

Women's Work in Newfoundland

Fishing Families

by Ellen Antler

The most dramatic change in the lives of fishery women in outport Newfoundland has been in their relation to the production process. As recently as the 1950's women were an integral part of household production. Their finished product was light salted sun-dried codfish and their labours were contributed in a social context. Within this generation household production has been eroded and women's contribution to the production process has changed totally. Women now are either wage labourers in capitalist owned and operated fish plants or simply houseworkers in a privatized, domestic sphere where they support male family members who labour at a fresh fishery. This paper describes household production, the forces which have led to its

decay and the consequences of industrial production for women in the fishery.(1)

Household Production

When Newfoundland entered Confederation her population was organized to pursue an inshore fishery. Land tenure, marriage rules, residence rules and kinship categories were a response to the production requirements of this fishery --to maintain a 'crowd in the boat, a crowd ashore and hardy children.'(2)

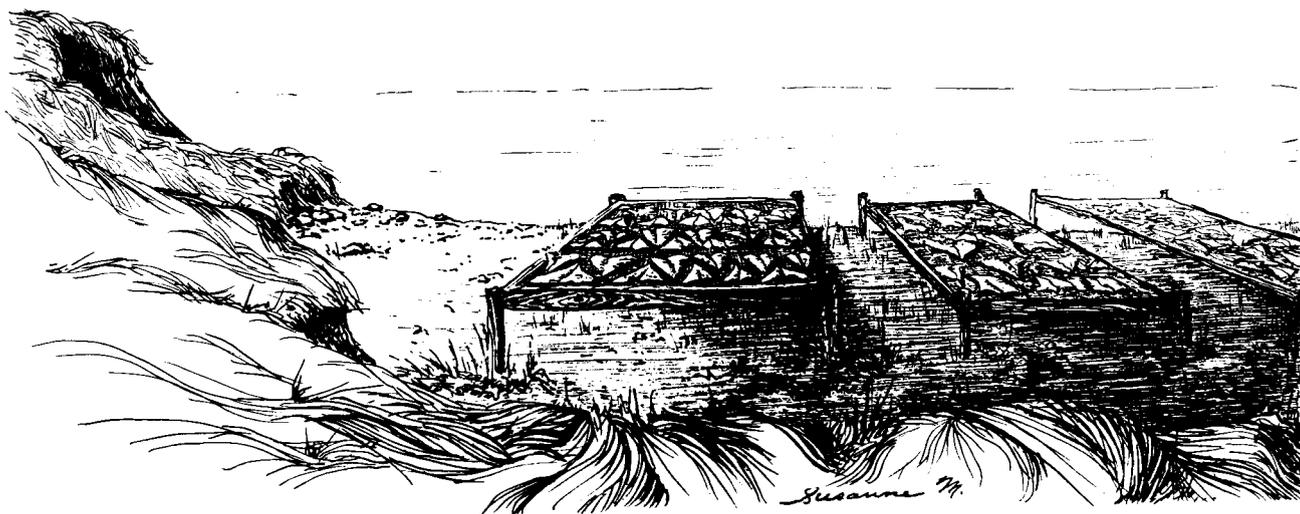
The traditional fishery required an extended family network. Fishing crews were agnatic and it was unlikely that a single nuclear family could muster the necessary capital and labour for the

enterprise. Inheritance rules guaranteed preservation of accumulated gear, fishing rooms, stages and boats to men. This, in effect, disinherited women and made their labour available to their husbands' undertakings. The traditional fishery also required that the whole community be involved in the productive process. Men often required assistance hauling or repairing boats that could not be provided by their 'crowds' alone. Shore processing efforts also were made easier by available community labour; often one 'crowd' would help another putting away fish at night or during a turn in the weather, and arrangements were certainly reciprocal.

Although actual fishing technologies

varied somewhat depending upon the use of jigger, handline, trawl or cod traps, in general the organization of production was the same. Men would fish in crews of two to five from early June when the cod 'strike' until October when the storms and rough seas make fishing impossible. During the 'glut' weeks in July and August, women's labour would be essential.

Men would bring their catches ashore and with women would head, gut and split the fish. The men then would return hastily to the fishing grounds while women remained in the fishing rooms. Here, they would salt and stack the fish and place them in the sun to dry.



The drying process requires several stages of washing, pressing and laying fish on 'flakes' so that the sun and wind will evaporate the water. Medium and small sized fish require about five days of actual drying in the sun although these days are separated by the time that the fish must be piled and pressed. Large sized fish require about ten drying days. Depending on the amount of space available and the weather, about 100 quintals of salt cod (one quintal=112 pounds)(3) can be made over a period of two or three weeks.

Drying fish can be tedious and time consuming and it is an extraordinarily difficult task for one person alone. It requires a committed and attentive person(4) who is also experienced in predicting the weather. Damp winds will hinder drying and permit decomposition to begin; heat too intense and sunshine too strong will actually cook the fish; rain will wash out the salt leaving the fish with a blotchy appearance and allowing bacterial action to begin.

The curing process requires that persons be available in case the weather changes so that the fish can be turned or taken in. It does not require, however, a continual presence since once the fish is spread it needs little attention. The nature of the production process and the fact that the income generated by this process was not sufficient to support an entire family unit

meant that curing fish was well-suited to household production. It was also particularly well-suited to those fishery crews using cod traps. These crews would be composed of 3-4 kinsmen who would have female labourers--wives or daughters--to contribute to the processing effort.(5) As well, traps tend to catch medium sized fish which are somewhat easier to cure than very large fish.

For a shore crowd composed of three women, making fish would require about three to four hours per day during the glut of the summer fishing season when men could not be spared from hauling traps. During the fall months the pace of fishing slows considerably and men have sufficient time to process fish themselves. On the Northeast Coast women would be required to work in the stages and on the fish flakes for about 4-5 weeks. Farther south the trap season may extend for as long as 10-12 weeks requiring a correspondingly greater input of women's labour at the shore tasks.

There was also a migratory fishery on the Labrador which is mentioned only briefly here. Men, women, children and usually the family livestock would sail to coastal sites 'on the southern Labrador' early each summer and pursue a fishery very similar to that conducted on the Island. Labrador fish tend to be smaller, thinner, cured with more salt and consequently they require considerably less drying time.

Often a 'skipper' and his family could undertake the entire season's effort without additional labourers.

Women did not actually get paid when their labour was applied to their own 'crowds,' but their efforts did make a difference to the income of their households. According to a government study published in 1953 (Walsh, 1953), the value of light salted fish over the equivalent fresh fish was \$5.16 per quintal.(6) On the Northeast Coast where the trap season is short, women's labours added about \$360 for 4-5 weeks work (see Faris, 1972: Appendix A, Table 1). In Conception Bay where the trap season is of longer duration, fishermen have calculated that their wives' labours increased the household income by \$1,500-\$2,000 (Andrews, 1969). An average summer for Labrador 'stationers' yielded about 800 quintals of fish. (7) For those families relying only on women and children's efforts, the processing could add about \$2,400 to the value of the season's catch.(8)

Women contributed to the household production in ways other than their involvement in the fishery. They tended gardens, carded and knitted wool, sewed, picked berries and performed the everyday services necessary for the maintenance of the family. The value of their labours (that is, the dollar value of expenditures which would be otherwise necessary) has been estimated to be about \$700 (cf. Brox, 1972; Dyke, 1966 and 1968; Wise, 1963).

In 1957 beneficial payments for saltfish production were introduced through a fishermen's unemployment compensation programme. The value of these payments to families making saltfish over those selling fish fresh were on average \$200 per year.

Thus, the average returns to the household from women's participation in the traditional fishery and other productive tasks may be estimated as follows:

\$785	cash value added in fish processing
200	additional UIC benefits
700	consumption items produced
<u>\$1685</u>	(9)

This \$1,685 represents a significant portion of the average family income of \$4,990 estimated in 1967 for a "hypothetical" fisher family of the Northeast Coast (Brox, 1972).(10)

Industrial Production

Since the Second World War and especially since Confederation the inshore fishery sector has been eroding. I cannot examine all the sources of this here and must focus only on the most salient. First, the Newfoundland government and important segments of her ruling class saw Newfoundland's future in terms of major industrialization which required a "free," dependable and inexpensive wage labour force. Simultaneously, the bigger firms in the fishery were interested in developing a thoroughly industrialized fishery. For them the profits from transporting and marketing

a finished product were less attractive than those that came from massive catching/processing efforts relying on relatively ill-paid deck hands and producing frozen fish blocks which could be marketed with apparent ease in the United States.

The preservation of a viable, producer operated inshore fishery was clearly contradictory to such interests; it provided a haven from wage labour and also raised the rate of wages necessary to tempt workers into the industrial sphere. Accordingly, there were concerted efforts to destroy the inshore fishery. Resettlement programmes in 1957 and 1965 were designed to remove fishery families from small fishing villages to centres where employment was available with offshore or mid-shore fleets or in other sectors of the industrial economy. A community stage programme was initiated in the late 1950's and early 1960's to encourage the making of salt bulk fish. (In this process fish are headed, gutted, split and salted but not dried and hence no input of women's labour is required.) No facilities were offered for producing light salted fish and this circumstance encouraged fishers to abandon their own flakes and stage. Today the high costs of restoring these facilities prevent many potential salt fish producers from taking advantage of currently high prices. Moreover, preferential export licensing schemes have disadvantaged small processors and recent policies regarding boat standards

and the licensing of fishery participants have seriously crippled inshore efforts.

Early in this process, women's labour seemed to be suddenly withdrawn from fishery efforts. This was a serious blow as it left fishermen with options only to sell fish fresh or in salt bulk; previously fishermen had been able to allocate their catch to fresh, salt bulk or light salted or even to withhold it from local merchants in attempts to obtain better prices. Without this option fishermen are increasingly at the mercy of such merchants. It is significant in this regard that although prices to fishermen for all kinds of fish have increased lately, their share of the world market prices has actually declined quite dramatically (cf. Antler and Faris, 1973:14).

The forces leading to the withdrawal of women's labour from the fishery were basically of two kinds. First, the massive influx of transfer payments from Ottawa served to "individualize" households in the community. That is, households began accumulating possessions of various kinds and previously nascent status differences burst forth in full bloom. The assistance that one shore crowd could expect from another was important and the separation of households undermined the ability of any to sustain curing efforts

More important was that the inshore

fishery itself was becoming more and more marginal. Crews were chronically short of men and with an absence of men came an absence of women. Women's participation in the fishery always has followed that of men. There are tasks that men are needed to perform such as carrying heavy buckets. When crews become too small such assistance is not easily given and when the shore crowd numbers dwindle down to two or even one the curing operations become overwhelmingly onerous. Increasingly men had to abandon their own fishery efforts altogether and fish with another crew or in distant waters.

As fewer families 'made fish' the traditional training grounds for young girls disappeared. 'Making fish' is not physically demanding, but years of accumulated experience are required to judge the weather and to learn the curing process. It is more precisely correct to say that older women have been removed from the fishery and that their daughters have not had the opportunity--even if they had the inclination--to replace them.

Women's work in the fishery sector now occurs in fish processing plants as was predicted by government planners (cf. Walsh, 1953). Indeed, one fishery reporter noted with some satisfaction that women's labours simply were transferred from the flakes to the fish plants at the minimum wage (Barrett and Wells, 1972:65-66). Work in fish plants is far from pleasant. The

plants are cement and cinder block, unheated; as the floors are hosed-down periodically, women are generally standing in one quarter inch or so of water. Wages are low. For women working at the minimum wage in 1968, for example, it would require 26 weeks of work in a 9 to 5 job to earn what her average 6-7 weeks labour at the household fishery produced. Even at union scale, it would require 11 weeks of work, 8 hours per day, to reproduce her equivalent earnings at the 'shore crowd' tasks. Moreover, work at the fish plant represents more hours of work. Fish plant work also requires expenditures for transportation and childcare.

It is not likely, then, that wage labour opportunities drew women from the fishery. To the contrary, women became available to work in the fish plants because their labour could not be applied to their own households' efforts.

Orthodox economic theory would lead us to expect that fish plant labour, assisted with a rational organization of tasks and much capital, would be more productive and yield greater returns to both labourer and capitalist. Of course, the reduced return to women arises not because fish plant labour is less productive than labour applied to the household production but because it is exploited. Fish plant owners now expropriate an increasingly large share of the value produced by women in their premises. It is pre-

cisely because fishery families could capture a much larger share of the value of their labour power when applied to the traditional fishery that made it compete so well with industrial wage labour and which necessitated its destruction by industrial capital.

What has happened to the fisherwomen and men of Newfoundland is hardly unique; they have been proletarianized. It has been a coercive process in Newfoundland just as it has been elsewhere, and not all of the changes have been in the conditions of work. Changes permeate all circumstances of life. Outport women now find themselves suffering the same isolation, alienation and sense of powerlessness that plague women in urban, industrial centres. They labour privately and without the rewards that their previously productive labours brought. For Newfound-

land women this has all too often been translated into depression and apathy.

Summary and Conclusions

The role that Newfoundland fishery women played in the process of production has changed from that of co-producer in a producer owned and controlled fishery to that of wage labourer in capitalist owned fish plants and non-wage labourers in the privacy of their homes. This is the outcome of an evolutionary process-- the development of industrial capitalism in the Newfoundland fishery.

This most salient "event" in the lives of Newfoundland women is amenable to analysis and explanation only if we understand this to be a change in the relations of production of the Newfoundland fishery. The circumstances I have described are not the outcome of new fishery technologies or the discovery of new fishery 'niches.' Most assuredly, it is only when we understand that Newfoundland's fisherwomen and men have been separated from their ownership of the means of production and proletarianized that we can begin to explain the events of recent years.

Finally, I hope that I have not painted too bleak a picture of the circumstances of outport women. They are not confused by competing social science explanations of their conditions and remain by far the most keen analysts of recent events.



NOTES

1. Research for this paper was supported by a Pre-Doctoral Research Fellowship from the Institute for Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland. As well, James Faris and Jackie Driscoll have made valuable contributions to earlier drafts.
2. Words, phrases in single quotations are Newfoundland usages (after Faris 1966); items in double quotations are from published sources or indicate emphasis.
3. This is the equivalent used in Newfoundland. Its origin is most likely lost in history although most think it a leftover of the Spanish fishing presence in the 15th Century.
4. It is for this reason that most fishers agree that the processing of light salted fish is distinctly unsuited for wage labour arrangements.
5. It was not uncommon for men to have no women to contribute to shore 'crowd' efforts, or for a crew to engage 'sharemen' who would not be expected to make such a contribution. In either case such men would endure a significantly diminished share of the proceeds of the 'voyage.'
6. It is important to note that this commission was hostile to the continuation of the inshore fishery and, compared to my estimates of catch and export data, underestimated the value of such production.
7. Throughout most of the history of the Labrador fishery there was no opportunity to sell fish fresh. The absence of women's labour meant either that the fishery efforts would be abandoned altogether or that sharemen would have to be hired.
8. The earnings for the Northeast Coast are in 1966 dollars; the Conception Bay figures are in 1969 dollars and those for the Labrador fishery are in 1950's dollars. The task of making these prices equivalent goes beyond simply deflating all the dollar values to that of a single year as fish prices for any one year are not the same across the island and even (many local informants report) from fisherman to fisherman. It is most difficult to bring precision to Newfoundland fish prices, and these figures are offered as averages and indicators.

The figures in the text were calculated as follows:

To produce the Northeast coast figures, the average household yield of light salted fish in quintals (112#) is multiplied by 450#/112# to obtain the equivalent weight of fresh fish that could otherwise have been sold fresh to the fish processing plants. This figure is multiplied by a constructed average price per pound paid to fishermen for saltfish in 1967 (based on figures produced by the Newfoundland Fishery Board). This amount is compared to the amount that would have been received had the fish been sold fresh--minus the cost of salt. In other words:

$$R_{sf} = (Q)(450\#/112\#) \times AP_{sf} - S$$

$$R_{ff} = (Q)(450\#/112\#) \times AP_{ff}$$

$$R_{wl} = R_{sf} - R_{ff}$$

where

R_{sf} = returns to salt fish sales

AP_{sf} = av. price for salt fish (assuming 65% Madeira grade, 50% Medium sized fish)

AP_{ff} = av. price for fresh fish (assuming 50% Medium sized)

R_{wl} = Returns to Women's Labour

S = price of salt in \$/#

Q = number of quintals of salt fish produced

Returns to the Labrador fishery are calculated similarly, except that salt fish yields are multiplied by 375# as Labrador fish has a higher moisture content than island fish.

Conception Bay figures are produced from informant calculations, and it must be said in fairness that they are probably the most accurate. Fishermen can look at any quantity of fresh fish and generate these calculations instantly and with unerring accuracy.

9. The cash value figure for fish processing is a provincial average based on returns from the Northeast Coast, Conception Bay and Labrador fisheries. The UIC benefit is also based on a provincial average as calculated by the Finn Commission (Finn 1964). The value of household production is also an average figure based on the estimates cited above.
10. By 1974 the price of light salted fish has increased nearly 30% over 1967 levels. The returns to saltfish versus fresh had not widened proportionately, that is \$6.16 from \$5.16. This may reflect the exceptional rise in the price of fresh fish in response to union militancy in recent years.

REFERENCES

- Antler, E. and James Faris
1973 "Adaptation to Changes in Technology and Government Policy: A Newfoundland Example (Cat Harbour)." Forthcoming in R. Andersen (ed.), North Atlantic Maritime Cultures, The Hague: Mouton.
- Barrett, D. and Robert Wells
1972 "An Historical Reconstruction of the Fishery Industry in Bay De Verde, 1949-1971." ms.
- Brox, Ottar
1972 Newfoundland Fishermen in the Age of Industry. St. John's: ISER, Study No. 9.
- Dyke, Prince
1966 "The Fishing Industry. A Preliminary Appraisal" Ottawa: ARDA Task Force for Comprehensive Planning (mimeo).
1968 "Subsistence Production in the Household Economy of Rural Newfoundland." In H.L. Skolnick (ed.) Viewpoints on Communities in Crisis. St. John's: ISER, Study No. 6.
- Faris, James
1966 Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement. St. John's: ISER, Study No. 3.
1972 Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement. St. John's: Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies, No. 3.
- Finn, D.B.
1964 Commission of Enquiry into the Atlantic Saltfish Industry. A report to His Excellency the Governor General in Council. P.C.
- Walsh, A.J.
1953 Newfoundland Fisheries Development Committee Report. St. John's: Queen's Printer.
- Wise, T.
n.d. Budgets, Credits and Skills: Survey of Rural Fishermen. Canada. Agricultural Rehabilitation and Development Agency Project # 1045. St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland (1963).