

Women and Casual Work in the Nova Scotian Fish Processing Industry*

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Abstract

The general concern of this article is with the role of women in the organization of the demand and supply of labour in the context of the Nova Scotian fish processing industry. The distribution of jobs by gender, wage rate differentiation, job mobility distinctions, and labour market segmentation according to job tenure, are analyzed in this light. Particular empirical reference is to a fishing community, which I shall call East Sandy Cove, in south west Nova Scotia where I spent two and one-half months conducting field research.

Introduction

This paper examines the social and economic factors influencing the position of female fish plant workers in a Nova Scotia fishing community, fictitiously titled, East Sandy Cove.¹ The major focus of this paper centers around the ways in which processing firms recruit and utilize their plant workforces.

There are 765 fishing communities in Nova Scotia of which 11.4% are totally dependent on the fishing industry (Environment Canada, 1976). Most of the 12,784 fish plant positions in Nova Scotia are characterized as seasonal and casual jobs. The location of these jobs are in relatively small, rural, resource-dependent fishing communities. According to a recent study on the Nova Scotia fish processing sector (Apostle, Barrett, Davis and Kasdan, 1985:26), it was found that one-half of the fish plant work force was

made up of regular employees and the remaining one-half of seasonal employees. Females constituted 58% of all seasonal workers, while males held 58% of the regular positions. Since much of this local wage employment is unstable and seasonal, the characteristics of a surplus labour force may be of particular importance in understanding the position of women within this industry.

Short-term, casual, seasonal and part-time employment, as well as unemployment, are conditions that are largely created by factors such as industrial structure. Those who fall into this classification, a group surplus to the requirements of industry (Bromley and Gerry, 1979; Bienefeld and Godfrey, 1978), lack a moderate degree of security of income and employment. Work may be contracted by the day, week, month or season with no assurance of future employment. Under the capitalist mode of production,

intermittent and poorly remunerated employment is created because employers are unable and unwilling to fully absorb all of those available for work. Casual workers appear, therefore, as a highly mobile floating group that can be drawn into and pushed out of the production process as the conditions in technology and organization of work change (Bromley and Gerry, 1979:11). The availability of surplus workers provides considerable benefits to industry, such as the ability of firms to organize production requirements around those who are on "stand-by" and are waiting to be called into work.

The framework for evaluating such labour relations centers around the organization of the demand and supply of labour. Women, in particular, are engaged in wage labour which is known to be made up of low-paid, unskilled, and semi-skilled work (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1978; Rubery, 1978; Hartmann, 1979; West, 1982). Such wage labour formations can be understood as components of a labour surplus population. This surplus population provides workers for production as the market expands, and takes back workers from production as the organization of the labour process changes (Beechley, 1977; Connelly, 1978; Simeral, 1978; Luxton, 1980; Connelly and MacDonald, 1983). In Nova Scotia, high levels of labour surplus characterize primary industries such as fishing and agriculture and manufacturing industries closely associated with the food industry. In the fish processing industry, the importance of surplus labour has been shown to be especially significant in terms of intra-regional location and the seasonality of the production process (Barrett, 1983). The role of the state, through unemployment insurance benefits, may be particularly important in regulating and reproducing a labour surplus (Wadel, 1969, 1973; Brox, 1972). The data examined illuminates a variety of evidence documenting how a malleable supply of labour in the community meets the requirements of a demand for casual labour. The distri-

bution of jobs by gender, wage rate differentiation, and labour market segmentation according to job tenure, are analyzed in this light.

The Setting

East Sandy Cove is situated along the coastline of southwestern Nova Scotia. As a fishery-dependent community, it has experienced many changes in its development. The movement from one stage to another has accompanied social and economic changes and variations in the organization of both the primary and secondary fishing industries. This community was utilized as a fishing harbour as early as the sixteenth century. However, East Sandy Cove did not have any permanent settlers until the latter half of the seventeenth century. It was during this period that the area was exploited for its resources by its inhabitants and neighbouring fishermen. The first inhabitants of the area were the Micmac. By 1759, the Governor of Halifax issued proclamations regarding the availability of lands in Nova Scotia and stating the terms under which grants would be made. The first who expressed interest in settling in and around East Sandy Cove were from the Cape Cod and Nantucket areas in the New England States, and were engaged in fishing (Innis, 1954). With the arrival of more and more fishery-headed families, the population increased substantially. As the population grew, more households became engaged in fish handling and processing for their own use and for sale to merchants.² These household units received their fish product from the schooners that employed many itinerant fishermen and sold the processed product, salt fish, to European merchants. However, the household fishery did not survive much beyond the nineteenth century because of the decline of the mercantile trade and the change in product demands from traditional salt fish to fresh fish and lobsters.³ It was during this transformation that outside firms began to set up business in East Sandy Cove. Portland Packers Limited was

the first U.S.-based lobster canning company that arrived in the community. Its work force was mainly supplied by females in the local area. Gradually, throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century, more fish processing firms located in East Sandy Cove. This capital expansion was accompanied by a growth in community size largely through in-migration. The companies exercised a strong influence over municipal councils since they represented the major source of capital and income in the community.

Today, the importance of both fishing and fish processing cannot be overstated. Two major government funded wharves, eight fish processing plants (Table 1), and five boat-building companies are located in the community. The community contains 345 family households with an average of 3.3 persons per household. The average family income in 1984 was approximately \$22,700 (Department of Development, 1983). The majority of this income is derived from seasonal work in the fishing and fish processing industries. Seventy-five percent of 219 fishermen from the community are engaged in fishing on a full-time basis (Department of Fisheries and Oceans, 1983). Ninety-five percent (134) of all fishing vessels⁴ are less than 45 feet in length and land 96% (2,480 metric tons) of all groundfish⁵ catches (Department of Fisheries and Oceans, 1983). Pelagic and estuarial, shellfish, Irish moss, and other species are all caught by these vessels (*Ibid.*, 1983). Thirty-five percent of the 449 fish plant jobs in the area and in nearby villages are filled by both women and men from East Sandy Cove. They are paid at wage rates which range between \$5.00 and \$9.59 an hour.

Since little is known about the contemporary fish processing industry in Nova Scotia, East Sandy Cove provided the opportunity to examine the social organization of this sector, the conditions under which capital recruits and utilizes its plant work force, and the relationship

between these factors and the rural social structure of the area.

The Supply of Labour

The southwestern region of Nova Scotia is dominated by fishing and the fish processing industry. This region contains 75.5% of all fish processing plants in the province and 66% of the 12,784 fish plant workers in Nova Scotia (Table 2). Women, in this instance, make up 41% of all fish plant workers in Nova Scotia and 63% of this group is located in southwestern Nova Scotia. (The two remaining regions of the province, the Northeast and Cape Breton, contain 24.5% of all fish processing plants in Nova Scotia and employ 34% of all fish plant workers). These figures suggest that women's work in the Nova Scotia fish processing industry is significant to both fishing communities and the province as a whole, and it is even more significant to the southwestern region of the province.

To illustrate the importance of fishery employment and dependence for community members in East Sandy Cove, the area's labour force has been examined in terms of labour force participation, employment patterns, and unemployment.

There are 678 people in the community between the ages of 15 and 64 years, who are not attending school on a full-time basis, and who are eligible for employment. However, the entire labour force in East Sandy Cove is made up of 385 people, constituting 56.8% of the total population. This percentage indicates that just over two-fifths (43.2%) of the employable population in East Sandy Cove are, in fact, not active members of the labour force (Raymond, 1985)⁶. The unemployment rate among the female population ranks the highest at 20.0%. This unemployment figure is approximately eight percent higher than the provincial average. In comparison, the unemployment rate among

Table 1
Fish Processing Plants in East Sandy Cove
By Size, Employment Range, Products, and Fish Exports

Plant Name	Plant Size* (Actual Number Employees)	Employment Range of Fish Plant Processing Workers	Products	Fish Exports**
Tibbets Seafoods	not available	1-20	not available	not available
Black's Fisheries Limited	19	1-20	Fish, Lobster (Fresh and Frozen); Fish (Pickled or Vinegar Cured); Fish Round or Dressed (Fresh or Chilled); Fish (Salted or Dried).	7
S.C. Stanford Seafoods Limited	125	101-200	Fish Fillets, Steaks, Blocks (Fresh, Chilled and Frozen); Fish, Roe; Fish (Pickled or Vinegar Cured); Fish (Salted and/or Dried).	3
Nigel Elder	12	1-20	Fish, Lobster (Fresh and Frozen); Fish (Round or Dressed, Fresh and Chilled); Fish (Salted and/or Dried).	2
Sutherland Fisheries Limited	25	21-50	Fish (Salted and/or Dried).	3
Dwight Logan	not available	1-20	not available	not available
Ruth S. Morrison	22	21-50	Fish (Salted and/or Dried).	2
Barrington Seafood Brokers	not available	1-20	not available	not available
Sea Lobster Limited	40	21-50	Fish, Lobster (Fresh and Frozen).	7

Source: Canada, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Unpublished Printout, November, 1983; Nova Scotia, Department of Development, Nova Scotia Ocean Industry Directory, 1983.

* Plant Size refers to the total number of employees engaged in production, maintenance, truck drivers, office personnel, administration and company vessel crew members.

** Fish Exports refers to areas in which the plants export fish. The following number codes apply:

- 0 - No exports
- 1 - Exports to other provinces of Canada
- 2 - Exports to U.S.A.
- 3 - Exports to other provinces of Canada and the U.S.A.
- 4 - Exports to foreign countries other than U.S.A.
- 5 - Exports to other provinces of Canada and to foreign countries other than U.S.A.
- 6 - Exports to U.S.A. and to other foreign countries
- 7 - Exports to other provinces of Canada, to U.S.A. and to other foreign countries

males is 5.8%; an unemployment rate which is slightly lower than the provincial average (Raymond, 1985). Of those who are employed in the work force, one-fifth are engaged in seasonal and casual work. Women, in particular, make up three-quarters of all seasonal and casual workers. The occupational distribution of employment includes the following occupations: fishing, fish processing, clerical, sales and service, management, medicine and health, technology and teaching. Sixty-two percent of the total number

of jobs in the labour force are fishing and fish processing related. This occupational division is also marked by a division based on gender. Males constitute just over two-thirds (67.2%) of the total labour force in the occupations of fishing (96.3%) and fish processing (60.0%). By contrast, females make up just under one-third (32.8%) of the total work force in occupations of fishing (3.7%) and fish processing (40.0%), the remainder are in clerical, services, and teaching (Statistics Canada, 1983).

Table 2
Employment of Males and Females in
Fish Plants by Nova Scotia Counties

		Employment in Nova Scotia Fish Plants			
	County	Females	Males	Total Employees	Total Number of Fish Plants
South-West Nova Scotia	Lunenburg	704	1600	2304	8
	Queens	190	519	709	7
	Shelburne	559	1272	1831	82
	Yarmouth	764	744	1508	30
	Digby	993	907	1900	46
	Annapolis	86	93	179	3
	Sub Total		3296	5135	8431
North-East Nova Scotia	Colchester	18	6	24	3
	Pictou	253	48	301	4
	Antigonish	18	20	38	2
	Guysborough	362	608	970	11
	Halifax	153	511	664	16
Sub Total		804	1193	1997	36
Cape Breton	Victoria	14	23	37	4
	Inverness	111	80	191	3
	Richmond	6	43	49	3
	Cape Breton	980	1099	2079	11
Sub Total		1111	1245	2356	21
TOTAL		5211 (41%)	7573 (59%)	12784 (100%)	233

Source: Canada, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Unpublished Data, 1980, Economics Division, Occupational Employment in Fish Plants by Nova Scotia Districts.

Cumberland, Hants, and Kings counties do not have any fish plants.

In terms of labour surpluses, one can also say that women constitute a much larger reserve labour force than men. This population is composed of those who are out of the work force (but available for employment), those who are employed on a casual and seasonal basis, and those who are underemployed. Conditions of a rural labour surplus population clearly, therefore, characterize East Sandy Cove.

The Demand for Labour: the structure of the labour process

Fish plant work is by nature largely intermittent. The supply of fish is seasonally regulated and unpredictable. East Sandy Cove is dominated by a small boat fleet which is extremely susceptible to seasonality and poor weather conditions. Therefore, the fish processing industry is even more subject to gluts and scarcities of fish supply than plants which have 'all weather' trawler fleets attached to them. However, my research indicates that work time patterns, which are dominated by casual labour, cannot be solely explained by the seasonal fluctuations in fish landings. Capital tends to utilize a labour surplus for its own purpose, and in so doing exaggerates the intermittent nature of fish plant work. A number of such social characteristics of production are examined below: the segmentation of the labour force according to occupation, work time, and remuneration.

Fish plant work is generally characterized by the following job tasks: cutting, trimming, weighing, sorting, packing, maintenance, supervising, and outside and freezer crew work (See also: MacFarland, 1980; Lamson, 1983). When recruiting new workers, plant supervisors or chargehands are not primarily concerned with obtaining workers who are skilled. Their concern for recruiting experienced workers applies only to the cutting line. Cutters⁷ are the most skilled production line workers. Their job entails a variety of tasks such as cutting, boning and heading fish. It takes approximately two to three months

to become proficient at this job. The remainder of the production line workers (skinning machine operators⁸, trimmers⁹, sorters¹⁰, weighers¹¹, and packers¹²) are unskilled. It takes about one or two days to become proficient at any one of these production line jobs. No formal training is given to any one worker in a fish processing plant. All workers, including cutters, are shown their job by another production line worker, usually a worker doing the same job. However, workers are all expected to learn their job tasks through "on the job experience". Clearly, then, the majority of fish plant work can be considered unskilled manual labour. This makes it particularly suited to the conditions of surplus labour described above.

Fish processing plants rely on males to do "heavy" jobs around the plant like painting, mechanical tasks, construction, and other activities. Women are clearly utilized only for jobs that are directly located on the production floor. Job segregation by gender is not only peculiar to this community but is a characteristic of the Nova Scotia fish processing industry more generally. Apostle, Barrett, Davis and Kasdan (1985:31) reveal that:

First, the proportion that women constitute of total employees increase with the scale of firms, indicating that women are drawn into employment as work processes become mechanized and tasks become specialized. Second, women are much more likely to be employed for specific light labour tasks than are men (over 70% of all light labour is performed by women). Third, none of the fish plant operators reported employing women in any of the trade or technical categories. Fourth, while constituting about 50% of the total work force, women were reported to hold 13% of supervisory positions and 20% of the cutting and splitting jobs.

Another dimension that is a reflection of the distribution of jobs by gender is the lack of job

mobility within this sector. We can get a clearer picture of this if we look at jobs held by fish plant workers over time. Of all female fish plant workers sampled, 93% of them started out in the following types of jobs: packing, sorting, weighing, and trimming. Only 15% of these women, over the last five years, moved into higher paying jobs: cutting line and changehand jobs. Of all male fish plant workers sampled, 64% started out in jobs that were located outside of the production floor area (truck drivers, fork lift drivers, maintenance and construction, and wharf crew workers). The remainder of male workers (36%) had their first fish plant job in the production line area. The majority of these jobs were classified as cutting, splitting, and freezer crew work. The job mobility for males, over the last five years, is slightly higher than that for women. Twenty-two percent of the total number of males sampled moved into supervisory or managerial positions.

Fishing and fish processing is characterized by seasonal, casual and part-time employment. However, not all workers suffer from this lack of opportunity equally. Forty percent of females employed in the industry work on part-time basis, while 9.1% of males are seasonal or casual workers. Fish plant workers in East Sandy Cove, because of their location in a single-industry community, are extremely vulnerable. Such vulnerability is reflected in the degree to which particular firms (unionized and non-unionized) are able to manipulate their plant work forces. There are major differences between non-unionized and unionized plants with respect to hiring practices. Non-unionized firms are able to call on any one person, over another, for employment. Thus, workers in these plants are subjected to hiring practices that are not based on seniority ranking or levels of work experience. Under these conditions, any one worker may be permanently dismissed from their job, without notice, simply because the owner of the company no longer calls on that person for employment. Informal firings of this sort are a common

practice in non-unionized plants, especially when workers are perceived as being unproductive or troublesome¹³. Older and outspoken workers are particularly subject to these problems. It is not unusual to find the supervisor or owner hiring his/her relatives and family members over other non-family workers. For example, the owners of two independently owned salt fish plants in East Sandy Cove employed a small work force that was primarily (over 80%) made up of their own family members and relatives. One of these owners, in particular, employed his daughter and brother for longer periods of time relative to the remainder of the workers. Longer durations of employment given to family members was often a complaint made by non-family employees. The employment situation for non-unioned workers is unlike that for unionized workers. Unionized workers are called into work on a seniority basis. Thus, these workers are protected from discriminatory hiring practices found among non-unionized firms.

Many employers consider part-time and seasonal jobs as the most viable form of employment because of the surplus of available females, both young and old, who are willing to work for them. Informal conversations with employers and employees indicates that women, in particular, are more readily available for work irrespective of the wage levels being offered (See also: Apostle, Barrett, Davis, Kasdan, 1985). One fish plant worker comments on how it feels to be dependent on fish plant work for her livelihood.

We work about 42 to 55 hours a week when there's lots of fish and get \$6.50 an hour for it. We never get overtime pay... Last year we worked thirty-one weeks, with five months or so with no work. That's about average... You see, it's like a family there. We all know each other and get along good too... We feel like we have to work whenever they tell us to because we know that if we don't they can find lots of other workers that'll work there. And when there's lots of work

(summer months) we have to work overtime whenever they (management) ask us to. You sorta' feel that you don't want to cause a problem... They said that they (management) couldn't afford to pay us overtime (she laughs)... Well, the owner... told (names boss) that the company just didn't have the money. We have to go along with it - jobs around here are hard to come by.

The wages paid to workers in the fish processing industry in Nova Scotia are, and have been, low relative to wages in other manufacturing industries. The average wage rates in this industry are 23% below that of wage rates in other manufacturing industries in Canada (Barrett and Davis, 1984:133). In keeping with the patterns of labour force segmentation described above, there are differences between male and female wages in this industry (Lamson, 1983; Apostle, Barrett, Davis and Kasdan, 1985). In overall terms, the

Table 3
Earnings of Fish Plant Workers by Gender,
1983-1984

	Males	Females
Average Weekly Earnings	\$291.97	\$224.59
Average Number of Weeks Worked (Either Part-Time or Full-Time)	42	33
Average Weekly Earnings Through Unemployment Insurance	\$174.60	\$134.75
Average Number of Weeks Collecting Unemployment Insurance	17	24
Average Annual Income from Fish Plant Work and Unemployment Insurance	\$14,008.74	\$9,971.72

Source: Calculated from the sample of 53 Fish Plant Workers in the resource-dependent community of East Sandy Cove.

wages that women receive in this sector are at bottom levels while the wages for men are at top levels. That is, 68% of all plant workers in Nova Scotia earning \$5.99 or less per hour are women, while men comprise 80% of all workers earning \$7.00 or more per hour (Apostle, Barrett, Davis and Kasdan, 1985:34). This wage distribution for men and women is a notable feature of the fish plant work force in East Sandy Cove. From Table 3 we can see that there has been a difference in average earnings and average number of weeks employed between males and females in the period considered.¹⁴ On the one hand, female workers earn substantially less and work less often than male workers. In East Sandy Cove, the average income for males and females in 1981 was \$16,722 and \$5,913, respectively.

Although unionization for some workers in East Sandy Cove has been particularly important in protecting them from unfair labour practices, it has not been instrumental in providing wage levels equivalent to that of the national average wage rates in other manufacturing industries.¹⁵ One fish plant worker describes this situation:

This year, the union negotiated for an increase in wages and management came back and offered us a contract... They came up with a lot of changes... They said there weren't going to be any pay increases until 1985... Anyone who works on herring will only get a flat five dollars an hour and no one can make any grievances about this... They also put in the contract that they were going to let the cutting line go and all of us workers were just going to work on fillets — no cutting line and no cutters... Plus they wanted to change the day shift from what we do now, you know, Monday to Saturday to Sunday to Friday...

When we had the meeting that night to vote against or for the contract, only about 25% of the day crew showed up... There was almost all of the night crew there, though...

A lot of people were scared about losing their jobs because they (the management) said that if we didn't agree with the contract they weren't going to open the plant...there's lots of old people in the plant who are scared of losing their jobs. You can't blame them, because a lot of people depend on it. I think a lot of them went along with it (the contract) because of this. Myself, I would of held out for it — if we struck — because we're the only ones that produce any haddock (large volumes) in the area and they have to have haddock in order for the company to run. So, I think they would have come to some kind of agreement with us if we voted for a strike.

Fish processing plants, especially large-scale types, tend to rely on one another in determining the level of wages paid out to employees. This phenomenon has been clearly understood by many fish processing workers, and community members in general. One fish plant worker describes how and when her pay scales change:

(The two largest plants in East Sandy Cove) pay their workers around the same wages. It's like this: we figure that they (the management) must be doing some talking...to keep our wages the same, because every year I've been working up at (names non-unionized plant A) we end up getting the same increase as the workers at (names unionized plant B)...We aren't getting an increase this year because when (Plant B) negotiated for their wages they didn't get an increase, so we're not getting one either.

The low wage rates and the intermittent nature of fish plant work greatly enhance the significance of unemployment insurance benefits.

Although the majority of plants in East Sandy Cove were in operation between six and eight months a year, this time period was not a guarantee that plant workers would be supplied with

steady employment. For instance, when there is not enough employment, workers will not be able to qualify for unemployment insurance benefits. The months when there are no fish to be processed are typically January, February, March, April and most of May. Women are relatively more dependent on unemployment insurance in the slack fishing season than their male counterparts (See Table 3). Male workers, on the other hand, are able to receive more paid work than female workers. This problem is compounded by the single-industry dependence of the community and the lack of alternative opportunities in the surrounding area.¹⁶ Fish plant workers suffer from a lack of job security. The only "security" that can be given to these workers is unemployment insurance benefits. In fact, workers often talk about going to work in the 'stamp' factory. In order to qualify for unemployment insurance there are special regulations. Unemployment insurance is available to those who have worked at least 15 hours per week for 16 weeks, or for 10 weeks if the unemployment rate in the area is above 11.5%. For those who have been out of the labour force for more than one year, 20 weeks are necessary (Canada, Employment and Immigration, 1983:3). Since fish plant work is so irregular it will often take plant workers many more weeks to qualify for unemployment insurance benefits. It is particularly difficult for these workers to put in the twenty weeks of work which are required for maternity or sickness benefits. In addition, worker's benefits may be very low since their average weekly income is only based on part-time work. For instance, when they collect unemployment insurance, they receive the usual 60% of their wages, which could amount to less than \$50.00 per week before taxes.

Workers in fish plants are unprotected in many other ways. Some unionized plants in Nova Scotia have group life and accident insurance plans. However, not one fish plant in East Sandy Cove has paid maternity leave or company pension plans.

If the women who work in fish plants are able to find someone to care for their children, the wages in the fish plant are not high enough to allow them to pay more than a small sum to their babysitter. In order to qualify for unemployment insurance, especially during periods when fish plant work is slack, both females and males are expected to return to work when called upon. This means that, especially for women with children, they must have access to a childcare person. This usually is a family member or relative. If for some reason, a worker is called to work and cannot come, the majority of firms in East Sandy Cove tend to assume that this person is not interested in being employed with the firm. When this occurs on more than one occasion, the plant will usually not bother calling them again. One woman explains what she has to go through in the run of a day just to see if she will have to go to work:

I get up with the children and prepare breakfast for the bunch of us...I know if I start the wash, I can't hang the clothes out because I might miss the call...can't hear the phone when I'm outside...They only call once and if you're not there they just go down that list...Sometimes, I know, when I'm upstairs I can't hear the phone so I have to stay down here so I won't miss the call...I usually wait until after dinner (noontime) and if they have not called by then, I know there is no fish in...

Unemployment insurance rarely provides a subsistence income for most fish plant families. It forces them to be dependent on others and to be constantly available for work. Under these circumstances unemployment insurance benefits can be seen to subsidize low wages in the industry as well as to contribute to the maintenance of a reserve pool of labour in the community.

Conclusion

The social organization of the Nova Scotia fish processing industry is based upon the seasonal nature of the primary fishing industry,¹⁷ fluctuating product demand, and a malleable labour force. Processing requires a work force to be engaged in jobs which are seasonal, unskilled, poorly paid, and often without job security or promotion opportunities. Workers may be laid off at any time; thus, wage rates and employment duration remain as the crucial problems in a fish plant worker's life. The level of wages paid to women and men in this sector is marked by a division based on gender. On the one hand, light labour is largely assigned to females at wage rates which are significantly below those of males. On the other hand, heavy and skilled labour is most generally reserved for males at higher wage levels. Women are mainly assigned to seasonal unskilled jobs. Men are employed in jobs which have a longer average duration. Therefore, female fish plant workers are much more dependent on unemployment insurance benefits during the slack fishing season than their male counterparts. Clearly, then, unemployment insurance benefits contribute to the maintenance of a labour surplus, particularly where women are concerned. Women represent a flexible working population which can be consumed and disposed of as the conditions of production change. This phenomenon not only reflects the existence of a local labour surplus but also reflects the particular manner in which fish plant work is organized.

Notes

- This paper comes from a larger study done to meet part of the requirements for a Master of Arts at Dalhousie University. The author lived in East Sandy Cove for 2 ½ months during the summer of 1984. Fifty-three household interviews were conducted, two key informant relationships were established and five oral histories of the community were completed. In addition, eight days of participant observation in a fish processing plant enabled the author to further study and understand the structure of the labour process.
- 1. East Sandy Cove is a pseudonym that is used to protect the anonymity of community members. The names of specific people and fish plants are also pseudonyms.

2. This information is based on a number of oral histories.
3. Until the late-1940s, the Nova Scotia fishing industry was still dominated by the production of salted and dried fish. Most of the processing of this fish was done by women, men, and children and was sold to fish merchants. By the end of the 1940's, a substantial fresh and frozen fish industry had developed. The traditional dependence on fish merchants gave way to a new dependence on industrial capital. The family, as the unit of production, was replaced by operations that relied upon new technologies and the exploitation of wage labour. These firms are now engaged in a variety of products such as frozen and fresh fish, salted and dried fish, live lobster, and the reduction of herring meal and oil (See Innis, 1954; Barrett, 1983).
4. Boat size is a crucial factor in determining the type of species caught, the kind of gear used, and the amount of operating capital needed. Moreover, there are different social and economic characteristics attached to various size boats. There are mainly four different types of vessels in East Sandy Cove: boats between 20 and 31 feet and under; boats between 32 and 45 feet; vessels between 46 to 65 feet; and, vessels 65 feet and over. The boats in the first category are powered by outboard motors and they are used for gathering Irish moss, for lobstering, and for hand-lining. They are only used within one mile of shore and only in good weather. Those which fall in the second category are capable of two- or three-day trips, depending on their beam and displacement. These boats are the backbone of the inshore fishery. The third category contains vessels that operate under more restricted licenses and require a three- or four-person crew. These vessels will go on trips of up to a week to offshore fishing banks. The fourth category, boats 65 feet or more, are usually owned by fish processing firms and are operated by skippers and crews on a full-time basis. Some of these vessels are long-liners and offshore lobster and groundfish draggers. Vessels larger than 100 feet are almost always owned by companies. They are side draggers and steel stern trawlers (Williams, 1979: 161-175).
5. Groundfish are fish that live and feed near or on the bottom of the ocean. Often they are captured by baited hooks, gill nets, or otter trawls. They include: cod, haddock, pollock, cusk, hake, silver hake, grenadier, halibut. In both volume and dollar value to the fishermen, codfish is usually the biggest item in Nova Scotia's annual groundfish catch. Codfish is also an important staple commodity in international markets, and tends to dominate the groundfish industry (Nova Scotia Department of Fisheries, 1977).
6. The total labour force participation rate for the province of Nova Scotia is 59.0% (Statistics Canada, 1983). This percentage is slightly above that given for East Sandy Cove.
7. A cutter's job involves, depending on the type and size of fish, cutting off the head and tail of the fish and taking out the backbone. All of this is done with a sharp knife. A good cutter, for example, could cut approximately 350 to 450 pounds of fish an hour, depending of course, on the type, size, and quality of the fish.
8. There are various types of skinning machines on the market today. Each type of skinning machine is constructed for different types of fish. The operator(s) of these machines are responsible for placing fillets on the skinning conveyor belt. This conveyor belt moves the fillets to the skinning tools. Two rollers engage the skin which is separated from the fillet by a built-in knife. The knife is hereby activated by a flat oscillating movement. This gives a cut which is capable of severing the tendons between skin and fillet. However, with poor quality fish fillets (soft fish) difficulties can arise in the skinning operation. With good quality fresh fish fillets, an extremely favourable yield is obtained as the skin is pulled off without any losses of flesh except for a minimal loss for the initial cut at the tail end. Depending on the length of fillets, approximately 60 fillets per minute (with width of fillets less than 220 mm), can be fed into a skinning machine.
9. The task of a trimmer involves reaching into the trough in front of them and taking out the fish that has been passed through the skinning machine. The trimmer is responsible for removing any dark spots or worms from the fish. An average trimmer can trim 500 fillets an hour or 4,000 in an eight hour day.
10. A sorter is responsible for measuring and separating different types of fish after they have gone through the trimming process.
11. Once the fillets have been trimmed and sorted, they are sent (usually by a conveyor belt) to a weigher. The weigher fills a bucket of fish, usually weighing five or ten pounds, and places it on the packing line conveyor belt. These fish are then packaged by persons working on this line.
12. The first task that a packer has to perform (before production begins) is to get the proper wrapping sheets and boxes. All packers are told by the supervisor that haddock, for example, will be put on the line first. Therefore, the packers know that they require marked haddock sheets and boxes. Once these materials have been gathered, the packers return to their standing positions in front of the packing table. Following this, the tasks are quite simple. Each packer takes a bucket of fish in front of them. The packer will then wrap these fish into separate cellophane sheets and place it in a properly marked box. Later, these boxes are transported to the end of the trimming table to a freezer crewman. The freezer crewman loads these boxes onto a crate and takes it to either the freezer room or holding room, depending on whether the fish will be sold frozen or fresh. An average packer can pack one five pound box of fillets in approximately two minutes. On an average eight hour day, 1,200 pounds of fish could be packed by one person.
13. Unionization, especially in an area or industry that is not highly organized, is weak. Since workers labour on a seasonal and casual basis, firms have an advantage. They may call anyone they like into work. Firms will not bother to call in "troublesome" workers when there are more compliant workers available. In addition, threats have been made by management personnel to workers who have tried to establish a union while employed with the firm. For these reasons, only one of the nine fish plants in East Sandy Cove is unionized. Unionization of this plant was the result of repeated instances of sexual harassment by the production floor boss.
14. Unfortunately, the average number of hours worked per week/year cannot be calculated due to the fluctuations in wage rates, the variation in hours of work from week to week, and the inability of gathering such documented information from each plant worker surveyed.
15. See: *Navigating Troubled Waters: A New Policy for the Atlantic Fisheries*, Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1982, pp. 68.
16. Emigration is seldom a choice that individuals make because strong kinship ties bond them to their community.
17. Today, a significant proportion (54.5%) of community households are without a regular source of income. Their only source of income stems from work in primary and secondary fishing industries. Both of these industries have undergone considerable internal changes. The entrance into primary fishing employment is no longer easy. Government policies have curbed the sale of fishing licences. Such policies have forced

those interested in a fishing occupation to find alternative employment. The secondary fishing industry in East Sandy Cove has not been able to provide adequate employment for the majority of available workers. Moreover, those employed in this industry have not been able to receive a subsistence income. Rather, they have been forced to find additional employment, with some holding as many as three part-time jobs.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge Gene Barrett, Patricia Connelly, and the three anonymous readers of *Atlantis*, for their helpful comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of this article. A version of this paper was presented at the meetings of the Annual Association of Sociologists and Anthropologists, Charlottetown, P.E.I., March 1985.

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