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THE SIRC COLUMN

On-line support and help for seafarers' partners

Lijun Tang, a postgraduate fellow at the Seafarers' International Research Centre, looks at a website where the partners of seafarers can communicate with each other

Seafarers the world over know all about their own problems of loneliness and isolation from their homes and families. But how many of them truly understand the depth of the difficulties of their partners who are left to struggle alone with the responsibilities and problems of family life? Who can these partners turn to for help and support when only another woman in the same position can truly understand? Yet often, there will be no other seafarer's partner in the village or the town where she lives. Her isolation could well be complete.

Thanks, however, to a Chinese seafarer and the internet, there is now somewhere that the partners of Chinese seafarers – and the seafarers too, of course – can unburden themselves, share problems and help and support each other.

The seafarer, Li Ronglu, has set up a website, the

Home of Chinese Seafarers, with the express purpose of providing somewhere where seafarers' partners can talk about their problems with the only other people who truly understand their problems: other seafarers' partners.

When seafarers are at sea they are working with other seafarers who are both literally and metaphorically in the same boat; they can talk to each other about their problems. But most likely the partner of a seafarer knows of no other woman in her situation: the days of whole communities where the men went to sea are long past in China and in most, if not all, other parts of the world too. However, while some Chinese partners of seafarers may be in a better position in this respect because they are more likely than partners in other countries to live in flats built in seafaring communities and allocated by shipping companies, this pattern too is becoming a thing of the past. The younger generation of seafarers' partners in China are now living pretty isolated lives.

Nor is it unusual for the families of those who choose to marry seafarers to disapprove of their choice of a partner who is going

to leave them alone to cope with problems, run the home, and bring up their children for much of the time. Where such disapproval exists, the partners of seafarers know there is little point in turning to their families for comfort and support.

Yet surely, even if they find no understanding from their families, seafarers' partners can find support and comfort among their close women friends? Surely, they can turn to them for help and understanding? It has been recognised for many years that women's friendships with other women are of tremendous value to women, providing as they do, somewhere to let off steam, empathy and the support and encouragement needed to keep going.

The experience of seafarers' partners, however, is that unless their friends are married to seafarers, which is extremely rare, they cannot empathise with them because their friends cannot really understand what it is like to be living a single life while at the same time being married.

As one seafarer's wife puts it: "When I could not bear it any more, I went to my good friends and we talked a



The home page of www.54seaman.com

bit. But they have little idea about seafarers; they cannot empathise with the feelings of seafarers' partners. Even though I talk with them, I can never go as deep as I wish. And also there are many things that they do not understand. I

have to explain to them over and over again. It is tiresome. There is no empathy."

Other seafarers' partners describe their predicament, in their own words, below:

"While others say what happened to their husbands

yesterday, we discuss what happened to him when he was home on leave last year."

"When I am under pressure, I really want him to be around and give me some consolation. But what meets me is permanent silence. ... I have to face the pressure, while at the same time suffering the pain of separation."

"A single person can live as others and lead a beautiful life. But I am in a predicament: behind the appearance of being single, my partner away at sea is in my mind. Therefore, I cannot live as a single person. But the reality is that nor can I enjoy the shared life of a couple. I fall in between."

"When I go out with other women, their talk always revolves around their husbands ... I don't have a husband at home. Being with them makes me feel the pain of my loneliness more sharply. Therefore, I seldom go out."

"One day, it was snowing, some couples were sharing an umbrella, clinging together and talking to each other intimately. The feeling of loneliness suddenly rose from deep in my heart."

"Over the five years of our married life, we have been together only one third of that

time. But I seldom shed tears, not because I do not have any, but because they have run out. I brought up my son alone. My husband went to sea just one week after my son's birth and did not come back for a year. At that time, I really wanted to leave everything behind and run away."

"The women in my office are the kind of people who gloat over others' misfortunes. They make jokes about me, as if my loneliness can remind them of their happiness."

Today, however, more and more people are using the Home of Chinese Seafarers website to help and comfort each other, sharing problems, and also joys, with the only people who can truly empathise with their predicament: people like themselves, seafarers' partners.

Says one seafarer's partner: "Before I knew about this website, I felt that I did not have a single friend with whom I could communicate and who could understand seafarers and their partners. Here, we have similar husbands, similar experiences. We help and support each other. I feel that waiting days are very full."

Yet another has this to say: "Coming to this website,

I feel that I am entering my home, which is both intimate and warm. I can find those who understand me and empathise with me. We have similar feelings and can confide in each other without worrying that the other person does not want to listen."

Li Ronglu, who set up the site, invested a great deal of his own money and all of his energy in it, only narrowly surviving several financial crises. Thanks to this seafarer's efforts, there is now a website "home" for the partners of Chinese seafarers: www.54seaman.com. More such websites would clearly be helpful to the partners of seafarers around the world. But whoever sets up such a website will need to be aware that this takes time and money. However, anyone, possibly another seafarer or a group of seafarers, who undertakes to follow the example of this Chinese seafarer, will be performing a valuable service for the partners of seafarers.

The interviews in this article are taken either from the postings by the partners of seafarers on the Home of Chinese Seafarers website, or from online interviews with seafarers' partners.