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## Lost Moorings: Offshore Fishing Families Coping with the Fisheries Crisis

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Marian Binkley\*

Lost Moorings: Offshore Fishing  
Families Coping with the  
Fisheries Crisis

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*The fisheries crisis has severely affected the families of offshore fishermen. In Nova Scotia, offshore fishermen normally spent ten to fourteen days continuously at sea and as little as forty-eight hours on shore between voyages. The fishermen and their families adopted strategies to cope with that work schedule. This paper focuses on how these previously beneficial adaptations conflict with the new situation these families now face when many men have been laid off or had their work reduced.*

*Introduction*

This paper focuses on families of Nova Scotia offshore fishermen<sup>1</sup> and their strategies to cope with the changes brought about by the current fishery crisis. Although fishers prosecuted many different types of fisheries in Nova Scotia, these fisheries can be divided on the basis of employment into two groups—industrial and independent. Industrial fisheries are exploited by fishers who work for companies and independent fisheries are exploited by fishers who work for or as independent operators/owners. This distinction—industrial/independent—roughly coincides with the division between the offshore and the inshore fisheries. In February 1992, the federal government halted offshore harvesting of cod off the northern shores of Newfoundland. In June of the same year the government expanded its moratorium to include inshore fishers. It subsequently issued a groundfish management plan, limiting all fishing of northern cod off Newfoundland as well as in specific areas of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, including Sydney Bight, and in waters off Nova Scotia north of Halifax. On 31 August 1993 the government closed five more areas, virtually halting all cod fishing off the Atlantic shore north of Halifax except for fisheries off the Labrador coast. Groundfish quotas in the areas remaining open were severely cut. The latest groundfish plan has greatly limited the catch of groundfish in the remaining open areas.

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1. I use the term fishermen/fisherman when I want to be gender specific, otherwise I use the term fisher.

As of 1993, the northern cod closures have eliminated over forty-thousand fishery jobs.<sup>2</sup> Although the federal government has compensated fishers for lost earnings and offered them retraining programs—as well as early retirement packages for plant workers—the future for those people, their families, and their communities appears bleak. The compensation packages cannot go on forever, and even if the fishery rebounds it will not be able to support the large numbers of vessels and crews that previously exploited this resource. Moreover, in a region of high unemployment in the middle of a recession, many fishers and plant workers with relatively poor education are skeptical about what jobs they can retrain for and where those jobs will be located.

In Nova Scotia, particularly in the area south of Halifax and along the Fundy shore where the fishery is more diverse, the impact of the moratorium has been recessionary rather than catastrophic as in other areas of Atlantic Canada. Many companies in the area south of Halifax and along the Fundy shore have down-sized their operations. Companies have tied up their deep sea vessels, have sold off surplus vessels, have retired aging vessels, and have refitted groundfish trawlers to fish for other species such as shrimp, shark, or surf clams. The *Cape North* and the *Cape Adare*, factory freezer groundfish trawlers, have been sold. With fewer vessels to operate and to maintain, the companies need fewer men and lower plant capacity. Some companies laid off the whole crews of redundant vessels, while other companies run two crews that alternate trips on a single vessel. Some fish plants have been closed while others plants have shortened their work time and/or extended their vacation period. For those employees who still have a full time job, life continues much as it did before. However, for those men who now work on double crewed vessels, time on shore has increased from an average of two days to two weeks, and their wages have been cut in half. For those men who have been laid off, they must find other employment or collect government assistance such as the “fisherman’s package”, unemployment insurance, or other social benefits. These declines in the fishery of southwestern Nova Scotia have inevitably restructured the economies of the local communities, and the government has not offered any relief to the local retailers or other people indirectly affected by the fishery closures.

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2. K. Kelly, “Atlantic Canada Reels Under Fishery Closures” (1993) Vol. 74: No. 8 *National Fisherman* 14.

## I. *The Study*

Information for this paper comes from my study which compared and contrasted the adaptations of offshore and inshore fishermen's wives to the extraordinary pressures put on their households because of the nature of their husbands' work. The populations under investigation were the wives of offshore fishermen who sail out of Lunenburg, the largest Nova Scotian deep sea port, and wives of inshore fishermen living in Lunenburg and Halifax Counties. The study focused on independence, the perception of independence, social networks, social attitudes, and finances. Although particular attention was paid to the transition between living with and living apart from their husbands, the study examined the complete work cycle. One of the major areas of inquiry was the impact of the decline of the fisheries on fishers' families. This paper focuses on those findings as they apply to offshore fishermen's families.

Phase I of the study consisted of a literature review and a series of in-depth interviews with selected key informants including a number of wives of offshore and inshore fishers, wives' support groups, community support workers, fish company managers, and elected officials in Lunenburg and other Lunenburg County communities. I used information from those sources to generate statistical profiles, demographic and socio-economic parameters, and to identify areas of residential concentration for the populations. Relying on the preliminary information obtained in this phase and from previous research, I developed the interview schedules and sampling plans for the subsequent phases.

Phase 2 consisted of a general survey administered to one hundred and fifty offshore fishermen's wives from late August to November 1993 and one hundred and fifty inshore fishermen's wives from late August 1993 to May 1994. We surveyed each population and these data were analyzed in turn (Phase 3). Each survey stood on its own. During July and October 1994 we conducted 25 taped in-depth interviews with wives from each group.

## II. *What It Was Like Before*

Before discussing how offshore fishermen's families have coped with the current crisis, it is necessary to review how this type of fishery affected their lives prior to the collapse. In the Nova Scotia offshore fishery<sup>3</sup>, men

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3. The length of time at sea could vary from as short as four or five days (e.g., small scallop draggers) to as long as three to six months (e.g., factory freezer trawlers) and the length of time on shore could vary from as short as 48 hours (e.g., groundfish trawlers) to three to six months (e.g., factory freezer groundfish trawlers). However, the majority of offshore fishermen worked a cycle of ten to fourteen days at sea and forty-eight hours on shore.

normally spent ten to fourteen days at sea and forty-eight hours at home. Typically this pattern continued throughout the year, except for the annual summer vacation and Christmas holidays, unless the fisher became injured or asked specifically for time off. For most couples the time on shore was the most important time in family life. Men talked about living ten days in two. Women yearned for the two or three days when their husbands were home. This is how one woman reported a conversation she had with her best friend concerning her way of life:

I was saying 'I can't wait 'til he comes home and all that' and she said 'You know you rush your life away.' And I do, you know. Like each day, every night when I go to bed it's like 'Well there's another day closer to when he comes home.' Because I said to her, 'I can't believe how fast this year's gone,' and she said 'well you rush it', and I do, like it's kind of sad 'cause you're rushing your life away because you can't wait until those three days come that he's going to be home, and what's three days out of three weeks, right. And then when he comes home, you want the clock to stop and then it just flies . . . it seems like just a couple of hours and he's back on the plane again, but . . . I mentioned to my friend the other night and she said, 'Ya', you know when you think of it, everybody does it, pretty much all of the fishermen's wives, and it's kind of sad because your life's short anyway, and you're rushing every day by.

Fishermen's wives organized their own work around their husbands' schedules. His work defines her work. This type of definition remains common among families where the male takes on the role as primary breadwinner. Since the economic well-being of the household depends on the husband's job, his wife's primary responsibility lies in supporting him. Her needs become secondary. Fishers work long hours, spend a good deal of time at sea, and work in one of the most dangerous occupations in Canada. Husbands return home weary and tired and have little time or interest in the minutiae of every day live. They expect their wives to take care of it. Husbands' absences from home further increase wives' independence and autonomy. They shoulder all the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the household as well as coping with emergencies that may arise. Wives worry constantly about their husbands—whether he will return home maimed or if he will return at all—and about family finances. Fishers never know how much they will make from a trip because they never know how many fish they will catch. This means that their wives cannot budget their finances; they are always trying to stretch their income and to save in case of a bad trip. The nature of fishers' work sets up a dilemma for these women—how to balance the dependence/restriction set up by husband's work and the independence/autonomy needed to run the household. The balancing of these factors leads to the adaptation of fishermen's wives.

Fishers face a parallel dilemma. These men's allegiance wavers between their family and their fellow crew members—their family at sea. They go to sea to provide for their families. Here they enter a male world where they depend on their shipmates for their survival. This type of working environment leads to the development of strong ties among crew members. When he comes ashore, the fisher enters an alien world. His work makes it difficult to maintain or develop social contacts outside the fishery. Generally, he has no social contacts other than his family, or his shipmates, or possibly his wife's social network. This lack of social and community interaction increases the fisher's sense of alienation, and increases the likelihood that he will spend his shore leave almost exclusively with his family and shipmates. He relies on his wife to mediate the "shore world" for him.

The conflicting demands of work and family responsibilities aggravate tensions between spouses in all households, but long absences from home, high stress, and physical risks exaggerate these problems and distinguish fishers' families from other households. If the marriage is to survive, each couple must develop strategies to cope with their individual situation.

### III. *What Happened When the Fishery Declined*

For a few offshore fishers' families where the husbands have maintained their job and their income, the moratorium in the groundfish fishery has had no *direct* impact on them. But most of these men come from fishing families and many have brothers, fathers, or cousins who have been affected. Although there is a real fear that the husband's job could be affected in the next round of quota cuts, their wives try to be optimistic about their future. Here is how two women feel about their present situation:

Well, it affected my father. . . . He did that ground fishing, and he just had to give it all up because there was nothing to it. . . . My husband gets upset with me. He thinks that I believe that it's always going to be there. Sometimes I do think that way. I try to think positive. Maybe if it came to what it is with ground fishing now, it's terrible. Their income is unreal. They just live from day to day and that's it. It's that bad.

and:

I am somewhat [worried]. I don't dwell on it a lot, you know. I feel that for the most part we have to live for the present now, and prepare for the future—we have been saving for many years . . . so we have some saving . . . but, there is that fear that Mark's job will disappear in, say, a year . . . two years, whatever. Just about every year when the new season starts, you know in January, the company meets, and this boat is old, and we know that it's a limited time . . . so it's more or less, which year will it be? And when

it goes, I don't think there'll be anything there for him. . . . That company only has four boats right now, and it's not likely that there will be a job there . . . it'll just be termination, most likely. The company generally had cut back. They'd gotten rid of a lot of their older boats and replaced them with some new—ones they built a couple and bought—one and phased out the older boats. And, well a lot of the captains just weren't of retiring age, so it just didn't leave enough boats for the number of men they had. And that's true of the mates and crew as well . . . a lot of people were actually out of work.

But what happens when the husband's job has been affected and he has to spend more time on shore or has to leave the fishery all together? In past studies,<sup>4</sup> offshore fishers have described the three worst features of their job as health and safety hazards, high stress, and extended separation from home. In my study of offshore fishers<sup>5</sup>, I found that the most common reason for leaving the offshore fishery—after injury and economic concerns—was the long time away from home. Many couples look forward to the prospect of having the husband home for longer periods of time. It gives them a chance to get to know one another better. One woman, when asked how her relationship with her husband had changed, said:

We may be a little closer than what we were when he was [gone] . . . when somebody is gone twelve days and home four, and twelve days and home four, that type of thing, it doesn't give you a chance . . . to get close and talk over things that have gone on in twelve days . . . like he's gone another twelve days and you're thinking, 'Oh, I forgot to tell him, you know something happened, you know, twenty days before that.' Of course then by the time he comes in, it's gone all together. But, I . . . maybe that, a little closer.

The longer time at home gives the husband an opportunity to rest from the pressures of being at sea and to be re-introduced into family life. It relieves the wife of the sole responsibility of running the household and making family decisions, and opens the opportunity for the couple to develop a common life.

But those capacities that enabled a wife to be a supportive spouse to a fully employed fisher may conflict with her fulfilling the role of wife to an unemployed, laid off, or part-time fisher. Many women talk about their loss of independence, of having another child to look after, or of their husband being underfoot. For some women having their husband home all the time can be frustrating. They are used to being on their own. What

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4. See e.g. J. Horbulewicz, "The Parameters and Psychological Autonomy of Industrial Trawler Crews" in P. Fricke, ed., *Seafarer and Community* (London: Croom Helm, 1973); J.J. Poggie, "Ritual Adaptation to Risk and Technological Development in Ocean Fisheries: Extrapolations from New England" (1980) 53 *Anthrop. Quart.* 122.

5. M. Binkley, *Risks, Dangers, and Rewards* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1995).

once was an accommodation for a few days has now become a way of life. As one woman remarked:

I'm not used to, the last six months, I mean even when I crawl out of bed in the morning, and . . . if he's around . . . sometimes I go in and I look, and he's even making the bed. It's like every step I make, he's at my feet type of thing. But when I'm working nights, and he's here by himself, you know, and he's making the meals, and doing the laundry, and whatever . . . then when I get up in the afternoon and sit for a few minutes, and then I usually have my bath once I get up, and I look and he's going and running the water for my bath (laughter). . . . Sometimes you think, well I like to do these things myself . . . but you know, he's even doing that (laughter).

Similarly, fishers' adaptation to life at sea may conflict with their role of husband and father, and their integration into a land-based way of life. As one wife remarked:

I think it's hard for him to adapt to it because . . . he's so used to filling everything into four days that when he's home that month . . . he's just getting used to a normal time for sleeping and a normal time for doing things, when he's got to turn around and he's got to change everything again and go out.

When the fisher comes ashore he must adjust to his family, and leave the male world of the ship behind. He enters a matri-focal household where he may feel the outsider. He has to cope with an unfamiliar shore routine. Often he finds he has little in common with non-fishers and has no role in the community other than husband and father. But being home for a longer period of time opens up opportunities to get involved with the family and the community which were not possible before. Some men have taken advantage of this time to join a sports team, or to become involved in community, school, and church activities. Others have taken courses to enhance their fisheries credentials or to upgrade their education.

But being home for longer periods of time has an economic cost. Fishers whose boats are tied up or who work on a vessel with a rotating crew suffer a decline in their wages. Finances, which were always uncertain, impose an additional constraint:

They don't have a whole lot of trips, but then they're kind of supplemented in between their trips when the boat's laid up and whatever—they get unemployment. And we do have a little in the bank. . . . There probably are a lot of fishermen . . . like us. We own our home and we own our vehicle, so we don't owe any money other than your regular phone bill and light bill, that type of thing but . . . a lot of people don't have any money in the bank or anything to fall back on if the fishing industry goes kaput and . . . The government, the way it is too, I mean, a lot of things are being cut back, and the U.I.C. [Unemployment Insurance Commission], you never know when that is going to be cut off or whatever . . . so there probably are a lot of fishermen's wives that do have a lot of concerns as far as that goes.



It generally falls on the women to reorganize the budget to make do. For the husband, a decline in his wages indicates his inability to provide for his family and erodes his self-esteem. As the wife becomes more anxious about meeting financial needs, she may forget about her husband's emotional needs. The tension associated with uncertain finances may lead to disputes where emotional responsibilities get confused with monetary responsibilities.

Families of laid off fishers feel the economic squeeze even more. Now most collect UI or the "fisherman's package" but once their UI has been exhausted they will have to rely on welfare or other types of social assistance packages. They are desperate to get on to another boat if only to get enough stamps to continue to collect UI and not to go on welfare. As one woman describes her husband's search for a job:

There is no work. He's tried, he's went in . . . Like, it's the same . . . like if you go to another firm. Like, what he was worried about and which he's still worried about, is setting up enough stamps for another year. . . . And he tried to get on boats . . . like he went for two weeks straight, every day into Lunenburg, but with being on unemployment you can't use no more gas up than what you really can, you know. So, he was doing that for two weeks and then he just stopped 'cause there was just no chances (jobs) to get. None whatsoever."

The prospect of employment in the fishery or in other industries in the local area appears bleak. Couples must choose between staying in the community or moving elsewhere to find employment. This is a difficult decision. As one woman discussed the difficult possibility of moving:

I don't think I'd want to move. . . . He's already mentioned to me about going to Vancouver. There's scallop fishing there and he wanted to go there to live and I wouldn't even hear of it. Because I done that one time before. He uprooted Mom and Dad and all of us when we went to Newfoundland to live. And he done a different kind of fishing down there. . . . Ya, well he said that if it came to it that he would have no other choice, so if it came to that I would. But right now I'm not just going to uproot my family to move somewhere and it not work out. No I couldn't. I lived here all my life.

Yet in an area of high unemployment, moving may be the only real opportunity for most of these men to find work.

With the husband unable to get work, many households rely solely on government social assistance and the wife's wages. Wives who previously worked only in the home now take on outside employment; wives who had part-time or full-time jobs work extra shifts or take on a second job.

Now that he's home, or has been home for the last six months . . . I work and I work part-time, which sometimes involves full-time work, and with extra shifts I work at the hospital, and I'm gone for twelve hours/thirteen

hours at a time, and . . . he takes over the household duties. He does the laundry, the cleaning, everything you know, so it's good that way, you know. It's really hard to keep the bills paid and . . . there's no extras, and it's like, you're used to a pay cheque coming in and . . . well it's two pay cheques, mine and his . . . and now it's just mine, so you learn to.

The lack of financial security increases the anxiety within the household, puts additional responsibility on the wife, and erodes the husband's self-esteem.

As the wife takes on more of the financial responsibilities, the husband may take on household chores—the laundry, the cleaning, the cooking, child care. For some fishers this situation represents an opportunity to get to know their children, to do the repairs they have been promising to do for months, or to take up an old hobby they have set aside. Others simply hang around the house, sleeping, watching TV or videos, reading novels, or drinking with their buddies. No matter how well the fisher is integrated into the household, he's not happy being home, and he looks forward to going back to sea. This situation further erodes the fisher's self-esteem and may lead to depression. Here is how one woman describes her husband:

The problem is . . . what to do with himself, type thing. The emptiness and . . . he mopes a lot, and that type of thing. . . . He tries to keep busy, but you know deep down that he's bored with himself silly . . . I think his biggest problem right now is the fact that he feels . . . that he's worthless—that he's no good to himself (laughter) . . . that he's not productive. . . . You try to support them, but it's still hard. . . . He has fishing friends that are working, and then here he is, sitting home. And it's just not happened yet for him . . . to get something . . . I think he finds that really hard to deal with. . . . It's not easy. Not at all.

Fishers who have been laid off or have had their jobs reduced face more than financial loss. Fishers are proud and independent men. They consciously traded off being at home for financial well-being. They wanted respect from the community and their family, and sought it through financial means—expensive consumer goods such as new cars, modern houses, all-terrain vehicles, and other leisure goods. As in other industrial settings, conspicuous consumption indicates success and validates their choice of working in the offshore fishery rather than in other employment. Those items “proved” that they were good providers, husbands, and fathers. But now they no longer have a “good” income; they rely on their wives earnings and/or social assistance. They feel lost. A sense of worthlessness pervades, similar to those feelings of workers who have left the fishery because of injury.<sup>6</sup> Opportunities for these men are

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6. *Ibid.*

limited. Most have never done anything except fish, and they have no training for anything else. This is how one woman describes her husband's situation:

As times goes on, you can see that he's feeling more and more that he's not of any use, and . . . at his age, he's forty-seven, he's sort of caught in between. In a lot of cases, a younger person might be able to get work a little bit easier than someone his age, and yet he's too young to retire, you know. So . . . he's sort of a Mr. In-between, and . . . to go out now and re-educate and try to get into something else, it's almost impossible, because what do you do for someone that has been going to sea since he's been sixteen years old. He's only got junior high education, and has been out of the social . . . you know, when you go to sea, you live a totally different life. I can see, like there's things that goes on, that you just aren't aware of, at home; not necessarily just at home within your little home circle, but in your community, you know. You just lose all track of things, and even people that you've grown up with, and whatever, you just don't have any contact with them, because in a lot of cases, you don't have the time. And you . . . it's just . . . it's hard to go out and try, try to live a life ashore, as spending, you know, as spending thirty years at sea, you know. It's difficult, it really is.

His frustration at not working and his loss of self-esteem combined with her frustration over the erosion of her autonomy can lead to an unbearable tension between the couple. As one woman described her life over nine months while they waited for her husband's boat to be readied:

I'm not as independent as normal when he's out to sea. . . . When he's home there's more laundry and that stuff to do. And if he's home for an extended amount of time like he has been this year, it's like we both get on one another's nerves because we're not used to it at all. . . . [T]hey sold the boat he was on last year in November and he's waiting for the new one to get ready to go and that should be the end of this month, or the first week in July. We're going to raise the flag. . . . It's slower [when he's home] because I'm normally up early, so I have to wait for him to get out of bed in order to get my work done and do my things. It's a lot more tied down. I don't get to go for walks as early in the morning as I would when he's not home. It's like every move I make it's like 'Where are you going? What are you doing?' When he's out to sea I don't have anybody to answer to and ask those questions. It's just . . . well right now it's driving both of us crazy, because he's been home since November the sixteenth and this is the longest he's been home ever. "Til he goes away, well, if we don't have one another killed it'll be fine. . . . One night we were sitting here and we were talking about when he retires. I said that when he retires I hope I'm dead. Because there's no way the two of us could live together. We couldn't live together everyday, day in day out.

Although this women's statement appears to be extreme, many other women share her feelings. In this case, the couple recognized the difficult, discussed it between themselves, and have tried to deal with it in a

constructive way. For them the end is in sight. But others just shut down any attempt to communicate. As one woman, who left her husband stated:

We used to argue about stuff like that, and then it just got to the point it was a waste of time to argue. It was easier just to say nothing. So eventually he just did his thing and I did my thing, and—well you see what happened.

Once communication between the couple ceases, the probability of marital break-up is high. As the woman quoted above went on to explain:

If there's something bothering him I didn't see why he couldn't tell me. But he wouldn't. He would drink first. And then he might have tried to tell me when he was drunk, but I couldn't make out what he was saying (laughter). . . . There were many times I would sit there and it got to the point I would just sit and watch. After a while I wanted to leave him—just the whole situation—but yet here you are, you've got a house and a boat and a dog, and you've got everything tied up with this person, what do you do? So, I stayed . . . a lot longer than I should've really . . . because it was easier. . . . I left. I told him I was leaving . . . we had a big fight one night and I told him I was leaving. I told him I was leaving the next morning, and he didn't believe me, and got mad and went out to the lounge. And he didn't come home that night, and when he did come home, he was still drunk and I was walking out the door to go to work, with my bags stuffed. And just didn't think anything of it. And when I didn't come back after work then he started to wonder.

But in some cases, the frustration can lead to violence, especially when one or both of the partners drink. In the major fishing centers in Nova Scotia, a proportion of offshore fishers' wives and family members receive counselling at local transition houses and abuse centres. In some areas over sixty-five per cent of clients come from fishing households. Although these high numbers may simply reflect the demography of the community, the characteristics of this fishery have increased the probability of spousal and family abuse: a matri-focal family life, a high stress industrialized workplace, and little time to work out differences. Lenore Walker<sup>7</sup> argues that risk factors for battering occur in families where insecurity, jealousy, alcohol, and substance abuse aggravate conflicts for men holding traditional values concerning womens' roles. The cycle of long separation and short reunion strained the husband-wife relationship but functional adaptations prevailed. Now those adaptations are themselves sources of marital strain. The erosion of autonomy, and the high stress, high risk environment of the offshore fishery increase the anxiety and erode the self-esteem of fishers regarding their family relationships. They work hard to provide for their families. But when they return from the sea, they enter an unfamiliar world. They have even less control there

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7. L.E. Walker, *The Battered Woman Syndrome* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1984).

than at sea. With the reduction of the fishery, levels of anxiety for these men has not decreased but increased. Their self-esteem has been further eroded, now both as fishers and as fathers and husbands.

### *Conclusions*

Before the latest crisis in the fishery, fishers and their families adopted strategies to cope with a work schedule which required men to be away from home for long periods of time with relatively little shore leave between trips. Now many of these men are spending more time ashore which for them is an alien environment. This situation presents many opportunities for fishers as they become more involved with their families and communities, develop social networks and grow personally. But the previously beneficial coping strategies developed by the couple may conflict with the new situations these families face. Moreover the decline in wages, or the loss of work erodes fishers' self-esteem and aggravates their anxiety. Their wives are frustrated with their loss of autonomy in having primary responsibility for the household, including its finances. The couple must now struggle to develop a way of coping with this new situation.