of taking care of household finances with their husbands. Women are more often those who take care of the wallet, of paying bills and day-to-day spending. This gives them a certain amount of autonomy and independence although they hardly ever talk about it in such a way. Some women instead talk about this as an added burden to their double

day. To evaluate whether the independence described here means more power or a better position for women one must look at the household in the larger context in which women's wage work is very poorly remunerated. The importance given to their roles as housewives helps justify the low wages they receive, because they are not seen as main providers (Babb 1986; Beneria and Sen 1986; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

We can see from the above discussion that we cannot easily generalize about women in Icelandic fishing communities. There exist some important differences among them. Not all are either fishermen's wives or fish processors, although some are both, and all have either close relatives, friends or neighbours who are. They share a common locally based identity and common identities in relation to the fisheries. These locally based identities can at times overshadow the existing diversities among women and between women and men. We have observed that there are important gender-based inequalities which can, for example, be seen in the freezing plant where women's work has less value than men's and where women are primarily found in the lower-paying jobs. This is a position they share with other Icelandic women who have low-paying jobs in rural and urban areas. In spite of the strength women may get from being central in the household and having strong locally based ties, gender inequalities can easily be discerned as men are those who dominate in the political and economic arena. It is therefore not enough to describe only the different realities of women in fishing communities to better understand the social construction of the feminine. It is also necessary to examine the ways in which gender is socially constructed, based on inequality in the different spheres of society.

In this discussion of women in Icelandic fishing communities I have emphasized the importance of combining an examination of diversity with an analysis of gender in the construction of inequality. If we only describe gender inequality among men and women we may tend to oversimplify the commonalities among women. However if we only examine the differences among women we may lose sight of the commonalities and exaggerate the differences. Thus, I have argued that in order to get a clearer picture of women's position in Icelandic fishing communities we have to examine the social processes which create similarities as well as differences. By examining these processes locally but in a larger context we have seen not only what divides women but also what unites them. In this study I found that women's common identities do not only reflect their common gendered position but are also based on a sense of locality which they themselves help generate. The emphasis placed in the community on common interests with respect to the fisheries can mask differences such as those based on different economic interests and even gender.

### Acknowledgments

The research on which this article is based was funded by the Joint Committee on Western Europe of the American Council of Learned Societies, The Social Science Research Council, the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Icelandic Research Council and the University of Iceland. I would like to express my appreciation for the help received from all of them.

I would like to thank my research assistant Hulda Proppé for her help and Fríða Þórarinsdóttir, Ólöf Garðarsdóttir, Eva Munk-Madsen and anonymous reviewers for their comments on this article.

### References Cited

Árnason, Ragnar

- 1992 The Icelandic Fishing Industry—A Descriptive Account. *In* *Nar fisken svikter*. Nord REFO. Copenhagen: Academic Press.

Babb, Florence E.

- 1986 Producers and Reproducers: Andean Market Women in the Economy. *In* *Women and Change in Latin America*, edited by June Nash and Helen Safa, pp. 53-64. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.

Beneria, Lourdes, and Gita Sen

- 1986 Accumulation, Reproduction, and Women's Role in Economic Development: Boserup Revisited. *In* *Women's Work: Development and the Division of Labor by Gender*, edited by Eleanor Leacock and Helen Safa, pp. 141-157. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.

Cole, Sally

- 1991 *Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Davis, Dona Lee, and Jane Nadel-Klein

- 1992 Gender, Culture and the Sea: Contemporary Theoretical Approaches. *Society and Natural Resources* 5:135-147.

Friedman, Jonathan

- 1994 *Cultural Identity & Global Processes*. London: Sage.

Gunnlaugsson, Gísli Ágúst, and Ólöf Garðarsdóttir

- 1996 Transition into Widowhood: A Life-course Perspective on the Household Position of Icelandic Widows at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century. *Continuity and Change* 11(3):435-458.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson

- 1992 Beyond Culture: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1):6-23.

Löfgren, Orvar

- 1979 Marine Ecotypes in Pre-industrial Sweden: A Comparative Discussion of Swedish Peasant Fishermen. *In* *North Atlantic Maritime Cultures*, edited by Raoul Andersen, pp. 83-109. The Hague: Mouton.



Moore, Henrietta

- 1993 The Difference Within and the Difference Between. *In* Gendered Anthropology, edited by Teresa del Valle, pp. 193-204. London: Routledge.

Munk-Madsen, Eva, and Marit Husmo

- 1989 Kjønnsmyster med konsekvenser. En analyse av skillet mellom kvinner og menn i industriell fiskefordeling til lands og til vanns. Sysselsetning i Fiskeridistriktene. Rapport I. Tromsø: Norges Fiskerihøgskole.

Nadel-Klein, Jane

- 1991 Reweaving the Fringe: Localism, Tradition, and Representations in British Ethnography. *American Ethnologist* 18(3):500-517.

Nadel-Klein, Jane, and Davis, Dona Lee

- 1988 To Work and to Weep: Women in Fishing Economies. Newfoundland Social and Economic Papers No. 18. St. John's, NF: Memorial University of Newfoundland Institute of Social and Economic Research.

Nash, June, and Maria P. Fernandez-Kelly

- 1983 Women, Men and the International Division of Labor. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Pálsson, Gísli, and Agnar Helgason

- 1996 Figuring Fish and Measuring Men: The Individual Transferable Quota System in the Icelandic Cod Fishery. *Ocean & Coastal Management* 28(1-3):117-146.

Pratt, Geraldine, and Susan Hanson

- 1994 Geography and the Construction of Difference. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 1(1): 5-29.

Scott, Joan

- 1988 Gender and the Politics of History. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sider, Gerald

- 1986 Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sinclair, Peter R., and Lawrence Felt

- 1992 Separate Worlds: Gender and Domestic Labor in an Isolated Fishing Region. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 29(1):55-71.

Skaptadóttir, Unnur Dís

- 1995 Fishermen's Wives and Fish Processors: Continuity and Change in Women's Position in Icelandic Fishing Villages, 1870-1990. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.

Skaptadóttir, Unnur Dís

- 1996 Housework and Wage work: Gender in Icelandic Fishing Communities. *In* Images of Contemporary Iceland, edited by Gísli Pálsson and Paul Durrenberger eds., pp. 87-105. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.