

Human Element Issues KPI-HEI-19-2013 **(Succeeding in Seafaring Family Life & Suggestions)**

A) SUCCEEDING:

► Introduction:

The research resulting in various findings concerning the seafaring life can be used to advantage to set a series of strategies, advices & recommendations so as to have a relatively successful life as a seafarer & the family.

The couples have to learn to make the necessary adjustments and deal with the periodic presences and absences as well as challenging lifestyle of one partner.

► The stamina for Patience:

It is really true that patience is the key for good progress & a success. This is everywhere & within any relationship. Those in the seafaring life need a bit! more than what is ordinarily required.

Intermittent absence can pose difficulties in coping with the power to be patient.

It can be a very valuable - if not the most important! - advice that in a seafaring family; every member; even a child should somehow be patient. If the attractions of a seafaring life are as valid & precious; there will surely be rewards for this waiting.

The financial reward must always be there that after all the time in loneliness; there is a good sum of money which can solve most of the problems. The intimacy award is also there, once you are separated from each other for sometime; you would appreciate the value of each other in a more tangible way. Patience depends very much on the individual's experience in life. Considerably the children & young wives are not expected to be very good at it. What could be done after all; may be the help of family members; support groups or close friends with possibly the same or similar experiences in life.

In a speech on the human element aspects of the seafaring life; one can quote two items as very vital; first is the patience & the second is persistence. To be a successful seafarer you need to have a good share of these, so is the seafarer's wife and family. There have been very good cadets who scored top marks at the exams but could not tolerate the sea-life and they had to quit. On the other hand there were average & even many below average guys who were very patient & persistent, they became very successful mariners & the very patience supported them in gaining the adequate knowledge & expertise throughout their service.

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► The value of Trust:

One of the most frequently mentioned factors associated with succeeding in a seafaring relationship is trust. Trust usually referred to in the context of sexual fidelity. But it can surely cover many other aspects in a married life.

Seafarers are aware that their prolonged absences could not only facilitate an extra-marital relationship, but that the loneliness associated with their absence could perhaps even predispose to infidelity.

Trust in general concept is vital in any form of a relationship but in a married life it can be quoted as a primeval factor. In seafaring life; matters like financial trust to manage the household expenses can be a relief on the minds from the burden of anxieties and concern over people and events at home while the partners is at sea. The ability and capability of partners is the key element to build up the trust.

Trust should be partly taken as a token of love & partly needs to be built up.

► The Communication:

For both seafarers and their wives communication between ship and shore was reported as important in managing separations and reunions. Indeed those couples who had a long history in the industry often made reference to the problems associated with the limited communication opportunities earlier on in their relationship and noted how much more manageable separations had become in the light of modern communication technologies. For couples in this study, email was viewed extremely positively and the arrival of regular (non-electronic) post on board continued to be a matter of some significance. Frequent communication could help bridge emotional gaps and provide the couple with the sense that the seafarer continued to participate in everyday events and decisions whilst at sea.

As one seafarer explained:

It wasn't too bad always thinking I'm gonna get a letter or something like that and then you imagine a phone call and stuff like that it was good. (Junior Officer)

Such contact, whether by telephone, email or letter also served to 'break up' the trip so that absences did not seem so lengthy.

One wife who had regular contact with her husband whilst he was at sea commented:

We're on the phone every other day, we email each other, the contact is so much more now that you just don't feel apart so much as the early days you know. (Wife of Senior Officer)

► Support networks:

For seafarers' wives, the difficulties associated with partner absence are both practical and emotional. Practical issues relate to dealing with household problems, from fixing broken shelves and washing machines to dealing with floods and power cuts. Emotional problems referred to the loneliness associated with separation from their partner and anxieties and depression attached to this absence. In both these domains the existence of a local support network of family and/ or friends could be vital.

Family support was often valued for issues of a practical nature, in particular for help with childcare. As two women explained:

We were living close by [to my family], that helps as well because for all the things sometimes when you do need help or you need to go somewhere and the children. I haven't had to take the children shopping for every little thing. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I'm sure it would be harder if I wasn't supported. Although I like to think that I don't rely on people, I'm sure if they weren't there life would be a lot harder, you know it's little things. The other week when the light bulb went and the I couldn't reach – even with the step ladder I couldn't reach - and my dad's 6ft 2 so I got him to do that, and 'oh while you're here can you do that and that' and you know just the little jobs that you never get round to doing, that [my husband] would do. (Wife of Junior Officer)

In addition, close and frequent social contact with family and friends appeared to help protect women from emotional problems such as loneliness and depression whilst their husband was away.

One woman living in the village where she grew up described her experience:

This house's an open house, everybody's in and out [...] friends, cousins, children. It was like a port of call, that's what my father in law used to say. So no, I was never lonely. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Such support had a positive effect on the seafarers' wife and subsequently was beneficial for the seafarer, who could continue his work at sea without worrying about his partner's wellbeing.

► What is "A good seafarers' wife":

Interestingly, when seafarers were asked about factors that helped make their relationship work they often talked in terms of either characteristics of their wife or the context in which their wife lived at home rather than focussing on themselves, their own conditions of work or experiences during their leave periods. This may be because the seafarers recognised the importance of their wife's acceptance and support to both the success of their seafaring career and also their marriage. As one seafarer put it:

We simply couldn't, couldn't have survived, if the wife was showing me any, any signs of being unsatisfied, or complaining if you like, about you know going away to sea; I don't think you could have managed or survived. (Senior Officer)

Independence was a characteristic men associated with a 'good seafarers' wife', as was the ability to cope with day-to-day events and demands alone. One seafarer explained:

If she's the sort of wife who has to ask her husband or how to do or what to do about everything you will never succeed. (Senior Officer)

Women also recognised the need to be self sufficient and independent. This independence related to the ability to manage household and family affairs alone and also to the need to maintain their own identity and interests outside their marital relationship. As two women commented:

I think that is the main thing, you have to learn to be independent and strong and cope on your own and cope with all the problems that come with the children. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I am quite an independent person. So I suppose that sort of helps you keep your own independence. (Wife of Senior Officer)

► Do something; Keep busy:

Seafarers' wives had developed strategies to deal with their partners' absence. The most frequently mentioned of these was 'keeping busy'. This could be done by involvement in paid work, immersion in domestic labour or increased social contact with family and friends.

As one young wife commented:

I just try to be strong I think and keep myself busy, I've got brilliant friends and good family so I think that's what keeps me going really. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Children could also inadvertently ease the difficulties of husband absence as not only could they provide a source of company and therefore combat loneliness, but also their needs could be time-demanding, and indeed sometimes all consuming, for their mothers and thus fulfil the need to 'keep busy'. Parental activities such as school runs and involvement in social and school activities could also provide extra sources of social contact for women while their partners were away at sea

► Getting involved in paid employment:

An important means of coping with partner absence for seafarers' wives is to 'keep busy' and, for many, paid employment was particularly effective for this purpose. Going out to work was also a means of 'helping time pass', 'getting out of the house' and making social contact and thus avoiding loneliness, all of which helped women manage while their partner was away.

The following quotes illustrate women's feelings about the role of their employment:

[My husband] often says 'why did you bother doing that, you don't need to?' But I find that - particularly perhaps for the periods when he's not here - it's something that I've got. It's an extra thing. I get out to meet people. [...] It just gets me into the outside world. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I just sort of kill time by going to work I suppose [...] like I said throw myself into work and I'm shattered by the time I come home in the evening and then you know it's time for bed and there's another day gone. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I don't go out that much when [he's] away, because I tend to work anti-social shifts, I volunteer to do night duty when he's away just to make the time go a bit quicker. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Strategies that aided coping of one partner were not always beneficial to the other. Whilst many seafarers recognised the vital importance of outside employment to their partner's well-being, for a small number the disadvantages associated with this employment were of more significance. During seafarers' tours of duty, women's paid employment could affect women's opportunities, and indeed willingness to sail with their partner. In addition, women's work was sometimes seen as interfering with plans for their leave periods, restricting freedom for couples to take short breaks and holidays together and sometimes resulting in seafarers spending considerable portions of their leave period alone.

As one seafarer commented:

The only thing that I was adamant about was I didn't want my wife to work, because I didn't see any sense in us being separated for five or six months and me coming home to see her and she has to go out to work. And also I didn't see any sense in, at the time, any sense in us, me, me being able to bring her away to sea with me and she being constrained by a job. (Senior Officer)

Women were aware of the conflict between their paid employment and the demands of their partner and their desire to be together during his leave period. In addition, women with dependent children had to develop strategies to successfully juggle childcare and work responsibilities. Although some women chose to avoid paid employment altogether, a more typical way to manage these issues was for women to take part-time and essentially flexible jobs that allowed them to be there for their children and or work only minimal hours during their husband's leave periods.

As two women noted:

*I landed a lucky job, I work in a school so I'm off with the children because that's always been a bit of a problem because he works away I just can't go out and get a job like an evening job or night work because there's no one for the kids.
(Wife of Senior Officer)*

That's not too bad [when he's on leave] because I only do 2 days and if need be I can have what they call unpaid leave. So I don't get paid but another young girl gets paid, for which they're very grateful. (Wife of Senior Officer)

► **Previous experience:**

A small number of women had had previous experiences of 'intermittent absence', either due to having a seafarer in the family (for example father or brother) or because occupations involving 'intermittent absence' (for example oil rig work) were common within their community. These women felt better prepared to deal with a seafaring lifestyle as they were aware of the potential problems associated with this way of life and felt they had positive role models of successful management of periodic partner absence. As two women explained:

*I don't think I saw anything as such but it was just because you were surrounded it by it you just saw everybody get on and cope so you did just as well.
(Wife of Junior Officer)*

I'd always had seafaring background, my father had always been away at sea and my two brothers have been deep sea and I was used to that lifestyle and I knew roughly how married life would be. (Wife of Senior Officer)

B) SUGGESTIONS:

► **Introduction:**

The seafaring couples have developed means of coping with many of the difficulties in seafaring work and lifestyles and have managed to sustain both their relationship and the seafarer's maritime career. Such 'successful coping' does not, however, mean that couples experienced seafarers' intermittent absences as 'problem-free'. Indeed there can be no doubt that the regular separations had sometimes considerable impact on family relations. Certain aspects of the lifestyle are accepted as inherent and unavoidable features of seafaring, for example, couples recognise the immutability of the seafarer's intermittent separation from family and home. However, both seafarers and their partners make several suggestions for ways in which the negative consequences of the work pattern could be reduced.

► **Shortening the service periods:**

Months at sea per year, and, to a lesser extent, length of trip, have been found to be good predictors of social marginality of

seafarers and length of trip has been found to be inversely related to job satisfaction amongst seafarers.

The problems associated with longer trips were reflected by couples' suggestions for improving the lives' of seafaring families. A decrease in the length of trip was commonly mentioned as a means of reducing the strain of periodic separation. Couples tended to be more positive about the experience of managing a seafaring lifestyle where the seafarer was working relatively short tours of duty (for example, one or two months). Longer trips were generally regarded as more problematic, as one seafarer who was working four-month trips commented:

It's not the job, the actually work side that's making me leave it's just the actual length of the trips making me leave. (Junior Officer)

Seafarers and their partners felt that shorter trips were considerably beneficial to their relationship and family life. Shorter trips were felt to allow seafarers to reintegrate more easily into family life upon their return home and make periods of coping alone more manageable for their partners. A seafarer's wife noted:

Three months to be away is a bit too long [...] too long to be on your own, too long, because like I said to him if he's away that long, you'd be a single person really. (Wife of Senior Officer)

The advantages of shorter trips were perhaps particularly significant for those seafarers who had young children. During long trips, changes in children could be considerable and sometimes unsettling for seafarers upon their return home. Very young children, in particular, were also reported to 'forget' their father over long tours of duty. To be responded to as a stranger by their children could be upsetting for seafarers. One seafarer explained:

I wouldn't want to be away longer than 2 months I shouldn't think. I think that's long enough, to little children, you kind of miss their growing up a lot, and also considering [my wife's] point of view, she's on her own for 2 months with responsibility for the family, I don't think that would be ... she'd cope, but I think that would be long enough. (Senior Officer)

► **Easier, Free or Less expensive Communication:**

The cost of ship-shore communication could be a considerable expense to seafaring families, both in terms of initial outlay for telecommunication equipment (FAX machines, personal computers etc.) and the ongoing costs associated with their use. The high financial costs of staying in touch could inhibit contact and, where contact was relatively frequent, place a large financial burden on couples as one wife explained:

The companies should allow them so much call time a week or something to phone home. Just once a week to phone home on their time so we wouldn't have to have such big phone bills, because a lot of the blokes won't phone their wives, no not at all, we spend a fortune. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Subsidised or free ship-shore communication was mentioned by many couples as something companies could do to support seafarers and their families.

As one seafarer suggested:

[Companies could] keep the post and the email free, the satellite phone prices could be brought down [...]. [They could] Allow

people to go ashore so they can ring their families on a cheaper land line. (Junior Officer)

A further means suggested to improve the quality of life aboard ship and reduce the strains associated with prolonged absence from home and family was increased access to personal email facilities aboard ship allowing couples to communicate frequently and, importantly, privately with each other whilst separated.

► **Support from the Company:**

A belief in the company's support during times of crisis was important to couples, in particular the knowledge that the company would endeavour to get the seafarer home if there was a family emergency ashore. Such knowledge helped to reduce the significance of physical separation and give wives a sense of support even in their partners' absence.

As one seafarer's wife commented:

The reassurance and the security of him being there for us, you know it only - it does only take a phone call and he'll be home. (Wife of Junior Officer)

The support can also be in many other forms. To provide family counselling, financial & legal supports as well as other activities that imply the company's care & assistance in dire straits. Some companies provide birthday or various anniversary gifts; cards or cakes to seafarer's wives & children. They send female clerks to chat with & provide company for the families in some dining clubs & social activities alike which will surely affect easing the loneliness atmosphere at home & in result will improve the workmanship of the seafarer on board & the expenses will work as a sort of fruitful investment.

► **Chances of Sailing Along:**

Couples were very positive about opportunities to sail with their partner and many women took advantage of this opportunity and some reported sailing with their husband for a number of years, only stopping when they started a family and childcare responsibilities necessitated that they stay at home. This opportunity allowed couples to spend precious time together and promoted a greater understanding of the seafarers' work and living conditions. Children were also thought to benefit from the opportunity to sail with their father or visit him aboard ship. As one adult child of a seafarer recalled:

Oh definitely [sailing with him] did help yeah. Well because what his cabin was like, what the size of the cabin you know was, how many other people he lived with, where he ate, his routine, his isolation and the loneliness that he probably felt as well at times. (Child of Senior Officer)

The sailing of women or children along with the seafarers can be quite problematic too. This fact can not be forgotten that life at sea is a very unique experience & can be damaging if not carefully planned & managed.

The women get bored & there are chances of social isolation & mental problems. If there are not other women along; they lose the social contact in general & having contacts with the shipmates can be improper & involve difficulties.

The children may miss their proper education opportunities & having no other children around can have detrimental effects on the social interaction qualities and abilities. Their life on board both for wives and children can be dangerous too. There might

not be adequate medications available for their specific ailments and so on.

But as a general remark; it is good to sail with the seafarer as partner & child both for the separation matters as well as understanding of their specific ambient circumstances.

► **Activities & Contact with other seafaring families:**

Women reported feeling that their shore-side friends often had difficulties in understanding the particular issues that faced seafaring families and were keen to have the opportunity to meet up with other women with seafaring partners who shared like experiences and lifestyles. This was felt to be something that could be arranged via the company, at relatively little expense or effort. It was suggested that companies could simply provide contact details to their employee's partners or could take a more active role in facilitating family groups and events. As two women suggested:

I think they could have family days. [...] It would get the families together. The life for the families, wives and children, it can be very isolated. They could build a support network. (Wife of Senior Officer)

That would be a good idea actually, people living the same life, to talk to. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Contact with other seafaring families was also thought to be important for seafarer's children. As one woman explained:

With the children - your mum and dad are divorced or they haven't got a dad, so I think people are quite shocked and they kind of say 'well are you divorced?' and then 'no, my daddy works on a ship', because that's quite - I mean if there's other children if their dad worked on a ship that would be more normal. (Wife of Junior Officer)

The activities & contacts can be made individually or through seafarers' help centres or clubs. Even some batch-mates or ship-mates are known to have set up such groups out of necessity & have gained lots of benefits from. They could even help the friend's wife while her husband is at sea & that guy would do the same in turn after four to six months. They can lend money to each other, keep company & even take care of each other's children. All errands can be done on a give and take basis & all involved will gain as much. People understanding each other's problems can be extremely helpful & supportive in minor details to drastic accidents, etc.

► **Conclusion:**

The in-depth studies of seafarers and their partners allow a rich insight into the lives and relationships of seafaring families. In their accounts, couples reported *perceiving very few benefits associated with seafaring*. Indeed a number of seafarers cited money as the only reason they continued their sea career. In contrast to the limited perceived benefits of the occupation, the strains associated with prolonged and repeated separation from home and family were both numerous and considerable. Difficulties are experienced at all stages of the work cycle, however, in common with previous studies, *the transition periods between ship and shore* and from home back to sea again were found to be the most problematic times for couples. During these transition periods couples had to move between two existences that were sufficiently different for seafarers and their partners to

refer to living in 'two worlds' or having 'two lives' or even 'two selves'.

Tensions were reported to develop when the seafarer returned home and struggled to adjust to the routines and demands of family life again, and partners had to manage the transition from living alone and, in some cases, acting as a 'single parent family', to being part of a couple again. Many wives had learned to cope very successfully in their partner's absence and this successful coping could paradoxically leave seafarers *feeling redundant and 'displaced'* when they returned home.

For couples with young children problems could be exacerbated during this period as *children saw their fathers as 'strangers'* and felt their lives to be more normal when they were away. The period immediately before the seafarer's return to sea was also characterised by anxiety and strain as couples anticipated the disruption of family life and the angst associated with their separation. The tensions associated with these transition periods could absorb considerable portions of seafarers' leave periods, leaving seafarers relatively little time to enjoy with their families. Despite the problems precipitated by the occupational lifestyle, the accounts of couples in study suggested that family relationships were of particular importance to seafarers.

The lengthy and repeated separations from their home appeared to inhibit seafarers' ability to initiate and maintain friendship networks ashore. Very few of the seafarers interviewed for this study reported long term, close shore-based friendships and many reported *spending significant portions of their leave periods alone*. Correspondingly, changes in working conditions such as reduced crewing levels, single-person tasking, fast turn around times and increased working hours all served to diminish on-board relationships to little more than 'on-board acquaintances'. In this context seafarers became extremely dependent on their partners for *emotional support* and the provision of a *social support network* ashore.

Many seafarers reported turning to their partner exclusively for support and often relied on them for assistance with professional, as well as personal and emotional, problems. These factors suggested that the consequences of relationship breakdown for seafarers could be considerable.

Increased access to *telecommunication facilities* appeared to significantly reduce the impact of seafarers' intermittent separation from their families. (Cell-net) telephone and email communication allowed regular communication between couples and gave seafarers a sense of continued participation in family life. Such regular contact appeared to be important in easing transitions between ship and shore life. There was evidence to suggest that ship-shore communication was particularly important at times of stress or emotional strain.

The *apparent rarity of close confiding relationships on board* meant that, at such times, access to emotional and social support from home could be crucial for seafarer well being.

Whilst the separation from home and family was largely considered to be an immutable aspect of seafaring, the detrimental consequences and experiences of such separation were not regarded as irreducible. In their accounts, both seafarers and their partners referred to a number of factors that influenced their experience of intermittent separation. *Many of these related to the seafarers' employment and working conditions. Shorter tours of duty, access to free or subsidised communication and opportunities for partners to sail could all considerably improve the lives of seafarers and their partners and reduce the impact of seafaring on family life.*

The domains of family life and the environment of work may traditionally have been considered separately, however these

data suggest that to continue doing this would be a considerable oversight. The accounts of couples in this study indicated that, for seafarers and their partners, *home and work lives are inextricably linked*.

The findings of this study suggest that attention to seafarers' families and attempts to reduce the negative consequences of seafaring on family life may have considerable beneficial implications for retention of seafarers.

This exploratory study focused on seafarers mainly from developed countries and their families; however, many of the issues discussed are likely salient to seafaring families worldwide. Work and employment conditions significantly contributed to families' experiences of seafaring work and family life. Those seafarers from developing countries with less economic power and weaker economic positions within the global seafarers' labour market typically have less favourable employment contracts and poorer work conditions.

It follows that such *reduced employment conditions may considerably amplify the detrimental impact of seafaring work patterns on family life* with the subsequent implications for both seafarer retention and seafarer and family wellbeing.

► **Steps that are recommended:**

- Increased access to private email & subsidised communication to reduce the financial burden & facilitate frequent/regular contact between seafarers and families.
- Delivery of regular mail as frequently as is logistically possible in order to increase opportunities for communication and maintain seafarer's morale.
- Tours of duty of no longer than four months in duration.
- Increased opportunities for partners, and where possible children, to sail in order that families have the opportunity to spend valuable time together and to enable partners and children to have a better understanding of the seafarer's life and work at sea.
- Improvements in the organisation of reliefs/ replacements so that seafarer's arrival and departure from home can be anticipated & transitional period stresses reduced.
- The promotion of social contact between seafaring families in order to reduce the social isolation and facilitate the development of social support plans & networks.
- Assurance of seafarers' immediate repatriation upon family crisis.
- Improved contact between the company and seafarers' partners.
- So far as possible & practicable seafarers should sail with the same crew, thus facilitating opportunities for social relationships aboard.
- Cost cutting through reduced crew sizes along with increased administrative duties should be balanced against detrimental health consequences for seafarers, in particular those relating to stress, fatigue and social isolation.
- Timely & fair allotment & payment of wages as per the contracts.