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BEHIND THE SCENES: SEAFARING AND FAMILY LIFE

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Abstract

Separation from partner and family has been found to be one of the most significant causes of stress for seafarers (Parker et al., 1997), with separation from the family one of the most important 'stress' factors influencing a decision to reduce planned sea service (Telegraph, 1999). Drawing on in-depth interviews with seafarers' partners in the UK, China and India, this paper focuses on the impact of seafaring on family life, with particular attention given to the effects of differing conditions of service and the range of company support available to seafarers and their partners. The paper concludes that the negative consequences of seafaring can be minimised by such policies as shorter trips, continuous employment (rather than employment by voyage) and opportunities for partners and families to sail. Whilst these measures may have financial costs, these can be off-set by improved retention of seafarers and the avoidance of stress-related illnesses. Indeed, at a time when there is a projected shortfall of well-trained seafarers, such steps may be sound company policy.

INTRODUCTION

The world's seafarers can be seen as one of the first truly international and global workforces, comprising of individuals from regions as geographically and culturally disparate as Western Europe, Russia, India, South America and the Philippines. Such seafarers work on a range of different vessels, operating different trades, with a diverse range of work conditions. However, one thing that these individuals have in common is that their work necessitates prolonged separations from their home and families, separations that are often characterised by infrequent opportunities for communication. As such, seafaring may be seen as a more than an occupation, rather a lifestyle - a lifestyle that involves a constant series of partings and reunions with associated transitions from shore-based life to the unique work environment of the ship. Inevitably it is a lifestyle that will impact dramatically on both seafarers and their families alike.

Given the dearth of research on seafarers in general, it is no surprise that little attention has been given to the impact of seafaring on family life or the effect of prolonged absences from home and family on the seafarers themselves. However the

little research that does exist suggests that such separations from home and family may be problematic for seafarers and their families. Research with harbour physicians in Rotterdam identified three main psychological problems among seafarers: loneliness, homesickness, and "burn-out" syndrome. The problems were primarily caused by long periods away from home, the decreased number of seafarers per ship, and by increased automation (Agterberg and Passchier, 1998). More recent research by the Australian Maritime Safety Association (AMSA) found that seafarers reported the 'home-work' interface to be their greatest source of stress (Parker et al., 1997). Such problems may not be without consequence: investigations into suicide at sea have identified marital and family problems as contributory factors to the event (Roberts, 1998).

Whilst seafarers' partners do not have to physically leave their homes and families in the same way that seafarers do, they are, nevertheless, also faced with a relationship characterised by separation and reunion and the constant adjustments these transitions require. Research suggests that such a pattern may affect health resulting in higher rates of depression and anxiety amongst seafarers' partners than in the general population (Parker et al., 1998). As with seafarers, studies of partners highlight the difficulties associated with the transition periods of the work cycle. In 1986 an Australian study of seafarers' wives found 83% reporting some degree of stress when their partners were due home or due to return to sea, with nearly one in ten (8%) reporting taking medication to cope (Foster and Cacioppe, 1986). Nearly half (42%) of the women in this sample felt that their relationship with their partner was strongly at risk due to the seafaring lifestyle and 25% believed that their partner was having, or had had, an affair.

This paper will focus on the impact of seafaring on seafarers' families. In particular, it will consider the impact of differing conditions of work on seafarers' families and will explore the range of company support available to address and minimise the impact of a seafaring lifestyle. It draws on data collected from two different studies: the Transnational Communities Project (TNC) (Kahveci and Sampson) and the Seafaring and Family Life Study (Thomas and Zhao).

METHODS

The data presented in this paper is drawn from 35 interviews conducted over an 12 month period. Interviews were conducted in the UK, India and China, with a small number of interviews being conducted aboard ship in international waters. Women were identified using a number of strategies, including use of existing SIRC databases, an advertisement in the NUMAST Telegraph, contacts made whilst doing shipboard research, and information from shipping companies and trade unions.

Seafaring and family life is a relatively unexplored area and as such, interview formats were structured in a flexible way, in this way ensuring that researchers were not restricted by their own pre-conceived ideas but could encourage participants to explain things in their own terms, allowing the researcher to explore interesting issues and experiences as they were introduced by the informant. All interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of those with Chinese seafarer's wives, which were conducted in Chinese by Zhao and our Chinese collaborators. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim¹.

The women interviewed for this study were of different ages and points in their lives, some were recently married, some had young children, some had adult children and some had partners who had recently retired. All the women's partners were employed in cargo shipping. The Indian women's partners were both officers and ratings. Chinese and British women were married to officers².

Throughout the text, verbatim quotes are included from the interviews. This gives a vivid account of how respondents think, talk and behave. Each quote is assigned an identifier to indicate the rank of their partner and the country where the interview took place.³

¹ Chinese interviews were transcribed in Chinese and translated to English.

² In the British data there was an over-representation of women married to Captains and Chief Engineers, reflecting the increased likelihood of those in these groups to respond to the recruitment advertisement.

³ Throughout this paper seafarers will be attributed the male gender and their partners, female. However, the authors recognise that seafarers may be female and have male partners, and that both male and female seafarers may choose same-sex partners. We also recognise that partners, may, in some cases not be married and hence not be 'wives' or 'husbands'. However, for the purposes of this

CULTURAL CONTEXT

The women interviewed for this study experience their lives as seafarers' partners in quite different cultural contexts. The Chinese women participating in the research lived in either Shanghai or Nanyang. Most of the women in Shanghai lived in apartment buildings built and subsidised by their husbands' companies, and hence in a seafaring community near the port. The living context for the Nanyang wives was different. Far from the sea and the shipping company, these women lived in an environment, which was land-oriented and they had little knowledge of shipping or seafaring. The wives of British officers were geographical dispersed and lived in both coastal and inland regions. Many had little previous connection with the sea or shipping. Although occasionally, these women were aware of other seafarer's wives who lived in their locality, they usually had little or no contact with each other. In India the women included in the study lived in very different social, geographic, and economic, environments. Some officers wives lived in the highly urban environment of Mumbai. They tended to live in small, sparsely furnished, low-rise apartments on private estates that were generally protected by security guards. They normally relied on domestic help with cleaning and childcare. Their lives were less exposed to public scrutiny than those of their Goan counterparts. In Goa, officers wives lived in luxurious detached houses with large well cared for gardens and a range of paid helpers including gardeners and maids. They were surrounded by a close community and had much less freedom than seafarers' partners in Mumbai. Nevertheless many were in paid employment and social attitudes did not seem as constraining as they were in the small village communities that tended to house the wives of ratings. In these small villages, some ratings' partners lived in poverty. They were frequently in debt to their neighbours and families, and where ratings' wives were in paid employment, this was invariably for the little financial reward they could gain. Many wives of seafarers in India had been married by arrangement. Their domestic, as well as their economic and social situations, were, therefore, rather different to those of the British and Chinese partners of seafarers.

FINDINGS

Working Conditions

Length of contract

Not surprisingly length of contract was a significant factor shaping the experience of being married to a seafarer. Contract lengths vary according to nationality and rank, and reflect company employment policies, types of trade and differential labour market values (SIRC, 1999). In China, in order to deal with surplus seafarers, large employers have adopted policies to shorten seafarers' sailing time by as much as half so that 'seafarers take turns to go to sea' (Zhao, 2001, personal communication). Such strategies have resulted in Chinese seafarers working for local companies having a sea-time of approximately 6 months with a corresponding leave period of a further 6 months. Chinese seafarers working for foreign ship owners can expect to work for one year or longer before they are allowed to take 3-4 months leave ashore. Indian seafarers experience tours of similar duration however they correlate more strongly with rank (with officers enjoying shorter contracts than ratings) than with flag or company. As with Indian officers, the partners of women in the UK study worked tours of duty ranging from 3 weeks to 6 months, with the majority working three-four months away. For British seafarers, leave periods varied from equal time to a ratio of two to one (work to leave).

Only those British women whose husbands worked tours of relatively short duration (4 weeks or less) reported that they found the length of the period apart acceptable. Regardless of their nationality, the majority of women found such long absences led to considerable problems, including loneliness while their partner was away and an irreconcilable emotional distance when their partner returned home.

It's just an awful long time, you know it's just - they're just away for such a chunk of the year, and every time they come home on a leave for a little bit and then gone, they just seem to be away for an awfully long time.

Third officer's Wife, UK

For women whose partners worked longer tours of duty, the difficulties of maintaining an emotional closeness with their partner seemed more apparent.

I would enjoy having my husband come home at night, in a way. It's a different life. Not together for months sometimes. Sometimes it gets to you. But I am more used to it than anything, but there's nothing like having the person there. Eight and a half months, and then back again. As you get old, things change, and you have to get back into the routine. Feelings change, emotions change, ways of thinking change.

Captain's wife, India

The difficulties of separation could be exacerbated in the situation where families had young children. Women were aware that their partners were absent for large and significant periods of their children's lives and witnessed the distress of both their partners and their children when husband and child were as strangers to one another.

Too long. And for the children also, they are lost without their father. They want father's love. So it's a problem. That's the main thing when you go for too long... Yes, he used to feel bad. 'Why are they not coming and talking to me?' Sometimes it was like they had not seen their father at all. When they are born, and then he comes home after seven months or eight months, they don't recognise who he is. When they were two or three years, he used to say 'Why are they not coming to me?' I said, 'It takes time, they must get used to you.' Then after they get used to him, they go and play.... Disadvantages in the sense of, the love between the father and the children, it comes less. They don't get to know the father properly, and he's away a very long time at sea. Then he comes home, and stays for a long time with the children. They say, 'How long are you home, when do you go away?' Because they didn't know him much.

Chief cooks' wife, India

The wives of Indian officers appeared to fare better than the wives of Indian ratings: Indian officers working on Flag of Convenience vessels were often in the position to pick and choose contracts so that they might work as little as four months in twelve. British seafarers and their partners also enjoyed a better ratio of leave to work than Indian ratings and Chinese seafarers working for foreign companies. Indeed, for the partners of British seafarers, what appeared to be crucial to the experience of their partner being away was not simply the length of the trip, but rather the ratio of work to leave time. A 'one-to-one' ratio of work to leave time was desired by most wives of British seafarers. However, for seafarers' partners from China and ratings' and petty officers' partners from India, their different economic circumstances and seafarers employment contracts could mean that long leave periods could, in fact, be filled with anxiety and tension.

And it becomes too much, with the man at home, they are out drinking, and we are eating. It is too much. When we are at home, we know how to adjust ourselves, but when they are they are at home as well, it is too expensive. Very high. With the company, there should be a gap of maybe two months, or three months, at the most. You know how these officers, they have four and a half months they work and then four and a half months leave. They know. And still they get wages. But ours, my husband doesn't get wages. He's on completely no wages at all for the six or seven months. That becomes very difficult for us.
Chief Cook's wife, India

Most of the women interviewed in Shanghai were redundant workers and solely dependent on the seafarers' wages for financial support. Thus, the reduced wages during the seafarer's leave period could have a significant impact on the financial resources available to the family (at a time when, perversely, the presence of the long-absent seafarers could cause living costs to rise). For Indian women, their partners' contracts were often only for the duration of any one trip so leave periods were often entirely unpaid, resulting in a dependency on savings for the duration of the leave period. Whilst, in some cases seafarers could be recalled by the same company, there appeared to exist a general uncertainty about *when* they would be recalled. Indian ratings without an Indian CDC⁴ appeared to find it particularly difficult to get regular work, often resulting in very long leave periods. For the partners of these seafarers, there existed a conflict between the desire to spend time with their husband and partner and concerns about the economic survival of their family when the seafarer was at home. Such concerns could result in a long-awaited family reunion being fraught with tension and anxiety.

Demands on leave time

Leave time may be vital in order for the seafarer to rest and relax after their sea voyage and for couples and families to re-establish bonds and relationships. As noted earlier, for some seafarers, ratios of leave to work time may be very low, and as such, time may be at a premium. Our interview data suggests that such shore-based time cannot be considered as uninterrupted free time for seafarers to utilise according to their own wishes and indeed figures for leave periods may in fact give a misleading

⁴ Indian Seaman's Book.

impression of seafarers' time away from the demands and restrictions of the workplace.

Increasing global regulation of the shipping industry, such as the STCW '95, has led to increased demands on seafarers to ensure that they meet with industry training standards. Unable to attend courses whilst at sea, seafarers often have no choice but to complete pre-requisite courses during their leave period. Such training courses may be substantial, both in duration and in financial cost to the seafarer and their family. Whilst some courses may last only a few days, this period is increased by, often considerable, travel time, and indeed it was not unheard of for courses to last up to three months⁵. In the context of a leave period of perhaps eight weeks, even relatively short courses could present a significant encroachment on leave time. Both the wives of Chinese and Indian seafarers commented on training demands that infringed on the seafarers' leave period.

It is an ocean going vessel and the voyage lasts for a minimum of 11 months, normally it lasts for more than a year. Last year he was on the ship for more than 13 months, only came back this April, and a month and a bit later he was called back by the company, to do a 48-day training scheme. The scheme was in Guangzhou. During the four months when he was back, he was home for less than half the time. Then he went to the training course, after that he was home for less than a week, then he was called to go back aboard the ship.

Second Engineer's wife, China.

Ratings' and petty officers' wives in India also reported that their husbands were required to 'report in' to the office upon their return home. The office could be a flight distance away and so further prolonged the separation between seafarers and their families. Senior officers generally did not report back to their offices in person but would wait to be called to return to their ships or would call in when they were ready to return to work.

⁵ During fieldwork in Shanghai, Zhao spoke with a group of seafarers taking a three month course in language and STCW training at a marine colleague. Seafarers who stayed on campus were not allowed to visit their families until the weekend and for some, in other cities, this meant separation from their families for the entire duration of the course.

The wives of British seafarers did not talk about training requirements or demands from the office cutting into leave periods. This may be because more favourable contracts may add any training time to the seafarers' leave period, thus avoiding the loss of time with the family. However, the wives of British seafarers did feel that work invaded leave periods albeit in a less tangible way than experienced by Chinese and Indian women. The wives of British seafarers reported that their partners often returned home from sea, exhausted and stressed and took sometime to unwind and adjust to family life again. Similarly women reported that their partner's began to make adjustments for their return back to sea as they neared the end of their leave period. Where the leave period was short in duration, couples and families could be left with very little quality time together.

I found it horrendous, he would come home so tired, absolutely zonked out cos he was still a second mate and he'd come home absolutely shattered - took him days and days to get over it - and then half way through he would come alive and then be worried about going back to work the fourth week. So you'd always have two out of the four weeks that were useless.

Captain's wife, UK

Thus, regardless of nationality, women in this study found leave periods to be far from unfettered by the demands of work. For Indian and Chinese seafarers, the need to undergo training to meet with new regulations and international standards often necessitated further periods away from their homes and families. For the wives of British officers, this did not appear to be such a problem, possibly due to better conditions of service which meant that they were compensated for any loss of leave due to training. Other company demands, such as requirements to visit central offices, could also encroach on leave periods. Changes in the industry such as increased automation, decreased crewing levels, increased work load and decreased job security have put pressure on seafarers to put in extra hours to keep their jobs (Collins, et al., 2000). Such pressures have resulted in increased levels of stress and fatigue (NUMAST, 1995). These increased hours of work and occupational pressures appeared to expand beyond the confines of the ship to impact on home life. For the wives of British officers, one of the most common problems during the transition period between ship and home was related to the stress associated with the job and the problems their partner had 'switching off' when they returned home from a tour of

duty, and the subsequent anxieties in the period prior to re-joining the vessel. Thus even for those on more favourable contracts, where training time was compensated by additional leave, work concerns could still be manifest and have a detrimental effect on family life.

Ship visits and women sailing

The opportunity to sail with a partner was something that was made available to the majority of wives of British and Indian officers. Those women who had sailed were generally very positive about the experience and felt that not only did it give them valuable time with their husbands but that it also led to a greater understanding of their partner's work. Indian women reported feeling that the time spent together aboard improved their abilities to communicate with their husbands and that sailing with their husband allowed them to come to understand that the life of a seafarer was mostly hard work and this prevented them from being resentful or suspicious.

Yes. Definitely. I would have felt that understanding may not have been there, the closeness may not have been there in the initial years of marriage, if I had not been able to sail with him. Now that I look back now. That helped me a lot.
Chief Officer's wife, India

Where women (British and Indian) were able to take their children aboard to sail, they also felt this had a positive effects on relationships between children and their fathers.

Wives of Indian seafarers employed as ratings were less likely to be able to sail with their husbands⁶. The data suggested that those Indian women who were not allowed to sail regretted that they were not able to do so and seemed to feel shut out of their husband's lives.

Is there anything you think is important that I haven't asked about?
Only the seafarers can't take their wives on the ship. That's the worst problem.
Otherwise - we are used to it. He must go.

⁶ One company that employed several of the Indian seafarers whose wives were included in the study allowed the wives of any ranks to sail, subject to available (suitable) living accommodation and safety regulations.

Why is it so important, do you think?

It's like that. For many years my husband has been a shippie. And I should like also to share his job or whatever his life is on the ship. I am a shippie's wife.

Chief Cook's wife, India

In China, women have not traditionally been allowed to sail with their husbands. More usually, seafarer's wives have tended to visit their husbands on board when the ship is in port. This was true of the Chinese women interviewed in this study. Women reported travelling long and arduous journeys with their children, and sometimes their families, in order to spend some precious time with their husbands.

When the child was small, we have met twice on his ship. Once in 1983 was in Shanghai, he wrote to say when the ship would be arriving and asked me to take the child to Shanghai. Then our child was only four, we took the train from Huang Shi in Hubei to Shanghai, and it took us three days and two nights by train. After that, we stayed on the ship for three days, then he sent us on the ship bound for home, then his ship left.

Second Engineer's wife, China

The opportunity to spend time with each other was valued by the seafarers and their partners alike. However, there was evidence that the drastic reduction of turnaround time had had a direct effect on the length of the wife's visit. In the past, when time in port was longer, the visiting wife could stay aboard with her husband for several days while the ship was operating in port. In contrast, more recently, it appeared to be quite common for a woman to travel for several days from inland provinces, only to be able to her husband for a few hours, (if, indeed, she did not miss the ship altogether). A woman recounts her experience when she visited her husband's ship in 2000:

He was sailing at sea when our child was born. Our child is 8 months old now. Three months ago, when his ship was calling Qingdao, I took the child and my parents to visit him there. He missed us very much and said that he would be happy if he could only have a look at the baby. Otherwise, he would have to wait for another few months and when our child could become one year old. So I agreed. I had a painful arm, I had to take my parents to help me on the way. It was a long journey, from Nanyang to Qingdao, 29 hours by train. By the time we arrived there, it was already 5 o'clock in the afternoon and the ship would be sailing at 10. We met for only 4 hours. I was really sad . . . I wish he could have stayed longer. But the ship had been loaded and

unloaded so quickly that I had to take my baby and leave the ship after only meeting with him for 4 hours!
Second Officer's wife, China

The accounts of British and Indian women who had had the opportunities to sail with their husbands reflect the beneficial effects of this opportunity for both seafarers and their partners. Indeed, the efforts made by Chinese women to visit their husbands, even for very short periods, illustrates the importance of physical contact, however brief, for couples and their families. For women, spending time with their husbands aboard served to bridge the gap between ship and shore life and to facilitate support and understanding between couples. Women could have an insight into the occupational world of their husband whilst simultaneously reducing or avoiding the lengthy separations which could be so detrimental to relationships.

Company support

The level of Company support varied considerably amongst the women in the study. Chinese women appeared to have considerably more company support than their Indian and British counterparts. The most clear illustration of this can be seen in the example of the 'Seafarers' Wives Committee' which was introduced by the Party Committee through the trade union of the shipping company. The chief objective of the Committee was to 'unite seafarers wives at home front and to provide support for seafarers at sea,' (Zhao, 2001, personal communication). As a woman in charge of the Seafarers Wives' Committee explained:

The Committee commits itself to help the seafarers' families. We have a tradition here. Any seafarer returns from the sea for leave, one of the first things he does is to report to the Committee. He would drop in and say hello to us. And, he would say, "Hi, I am home for two months. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you need any help." In this case, we would know who is at home and who isn't. Then, when seafarers' wives need help, for instance, when they need to move house, to buy coal or do other physically demanding tasks, we would give some of the men a ring and ask them for help. Oh, yeah, they are always happy to help, because they know their wives may need help when they are away sailing at sea.

Aided by the close physical proximity of seafaring families to each other, the Committee played a crucial role in organising the seafarers and their families together

and formalising a mutually beneficial relationship which otherwise could only be realised through the informal means of seafarers' social networking. The Chinese wives recognised the work and contribution of the Committee in promoting the welfare for seafarers and their families.

His work unit has been good to me, especially when I was sick. In 1988, I somehow adopted hepatitis and our son was only 7 years old. I phoned his company, asking if they could allow him to leave this ship and come back to look after me. They told me that it might take him a while to return, but they offered to send a person to help me. Although I declined their offer, because hepatitis is a very infectious disease and I didn't want anyone to pick it up, I have been touched by their kindness. Then, in 1999 when I had a major surgery, the company phoned me several times to send their best wishes. They also gave me some money and bought me fruits when I returned home from the hospital.

Chief officer's wife, China

However, at the same time, these women also expressed disappointment with the company as, as a result of the country's economic reform, such an important service has been reduced in recent years.

The company calls us as Haifuren (seafarers' wives) and we also refer ourselves so. I believe that Haifuren's role is very important, but the work unit doesn't pay us much attention now. They used to organise parties or other gathering occasions for us, but they no longer organise such activities now.

Captain's wife, China

The importance of the clustering of seafaring families to the success of the Committee can be seen when the situation of seafaring wives in inland areas is examined. The geographical distance between them prevented the 'Wives Station' to function effectively or in the same way as the Committee in the port cities where most seafarers and their families live in the same apartment buildings.

Well, I met them only once, it was when they came to organise the Wives Station. Other than that, my contact with them is mainly by phone or post. They sometimes send forms for us to fill in, such as the medical form for him, the family planning form, their annual thanks letter etc. They were always very kind whenever I phoned them ... but I don't think that I can rely on them for practical help. I have to depend on my own family, my parents for help whenever I have any problem.

Second officer's wife, China

In this case, seafarers' wives were more dependent on their informal social networks, especially their own parents, for practical support.

In contrast to the experience of the Chinese seafarers' wives, contact with company was reported to be low by several of the wives of British officers. Approximately one third of these women said they had little or no contact with the company that employed their husband. About a third of the UK seafarers' wives had had reason to contact the company for the husband to be brought home in a family emergency, ranging from a parent's stroke to the illness of daughter. However many women had had negative experiences in relation to their partner's company. In extreme cases, two seafarers had been made unexpectedly redundant and informed by letter after many years of service for the same company, another woman found, from reading a national newspaper, that the ship her husband was on was caught in cross-fire during the Gulf war and a third seafarer was never paid over £20, 000 salary owed to him. Less extreme was the frequently expressed complaint relating to the unpredictability of work schedules. Difficulties finding reliefs was reported as extremely stressful for seafarers and their partners and families and led to an inability to plan, from small events like trips to the theatre to family holidays. The uncertainty associated with transitions from work to home and from home to work could be a particular source of tension for seafarers and their families.

Like I was, that's another thing because it disrupts my lifestyle because I work full time when he's away and he'll come home unexpected now and I wasn't due for holidays until September cos I was hoping to book a couple of weeks off when he comes home in September. So now he won't be home in September and of course I'm saying 'is there any way you can give me a week off cos he's only home for a week?', you know.

Captain's wife, UK

The experiences of the wives of Indian seafarers varied according to the rank of their husband: senior officers' wives appeared to have good company support and access, rather similar to that reported by the wives of British officers. However for the wives of Indian ratings, the situation was quite different. Some women reported that they felt they were deliberately kept in the dark by their husbands' companies and sometimes they were just not kept informed at all.

If there was an emergency at home, do you know how to contact him?

Yes. I try to contact the office. Last time, when I lost my mother, they didn't know where he was. We sent a fax message to them, but they didn't contact [him]. [. . . .]

How long was it, from when you lost your mother to when he came?

It was twenty-eight days. My brother came from abroad. But my husband didn't get the message.

So you knew how to contact him, but it didn't work. And you don't have any direct contact with the ship?

No.

Motorman's wife, India

The experience of the Chinese seafarers' wives in terms of company support largely reflects the specific historical and cultural context⁷. However, regardless of the origin – it was clear that this support was valued by the women and appeared to lessen the impact of having a partner who was away from home for long periods. More support and contact from the company was often mentioned as a means of improving the welfare of seafarers and their families by both Indian and British seafarers' wives. In particular, it was felt important that that partners should feel that they could get in touch with their husband in the event of an emergency and that the company should keep families informed of their partner's ship's movements. Several British seafarers' wives reported that they would welcome any efforts by their husband's company to put them in touch with other seafarers' wives and families. Efforts to reduce the uncertainty regarding dates as to when their partners were due to return home or join ships were also steps that women felt would be welcomed.

Communication

The separation from family and home has been found to be one of the most significant factors contributing to stress amongst those in offshore industries (Sutherland and Flin, 1989). Contact with home can be particularly important at times of ill health of family members when stress levels at sea can rise dramatically (Parker et al., 1997). Advances in communication technology have considerable significance in the lives of

⁷ In China, employees refer to their employers, such as schools, factories or hospitals, as *danwei* or the work units. Under the planned economy the work unit was responsible for providing its employees with both their wages and virtually all the social services such as child care, children's education, medicine, pension, and even incurred cost for funerals. Whilst economic reform has drastically restructured the institution of the work unit in the last 20 years, the work unit still carries far more weight in shaping individuals' work and life than most employers in the Western economy.

work-separated couples (Robertson, 2001) and in maintaining relationships with the family and shore-based life (Davies and Parfett, 1998). Indeed, reduced frequency of contact can lead to relationship decline and eventual breakdown (Argyle, 1990).

It is not surprising that for all women, regardless of nationality, communication with their husbands and between ship and shore was of considerable significance. Communication was important for a number of reasons, to allay fears, to maintain close relationships, to improve seafarers morale, to relieve stress (on board and at home) and to maintain relationships with children.

It's OK for me, we don't have kids. But others, it is very difficult for a father to leave the child and go. When they go they really feel bad. They don't like to leave the family. They wait for the letters from the family, I have seen them. Specially when they go to port, they come running, 'My letter has come.' And they are happy, when they receive their letters. The person who does not receive his letter - my husband always tells me, 'Write something and send it to me.' When they are over there, they keep on thinking about the family. So when you read something again and again, it makes you feel a little better
Chief Officer's wife, India

For Indian women who had had arranged marriages, ship-shore communication could be vital, not just to sustain the relationship, but for the couple to actually get to know each other.

I think - because you know he keeps on ringing me up from every port, every port there is not any money matters for him. He will just keep talking. I say 'It is becoming expensive', but he will say no, no. 'You keep on talking to me.' Then he will call his mummy, call his father. He kept on talking to them. After that, I came to know. Because initially, since we didn't know each other, you always have that feeling, because you don't know the person as such.
Chief Officer's wife, India

Seafarers and their partners reported utilising a wide range of forms of communication, from conventional letters, to satellite and mobile phone calls and email. Advances in communication technology were heralded as quite life-changing to this group. Increasing access to email and to cheaper international phone calls via cell-net phones served to expand opportunities for communication considerably.

Before, we contacted each other by letters. Letters were our spiritual food then. We wrote to each other a letter every month. Occasionally we made phone calls. But phone calls were too expensive at that time, so I would have to prepare well what to say before dialling the number. Now we use the phone and mobile to keep in touch.

Captain's wife, China

However, whilst advances in telecommunication technology were undoubtedly advantageous to seafarers and their partners, access varied considerably. All wives appeared to use a combination of letters and phone calls, with British, and occasionally Indian, women reporting using email to stay in touch with their partners. All couples were, in fact, very reliant on modern communication technology for contact with their partners. All of the British couples (where the seafarer was currently serving) used cell phones to communicate (both nationally and internationally). This is considerably higher than the national rate of mobile phone ownership⁸. In addition, nearly half of the British couples reported having email facilities at home. A much higher proportion than those wives of Indian and Chinese seafarers.

Those women who had access to email were very positive about its effect on their lives and their relationships.

It's [email] absolutely wonderful because whereas before I'd say 'Oh bloody hell the girls – they've pissed me off!' or something like that....Now he can say 'well what have they done now?' Whereas before I'd have had to bottle it all up and you might put it down on paper but when you do that it isn't anything like the day that you've gone through. Maybe by the time he's come back you've got it all resolved but its better to be able to share it there and then.

Captain's wife, UK

Email and telephone conversations allowed wives to keep their partner informed of small day-to-day events that might not be reported in a letter or mentioned on their return home. The frequency and style of email and telephone conversations was reported to be vital in managing the transition from home to work and work to home and in linking the two domains so that movement between the two was less problematic. Those British seafarers working coastal routes could often call home

⁸ From 1990-2000, 44% of households in Britain had at least one mobile phone (National Statistics, 2001).

using shore-based mobile networks, at dramatically lower costs than satellite phone calls. Weekly telephone communication was not uncommon for those British seafarers working in these conditions. Emotional needs were met by frequency of telephone calls but such contact was also valued for its practical implications, allowing seafarers to take part in, and respond to household and family decisions such as queries over house insurance, and decisions relating to children's well-being.

Then there were no telephones, we wrote to each other. At the shortest there were a letter every one and a half months, and at the longest it was two to three months. Now we have telephone in the house, it is a lot convenient. He says that he bought a telephone card there and that it is cheaper if he calls us from the port. He cares about his family, although he can't help me much, only letters and telephones, it gives you a psychological comfort.

Second Engineer's wife, China

How do you feel now because he is working on coastal routes?
I feel like he is working somewhere in [local town] because we keep in touch all the time by phone.

Chief Engineer's wife, UK

However technological advance was seen as a doubled edged sword by some of the women. Chinese women reported still finding it quite expensive to phone internationally and opportunities for seafarers to call home were found to be impeded by the drastic reduction in turnaround times and the development of ports in areas remote from town facilities, leaving seafarers without the time or the facilities to call their families.

The accounts of women interviewed highlights the crucial importance of communication to seafarers and their families. Communication allowed relationships to be developed and sustained, over often lengthy absences and provided opportunities for couples to provide mutual support and for the seafarer to feel an active part of the family and household through participation in every-day events and decision making. Despite technological advances, the data suggested continued discrepancies in access to telecommunication facilities. Some wives of Indian ratings reported only recently having a domestic telephone installed at home, whereas it was not uncommon for wives of Indian officers to have email facilities at home and all of the wives of serving British officers reported having a household and cell net (mobile)

phone from which contact could be made in both national and international coastal waters. Many couples in these studies were fortunate in that seafarers held senior ranks and had access to shipboard telecommunication facilities (such as email) and salaries that allowed the financial costs associated with communication to be less than prohibitive. However, this may not be the case for seafarers of different ranks and nationalities (SIRC, 1999) and indeed, did not appear to be the case for the wives of Indian ratings interviewed for this study. Access to cheaper (or free) communication was frequently mentioned as a means of improving the welfare of seafaring families and reducing the negative effects of a seafaring lifestyle on family life.

Hidden Costs

Seafarers are often seen as high earners and in India and China being 'dollar-earners' gave seafarers and their families a 'wealthy' status within their communities. In the UK the tax-benefits of working in international waters can often mean seafarers have a higher disposable income than many of their peers. However seafaring is not without its costs. The emotional cost to seafarers and their families may be immeasurable, however in addition, our research suggests that whilst, for many, the relatively high salary is an incentive to work at sea, the very nature of the seafaring occupation can place additional financial burdens on seafarers' families which are not faced by those with shore-based jobs.

Perhaps the most significant financial cost for seafaring families, regardless of nationality, is the cost of communication. As outlined previously, in the absence of any opportunity to be physically in each other's presence, communication between ship and shore could be vital to seafarers and their families. Indeed, for many seafaring families communication was of such importance that the financial implications of 'staying in touch' were often disregarded.

Sometimes he calls me twice a day. Sometimes - well, it depends. If he gets a port, the first thing he will do is call me. Sometimes he does satellite calls also. He really doesn't think about the money. He talks to me and I talk to him, and we feel good about each other.

Chief Cook's wife, India

In addition to the cost of the communication, the cost of purchasing equipment to communicate could also involve large initial financial outlay. Of the British couples, approximately half of those households, where the seafarer was currently working, had access to email at home⁹. It was not clear whether access was solely the result of the need to communicate with an absent partner or whether the equipment and Internet connection would have been purchased regardless. However the initial cost of purchasing computer hard and software and the ongoing cost of Internet connection can be considerable. Other couples in the study reported buying FAX machines to be installed in their homes as a cheaper alternative to satellite phone calls. It is unlikely that such equipment would have been purchased if their husbands had been in shore-based employment.

Other costs associated with seafaring reflected the (sometimes vast) differentials between employment contracts and conditions of service. Some wives of Indian seafarers reported that their husbands occasionally had to pay, quite considerable, sums of money in order to secure a contract for a single voyage. Where seafarers were employed on single voyage contracts then money had to be saved to cope with periods of unemployment between contracts, and, in the case of Indian seafarers, costs of training and travelling to training venues often had to be met by the seafarers themselves. Whilst the Chinese seafarers in this study were paid during their leave period, this was at a rate considerably reduced from their salary during sea-time. Thus seafarers and wives had to manage money to cope with these fluctuating salary levels and periods where there was no income at all.

So you're really careful when he's at sea.

Yes. Very careful. We have to save. If something happens, something comes up, and you are not able to cope, sickness or something, or accident takes place, how are you going to manage? So I keep on saving a little bit. Whatever expenditure I have, and then what I have over I keep aside.

Chief cook's wife, India

⁹ This is considerably higher than statistics for the general population, which showed that in 1999 – 2000 38% of households in the United Kingdom had a personal computer (National Statistics 2001). Data was not available on the percentage with Internet access, however it is likely that when this is taken into consideration the figure would drop considerably.

Even for those seafarers on more favourable contracts, if their wives wished to visit a ship or join a ship the cost of travel had to be met by the family.

The nature of a seagoing career also impacted on women's own employment choices. Many of the British women in the study reported that their own participation in paid employment was a crucial factor in enabling them to cope with their partner's intermittent absences. This also appeared to be true of the wives of Indian officers who were all working for reasons other than economic gain. However, paid employment could also be problematic for the wives of seafarers. British women talked of the difficulties in arranging leave to coincide with their partner's leave periods and, in one case, one woman chose not to work for this reason. Other women took more flexible (and hence often lower paid) jobs that allowed them to work reduced hours when their partner was home. Both Indian and British seafarers' wives talked about giving up their own paid work in order to sail with their husbands.

I didn't work, because after I got married it was always going to the ship, coming for a short holiday, going back again to the ship, then a holiday. So I never had the opportunity, or perhaps never gave myself to try to work. That work would confine me to stay separate from my husband. So my option was to sail, so I never worked.

Captain's wife, India

Other British women chose not to work as they felt this would have a detrimental effect on their children who already had to cope with an intermittently absent father. These women felt with a father at sea, their children needed the consistency and security of their mother at home. Thus seafaring may also impact financially on the household in the loss of potential earnings of the female partner.

DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSION

It may be argued that seafarers' family and home life are peripheral to the workplace and therefore not of company concern. However a consideration of, and interest in, the family dimension is, in fact, sound company policy. The problems of the retention and recruitment of well-trained seafarers is a matter of global concern (BIMCO/ISF 2000). Data shows the stress associated with separation from family is significant for seafarers (Parker et al., 1997) and that separation from family is one of

the most important 'stress' factors influencing a decision to reduce planned sea service (Telegraph, 1999). Indeed, in their accounts for the Seafaring and Family Life study, many seafarers spoke of colleagues leaving the sea due to pressure from their partners and families, and the difficulties they themselves experienced, being separated from home and loved ones. High staff turnover has significant financial implications for companies, and indeed in the current, and projected future, labour market, companies may face considerable difficulties replacing exiting seafarers with crew of a necessary high calibre. These issues aside, company retention of existing seafarers is vital to stable, effective and *safe* crewing. Maintenance of regular crew has important implications for safety, teamwork and effective communication within the ship setting. Increased duration of employment within a company fosters company loyalty and allows an awareness of specific company policies to be developed and crew to be effectively trained according to company requirements. Thus, maintaining a stable crew directly effects and promotes improved crewing and safety standards.

Anxieties about family and loneliness caused by prolonged separations and lack of opportunity for contact can also impact on seafarers' work performance and this may have significant repercussions on safety within the work environment¹⁰. Indeed, even where there are no perceived problems in family relations, the emotional deprivation associated with prolonged absences from partner and loved ones can lead to psychological deterioration and increased rates of emotional tension which in turn may lead to increases in stress, emotional alertness and aggression, threatening individual and workplace health and safety (Horbulewicz, 1973). In the context of the high number of accidents attributable to 'human error' (UK P&I Club, 1999) such factors should not be disregarded.

Intermittent separation from family and home may be seen as an inherent and unavoidable feature of seafaring. Our interviews suggested that absences and separation do have a considerable impact on seafaring families. However, our data

¹⁰ Research with airline pilots has suggested that domestic stress and other major life events may have a detrimental effect on pilot's judgement and wellbeing (McCarron et al., 1982). The importance of the spouse as a social support system and in enabling the pilot to cope with stress has been acknowledged by the Aviation industry, along with the specific problems associated with a marriage where one partner is frequently absent (Karlins et al., 1989).

also showed that this impact was neither uniform nor indiminishable. Rather, the conditions of service and degree of support from the company can considerably effect the experience of seafarers and their partners.

Experiences of seafarers' partners in our studies varied, however this was not just by country. The, sometimes dramatically, different experiences of the wives of Indian seafarers could be seen as directly related to the rank of their husband. For those Indian women married to senior officers, the impact of the seafaring lifestyle was lessened due to their partner's more favourable conditions of service: shorter trips, better company access and support, opportunities to sail with their husband, ready access to rejoin vessels and higher salaries allowing better access to communication technology. Indeed, the experiences of the wives of Indian officers was, in fact, more similar to that of the wives of British officers, than wives of Indian ratings. The lives of Chinese seafarers' wives were also varied, reflecting whether their partner was employed by a national flag or a FoC and their location, whether in a traditional port or coastal city, such as Shanghai where they were lived in close proximity to other seafaring families and received company support in the form of the successful 'Seafarers' Wives Committee', or in a inland region where they were geographically separated from other seafaring families and as a consequence, received little effective company support.

However, despite these differences, and regardless of nationality or partner's rank, the effect of varying conditions was the same. Shorter trips were found to be advantageous for all involved, allowing family and couple relationships to be developed and sustained. For the wives of Indian ratings and Chinese seafarers working on foreign flagged vessels, leave periods were often strikingly short in comparison to the many months (10 or more) spent at sea. Leave periods were often encroached on by training requirements introduced by global regulations. For many women in this study leave periods were tainted if not spoiled altogether by the anxieties associated with the sudden reduction or indeed cessation of the seafarer's salary into the household. Tensions could be increased where contracts were for single voyages only and there was no assurance of future employment. Such unpredictability made it difficult for seafarers and their families to budget and manage household finances and could led to tension within relationships. The wives of British

officers reported that increased pressure in the work place meant that their partners were often stressed for a considerable portion of their leave period, again, effecting quality of time at home.

Wives were very positive about the opportunity to sail with their husbands and felt this led to an increased understanding of their partner's work environment¹¹, however, this was an opportunity that was often restricted to the wives of officers. In the absence of physical contact, communication took on an increased significance, however access was highly variable and communication was not without a financial cost. The financial implications of purchases communication equipment (household telephones, cell net phones, FAX machines and personal computers for internet and email access) and the on-going costs of making contact were considerable and sometimes prohibitive.

Interviews with seafarers' partners suggest that there are a number of steps that can be taken to reduce the impact of seafaring on family life. These can be very effectively undertaken by companies, with any financial costs off-set by better retention of expensively trained staff who might otherwise leave the sea or be subject to stress related illnesses. In particular our study showed that efforts should be made to ensure:

- Shorter trips (preferably no longer than four months)
- Paid leave of a comparable duration to sea-time
- Continuous employment rather than employment by voyage
- Training time to be added on to leave period
- Opportunities for partners (and where possible, children) to sail
- Improved access to cheaper communication
- Increased contact between seafarers' partners and their employers
- Opportunities for seafarers' families to make contact with each other

¹¹ The importance of allowing partners to sail has not gone unnoticed by some shipping companies. COSCO has recently begun to allow the wives of some senior officers to join their husbands aboard for a voyage in order to promote communication or 'mutual understanding' between the seafarers and their wives. As a senior manager explained, 'our intention is to provide opportunities for the wives to understand or appreciate what a hard job their husbands do,' (Zhao, 2001, personal communication).

These changes will benefit seafarers' partners and families, and also seafarers' themselves, with direct positive consequences for their employers. Partners and families are a neglected but vital part of the success and the sustaining of the shipping industry. As one seafarer interviewed for the Seafaring and Family Life study noted:

And it's like...a seaman's life is all about freedom isn't it? He comes, he goes, he travels, but you've still got to have a base. Without a base you've got nothing.

Captain, UK

If companies wish to employ stable, content and above all, *safe* crews, then they could do worse than to give some attention to seafarers' families.

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