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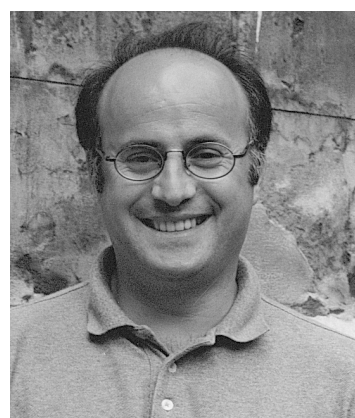
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## The SIRC column

# Focusing on family life

Dr Ehrol Kahveci works for The Seafarers International Research Centre in Cardiff, Wales, which investigates seafarers' occupational health, safety and well-being on board ship, among their families and in the labour market. Together with Ms Helen Sampson, he is currently carrying out a series of case studies of how multinational communities of seafarers are formed and maintained. One such study concerns the structure and functioning of shipboard society where crews are made up of two or more nationalities. Another is looking at expatriate seafarer communities in Hamburg and Rotterdam. A third is focusing on seafarers' families in Poland and the Philippines.



THERE are no industrial workers quite like seafarers. Not only do they have to live and work in the same place, that place is confined, isolated and intrinsically dangerous. While good recreational facilities help to ease their feelings of loneliness and isolation, the ability to maintain contact with family and friends is very important to them.

A survey carried out in 1996 for the International Transport Workers' Federation revealed that most seafarers are family orientated. Fifty-five per cent provide financial support for two to four people and 23 per cent support five or more. However, while entry into the global labour market certainly does provide some form of economic opportunity for seafarers and their families, the isolation from families that comes with it is often a problem in the long term.

Modern seafarers spend at least three-quarters of their working lives away from their families and local communities. The question must be asked whether this entry into the global seafaring labour market is liberating for families given the economic rewards associated with it, or whether in the long term it is socially damaging.

**A Filipino third engineer:**  
*"I went to sea when I was married for 3 days. After 9 months during my vacation our daughter was born. She is 14 now. After her birth I did hardly see her. My wife put a picture on the table and told her everyday that I was her daddy. I remember when I went back for a vacation when my daughter was 2, I told her that I am her father. She went and grabbed the photograph and said 'this is my father not you'."*

In order to have a better chance of finding work seafarers commonly migrate with their families from their birthplaces to hub

ports where the jobs are. As a result they become isolated from their extended families and from friends. This inevitably reduces the social support available to families while the seafarer is at sea.

**An Indonesian cook/AB:**  
*"About 3 years ago when my 9 month contract ended I wanted to sign off. The ship was in America, the captain said stay onboard until the ship goes back to Europe. He said sending me home to Indonesia is much easier and cheaper from Europe. I telephoned home and explain the situation to my wife. She was expecting my return. She was disappointed but I told her that it would take another couple of weeks. However, we kept tramping around America and the captain kept telling me to wait. After 15 months I couldn't wait any more and contacted the ITF. My ticket was bought immediately and I put all my money in my pocket. When I went home, my wife and my child weren't there. I haven't seen them since then. I miss my son and my wife but I don't blame her 15 months is a long time to wait."*

Partners have to cope with looking after the children alone, dealing with everyday family life and problems, managing the household economy etc. There may also be problems when seafarers return home. After long periods of absence the necessary adaptation process can be difficult. And families may only just have adjusted to the return before the seafarers are off to sea again.

While it is possible for seafarers to sail with their families, usually only officers do so. It is rare to have ratings sailing with their families.

**A Turkish bosun:**  
*"My last contract was 26 months. I stayed that long because before my retirement I wanted to buy a house for my wife and son. However, after being married to a sailor 10*

*years my wife has had enough. I wasn't there when she needed me most. I didn't see my children to grow up. I didn't change a single nappy and hold his milk bottle. She left me a year ago with my son. Now I tell everyone that they died in a traffic accident. Otherwise it is impossible for me to deal with the reality."*

Modern methods of communication should in theory help seafarers keep in close touch with their families while at sea. But in practice they tend not to. Ratings cannot generally afford to be in regular telephone contact with their families. They are often afraid to use satellite systems for fear that they will not be able to restrict themselves to the few minutes of conversation which they can afford. Onboard satellite telephone rates are extremely high and time differences mean seafarers cannot always take advantage of the cheapest rates when calling home. Telephone calls when in port – from seafarers' missions, for example – remain the most important means by which seafarers maintain contact with their families and friends at home. However, many of them have little opportunity to go ashore. For them, poor communication adds to the sense of isolation and loneliness they frequently experience.

**The ITF co-ordinator for New Zealand:**  
*"One thing I have done is to talk to the families of seafarers. They said that seafarers are getting complete character changes arising due to the amazing fatigue and stress – they're working long hours, with the quick turnaround, they don't have the ability, technology aside, to make contact with their families and if anything goes wrong, they don't have the ability to do anything about it, because they're not ashore long enough to put things in place, like for instance transfer money."*