

Professional Women and Network Maintenance in a French and an English Canadian Fishing Village

by Margaret Muir

Introduction

During my research on women's work in the Iles-de-la Madeleine, Quebec, (1) it quickly became apparent that all women are expected to perform the traditional roles of housewife and mother. Housework is a time-consuming, skilled occupation as practiced in the two villages I studied and the primary measure of a woman's ability is her competence in running a household. Women's lives are organized to meet the demands of housework and daily socializing. Yet, in both villages there is a small group of fulltime, professional (2) women. I was interested in how the professional women organize their lives, given the demands of both traditional and professional jobs. Does



their status as professionals allow them to evade the traditional requirements of village women? If not, what strategies do they use to perform their multiple roles? Do their adaptations provide lessons of benefit to professional women elsewhere?

The Setting

The two villages studied are at the less developed end of the Magdalen Islands, eight miles apart and thirty miles by partially paved road from the main town and service center of the islands. Their partial isolation, increased in winter, limits the local employment opportunities.

The two villages have similar settlement patterns. Houses, stores and institutional buildings are strung along the one road that runs through the villages. Neither town has a business center and in each place the Red Cross building, Post Office, beer store, school, church, town hall, stores, restaurants, take-outs, garages and hockey rinks are dispersed. Both villages have wharfage and the French village has a fish factory and frigidaires plant adjacent to the landing. Kin tend to live in a number of adjacent houses, so that each village actually consists of a collection of kin areas. In 1974-75, the population of the English village was about 550 and that of the French village about 1200. The English village is one of the two distinct Anglican, anglophone communities

on the islands; under 10% of the islands' 14,000 inhabitants are English. The islands are part of the Province of Quebec and the major services and businesses are run by the French. The English have maintained their ethnic identity and, though most English understand some French, few of them use the language of the majority.

The islanders' major income is derived from the lobster fishery which supports both the fishermen and the fish plant workers. There are also government positions, service jobs, teaching and nursing posts. Unemployment, welfare, pension programmes, LIP work and child allowance provide important sources of income as well.

The general pattern of employment is a series of short-term, seasonally specific jobs: fishing (May to July), gardening (April to September) and hunting (gunning in the fall and winter and sealing in the spring). This work provides occasional cash in lump sums, not a steady income. This is particularly true of fishing--both captain and hired man get their fishing money as a single payment in July. The local fish factories have provided seasonal labour during the fishing season for women and some men for the past 70-80 years. This pattern of employment, common to maritime communities, has been called "seasonal pluralism." (Andersen and Wadel, 1972)

Traditional Division of Labour and Social Life

In both villages, there is a strict division of labour by sex and age. Traditionally, men do the fishing, hunting, building, carpentry, gear maintenance and potato farming. Women are responsible for housework, cooking, childcare, hand crafts, vegetable gardening and "putting up" food. Men and women have exclusive, physical work domains: there is a strict geographical division of labour. A man's work is done outside, at sea, on the wharf, in his truck, near the house or in his "building" (a workshop/shed on his land). His place is out-of-doors. A woman's place is in the house, but more than that, the house is the source of her authority and the measure of her competence. Children do few productive tasks and are rather forcefully excluded from adult workplaces. The system seems one of "benign neglect" with children left largely to their own devices. Becoming an adult in the islands means both performing adult work and gaining permanent access to adult work domains. Children learn adult work through adolescent "apprenticeships"--boys hire on as bowmen in the fishing boats and girls serve as paid housekeepers. Children are paid once they undertake these jobs. A boy becomes a man when he starts fishing and joins a sealing crew. Usually his first wages go to buy a car or truck which provide him with his own space. A girl only becomes a full adult woman when she gets her own house, after marriage.

For both sexes socializing and work are done in the context of a kin-based network. By "network" I mean a set of social relations that are based on links between specific individuals rather than common group membership. Kin provide the basic pool from which a person creates a network, but not all kin are members. Kin are recruited first on the basis of sex (since the networks are sex segregated), then age, marital status, residence and camaraderie. For both sexes the performance of traditional sex roles involves the exchange of labour and goods within the network.

Men do much of their work together, pooling and exchanging labour for heavier tasks like moving boats or building houses. Work and socializing combine as men gather daily on wharves, in a building, in a truck or near a house. Interaction between men is almost always face-to-face. This is facilitated by their near monopoly on wheeled transport. The pickup truck is the focus of their daily activity. There is a continual exchange: one man will help another cut and haul his winter's wood and will get his tractor fixed in return. Special services tend to be sought from kinsmen with particular skills as part of the regular exchange system rather than seeking these services from professional specialists. Men have a very accurate idea of the balance of reciprocal payments in labour and goods.

Women are more housebound by the nature of their work and because they generally lack transportation. Few women drive and fewer have regular access to vehicles; the men are nearly always using the family truck. Women rely on the telephone for wider contact.

The isolation of the housewife creates a distinction for women between work and socializing. Socializing involves "getting out of the house" (as they express it) for daily visits and community and church activities. The VISIT is a key institution in the lives of women in both communities. Household chores are done mainly in the morning to leave the afternoon free. An afternoon visit may be a token appearance--a woman slipping into another's house, sitting a few minutes for a cigarette and chat and slipping out again. Or it may last hours.

A striking feature of island social life for both sexes is the necessity of daily interaction with people in their network. Men drive from place to place during the day to do a little work, a little drinking and a little "parling" with other men in the network. Women spend much of the day in visits or on the phone. It is not unusual for a woman to call her mother four or five times a day and to see all her nearby female kin every day as well. The information conveyed in a phone call or visit is not as important as the mere fact that people have

checked in. This explains the apparently "empty calls" which can confuse the stranger; one end of a phone conversation may sound this way: "Oh, hi . . . How ya doing? . . . Oh, nothing much . . . got my wash out . . . yep . . . um. . . well . . . talk to you later."

This daily servicing of personal networks in the two villages contrasts with the more occasional, scheduled nature of social contacts in urban life. Frequency and constancy in social relations are crucial in the islands. Close relationships do not endure without constant contact. People who leave the islands seem lost. This necessity for daily interaction puts heavy demands on one's time and energy and has grave implications for people with professional jobs with an industrial (9 to 5) time schedule. Professional women, in particular, must find other ways to maintain their social networks.

Women's Work

Women's work is done alone in the house or yard. Getting her own house is a key ambition for women. The married woman will pressure her husband to buy or build even if space is available with in-laws. To have her own house is to have full adult status. Island women are houseproud and an enormous amount of time and energy goes into their housework.

Although women's work is solitary, there is a constant exchange of goods and services between women in a network, especially between sisters, mothers and daughters, and in-laws. An older woman will regularly feed grandchildren and contribute food to a kinswoman's household. Younger women run errands, shop and help the older woman with heavy housework. During the semi-annual housecleanings, daughters help their mothers and each other in the intense, weeklong labour. Childcare is also shared and children will regularly spend whole days and nights at the house of an aunt or grandmother. One grandmother routinely makes enough food to feed several visiting grandchildren.

Women also manage housework and childcare by hiring a housekeeper who is usually a teenage girl, most often a niece or a younger sister. The housekeeper is a subordinate in the household, receiving both wages and housework training from the older woman.

Women's work is highly valued in the islands. This is shown by the fact that "work," as a category of labour, has NOT been distinguished from "housework." Island women will speak of "my work," meaning housework, in the same way that men mention their "work." I found that the question "Would you like to work?" (commonly asked between acquaintances and in questionnaires in industrial society) was greeted with indignation and the tart response that women DO work,

harder than most people with "jobs."

With one exception, every woman with whom I spoke in the two communities had held wage jobs at different points in her life. Locally, the main source of employment has been the fish factory that hires about 70 English and French women a year for a season of approximately six months. Fish factory work is not recent but has been a source of wage work for women for 70 to 80 years. Most women also have held jobs on the mainland, usually before marriage. Employment provides women with an independent source of money as does child allowance which is paid to the women.

In the islands there is no linguistic or perceptual difference between the housewife and the "working woman" or "working mother." It is assumed that ALL women will marry, have children, do women's work and hold occasional wage jobs. Professional women are set off by the regularity of their work and wages, not by a distinction between their work and what a housewife does (nonwork).

Women adapt to wage jobs through the use of normal labour and childcare sharing. When a woman works at the fish factory, she may send her pre-school children to her mother's or sister's house or she may employ a housekeeper. Female kin may donate baked goods or entire meals.

An important result of the adaptation to intermittent wage work is that women

do not assume the necessity of regular employment. Everyone changes jobs and everyone is without wage work from time to time. Regular employment is valued but not expected, especially since the introduction of unemployment benefits. Women do not worry that marriage and a family will hinder their employment potential or interrupt their careers. It is traditional to combine wage work with the housewife and mother roles. Women simply rely on labour and childcare exchanges within the network. Even the professional woman casually take a few months off to have a child and then return to work with no pressure to be a "full-time mother."

Much of the current feminist literature focuses on the problem of "working mothers." The assumption of the wider society seems to be that wage work is not normal and that childcare and housework are fulltime occupations for an adult woman. The working woman is accused of robbing her home and depriving her children to take a job.

The traditional sharing of domestic work among island women means that women can delegate housework without being accused of "neglecting her home." In a similar way, the traditional sharing of childcare frees a woman from the accusation of "maternal deprivation." In western industrial society, where housework and childcare are considered the woman's sole responsibility, the professional woman is forced to delegate tasks, but CANNOT JUSTIFY IT. A

recent book by Shorter (1975) suggests that the notion of a single source of maternal care, which underlies the idea of "maternal neglect," is an extremely recent phenomenon.

Control of the House

Although island women regularly share domestic labour and childcare, the control of the house is not shared between women or between women and men. Oakley's (1974) study of British housewives distinguishes between the PERFORMANCE of household tasks and the RESPONSIBILITY for household tasks. This distinction is useful with respect to the islands, for women share the performance but not the responsibility.

I have suggested that women derive their full adult status and power from their control of the household domain. The women keep EXCLUSIVE control by a number of defensive strategies. They exclude their men and children from housework and the house itself and hence monopolize the household skills. Before marriage, for example, the island girl is a dependent in her mother's house. "Home" and "mum's" are terms used synonymously which express the strong exclusive control held by the older woman. Children and men do not have free run of a house, especially the kitchen. The mother quite explicitly doles out food and goods and children do not independently rummage in the refrigerator. Daughters are reluctant to initiate house-

work on their own. I have seen a mother furiously berate and belittle a girl who tried to do housework on her own whereas this same attempt would have been praised by the middle-class urban mother. Most often children are simply shooed out and "run the roads" (in island jargon). If a young married couple stays for a time with one set of parents, the older woman directs the housework, imposing her standards and schedule on the younger woman.

If a woman needs assistance, she calls on a woman from her network or hires a housekeeper. The mutual assistance of adult women helps to maintain the exclusiveness of the woman's domain. When a woman is sick or absent from home, even for a few hours, she will specifically delegate her authority, specifying the tasks she wants done, the rules to be observed and the punishment for failure.

The Professional Woman

In both villages there is a small group of professionals, (3) including the school teachers and nurses on whom I am focusing. In the English community in 1975, there were five local teachers (four women and one man) and one Red Cross nurse. In the French community, there were nine local schoolteachers (all women) and one Red Cross nurse. With one exception, all the professional women are married. All expect to fulfill both the housewife and mother roles along with their professional roles.

The means of successfully performing multiple roles are already available to these women. They rely heavily on traditional work sharing and on hired housekeepers. Because of their need for long term help, the professional women may have year-round housekeepers; two of them have live-in housekeepers. The professional women's reliance on traditional work and childcare sharing contrasts with the pattern in the wider North American society. There, professional women must find or create new means to manage housework and childcare such as day care centers.

Although the professional woman in the villages relies on her network, she cannot invest the normal amount of time or energy in daily network maintenance (visiting and telephoning). It is apparent in the two villages that professionals try to pay their social dues in the evenings and on weekends. In particular, I saw the development among the professional people of formal Saturday night socializing and Sunday visits to kin.

The professional woman is in a better position socially by hiring a housekeeper. She may fulfill the traditional housewife and mother roles by delegating tasks and she may participate in the normal exchange of goods and services by proxy. A woman sometimes will offer her housekeeper's services for babysitting or baking to women in her social network in place of her own services.

Although professional women rely largely on traditional sharing mechanisms which maintain the exclusivity of the woman's domain, some professionals have used new adaptations which are similar to those of urban women. In several cases the professional woman's husband is doing work traditionally identified as "woman's work," particularly housecleaning and childcare. It is interesting, however, that although the husband may do part of the housework, the professional woman still considers the home and children as her responsibility. The husband's participation in housework is not a point of contention; it is appreciated but not demanded. Most often the spouses have simply fallen informally into labour-sharing.

This again contrasts to urban society in the west. The feminist literature seems to assume that when women take fulltime professional jobs, men automatically should share household labour and childcare. It assumes, first, that men will willingly perform tasks traditionally identified as "woman's work." Secondly, it assumes that women will readily relinquish control of the household. My research suggests that some men will perform female work but that women strongly protect their exclusive control of the household as a basis of their power. Traditionally, island women developed strategies to share work but not responsibility and then only with women. It is possible that one problem in the

liberation of western women is their reluctance to share household control, a source of female power.

The Professional Woman in the Community

Professional women differ from other women in the roles they are expected to play outside the house. It is important to emphasize, however, that a professional woman is still just a woman. Her social status and authority are those of a subordinate in a sex-based hierarchy of authority. Professional women may be called upon to use their skills for the community, but they have no public positions of power over men. At best, professional women serve as official leaders among women. The actual role played by professional women differs considerably between the French and the English communities.

English - The professional women in the English community were all candid in expressing their relative isolation from the community's social life. The English professional women take little part in community "dos;" they don't attend the weekly bingos, dances and movies. Their social lives are confined to close kin on whom they rely for help. They socialize the minimal amount necessary to have a network and their networks are small. Several of the women said that they did not like to socialize and that they just liked to stay home evenings and weekends since they spend their days in the

school or dispensary. Others commented that they had nothing in common with the other women, that they had nothing to talk about and that they would bore people by school talk. They also implied that their social isolation was a direct result of their professional roles, and that it was necessary as professional women to be slightly isolated, and to avoid involvement with the community.

One reason for the relative isolation is the lack of an island-based system of higher education for the English. Local English girls who aspire to professions must leave their networks for several years to attend high school and receive professional training. Since few want to leave, the professional staff also includes outsiders who have come and then married. At present there are two such outsiders who thus lack a normal female-based network.

I asked if the women were ever expected to represent the community or contribute their skills to it. They did not claim any contribution on their parts except the filling out of tax forms. Yet, when a committee was formed several years ago to fight a development programme planned for the area, several of the teachers and the nurse were asked to serve. The women did not see this as indicating leadership positions or special status in the community. They were seen as having a skill (education) which was needed in a specific

situation and were called upon as is any skilled worker.

French - In the French village, the situation is very different and the professional women are highly visible socially. They actively participate in all community affairs, head the voluntary associations such as choir and scouts and faithfully attend bingos, movies, dances, parties and baby showers. They seem to be held in general esteem and are treated with great courtesy.

I asked the French professional women if they were, in fact, leaders in the community. One articulate woman said she and the others felt a social pressure to participate. She said that if she isolated herself she would be labeled "big-headed" and her isolation would be seen as snobbism. To avoid criticism, the professional women participate hectically.

The similar professions of nursing and teaching, therefore, have very different implications for women in the two communities. The English feel they must be socially isolated while the French feel they must be involved. The difference reflects the opposite views of authority and leadership held by the two ethnic groups. The English are basically suspicious of and hostile to anyone in an official position. The French defer to officials and seem to respect them.

The different concept of authority is illustrated by the positions of the two village mayors. The French mayor who is also one of the managers of the local fish factory has served seventeen years. He takes his position seriously and dresses the part. Many community affairs are opened by a short, formal speech by "Monsieur le maire." Though people joke and gossip about the mayor, his role has weight in the community. He is deferred to in public and serves as community spokesman. He makes trips to Quebec City and is recognized as being successful in getting funds for the village. The English mayor is not respected or deferred to. The position is reluctantly taken since it serves as a magnet for criticism and hostility. Past mayors comment on the thanklessness and dangers of the job. The mayor never serves as spokesman at community affairs. The only time he spoke officially in public was to open the single council meeting held while I was there.

The different attitudes towards leaders affect the social status and perception of the professional women. In the French community they are expected to be leaders though they do not hold official public positions of authority. The nature of women's status is beautifully illustrated by the mayor's wife. She is called on to make speeches and represent the town on certain occasions. She is introduced with a flourish as "Madame la mairesse." Yet she holds no elective position and her status derives from a man.

Social scientists in the past have related the difference between English and French views of authority to their respective religions. The assumption often made is that Roman Catholicism is a religion that supports hierarchy and lends importance to authority positions. And, in one sense, the French professional women do derive their social status from the church. Until 1962, the schoolteachers in the French community were all "réligieuses," or unmarried females. The role model of the professional woman for the French was the nun. So the present teachers are fulfilling positions that have an aura of church authority. The difference is that the present teachers must combine the professional role, for the first time, with the housewife and mother roles. Their solution shows that although professional women are respected, they are considered first and foremost women, and women's primary task is home and children. The teachers cannot neglect these.

In the English community, the teachers have always been married women and so there is a history of combining roles. However, the professional woman does not have additional social status. This is due to the suspicion and "jealousy" that characterize social relations in the English community as the people themselves suggest. Leaders are suspect and strangers are threats. A woman playing on her professional role risks identification as an aspiring leader or "stranger" and will draw the

community's fire.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that it is possible for women in the two villages to perform professional roles outside the house although they must still be competent wives and mothers and housewives. The performance of multiple roles is made possible by traditional patterns of exchange within an all-female, kin-based network; these patterns are usually unavailable to the professional woman in industrial society. The island system of woman helping woman with housework and childcare enables the professional woman to have an additional role without losing control of her traditional source of legitimacy.

The community role of the professional women is different in the two villages. I suggest that the social status of the professional woman is related to attitudes towards leadership in the two ethnic groups. In both villages, however, no matter how successful women are, they are still considered subordinates in a man's world.

NOTES

1. Research was undertaken on a Predoctoral Fellowship from the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, during seventeen months in 1974-76.
2. I use the term "professional" to refer to women with fulltime, regular employment, formal job training and a longterm, career orientation.
3. See definition in Note 2.

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