

## "IT'S THE SMELL OF MONEY"

### *Women Shoreworkers of British Columbia\**

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AS LONG AS THERE HAS BEEN fishing on the west coast of Canada, there have been shoreworkers, and two-thirds of them have been women. The work is unromantic, routine and monotonous — as well as erratic, on-call, and intense. As someone who has spent ten seasons employed in fish-processing on shore, I have been amazed at the existence of a gendered division of labour within fish plants which supersedes other workforce dividing lines such as race.

Fish-processing plants are not completely similar to factory work elsewhere, though the gendered division of labour is maintained,<sup>1</sup> because fish-processing is seasonal, on-call employment, resulting in unpredictable and sporadic work scheduling and compensation. Unlike the romanticism of the rugged individualized fisherman in his small boat, fish-plant reality, particularly but not only for women, is one of noisy machinery, unpleasant (and often cold) surroundings, long hours of performing monotonous, repetitive labour, and inadequate rewards. In this article I will examine the gender division of labour in fish-processing, with an analysis of the divisions that exist "on the floor" — that is, how these divisions are played out in the daily work routine and what effect this has on the pay packet, as well as women shoreworkers' perceptions of their labour.

For all its uniqueness, this blue-collar women's work on the west coast has not yet been specifically examined. I will argue that the

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<sup>1</sup> P. Armstrong, "Women's Work, Women's Wages", *Women and Men: Interdisciplinary Readings on Gender*, ed. G. H. Nemiroff (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Ltd, 1987), 370.

women's role in the political economy of the fisheries is directly linked to their experience in the domestic economy. I demonstrate firstly that jobs in fish plants are gender-specific, and secondly that the double day of labour for women tends to exacerbate this segregation of work. Thirdly, the women shoreworkers' perceptions of their incomes does not jibe with the amount of money they receive. There is a marked difference between the unpredictable and limited incomes they attain and their perceptions that they are earning good money.

Current sociological literature from Atlantic Canada has clearly analysed the status of women vis-à-vis fishing or shorework. The larger Atlantic labour force has led to more fish-processing studies there than on the west coast. In contrast, too, work in the Atlantic Canada industry has focused on gender. A number of the Atlantic Canada studies of women in the fishing industry, including Davis<sup>2</sup> and Porter,<sup>3</sup> referred to fishermen's wives, who may or may not work in fish-processing. Other Atlantic Canada studies, particularly Messing and Reveret,<sup>4</sup> Lamson,<sup>5</sup> and Ilcan,<sup>6</sup> have examined women's fish-plant labour and working conditions.

In stark contrast to the B.C. literature, the Atlantic Canada fish-processing literature does not mention ethnicity as a factor in the distribution of fish-plant labour. Although Acadian women do this work, as the film "Les Femmes aux Filets,"<sup>7</sup> clearly indicates, the literature does not indicate whether there is also a First Nations component or a group of black women who work with fish. In B.C. the different ethnic groups in fish-processing — First Nations women and immigrant women from many places, as well as native-born caucasian women and others — have differing perspectives on the work, and different personal and family histories within the industry.

One of the first academic records of salmon-canning in B.C., written by J. C. Lawrence in 1951, made only token reference to the

<sup>2</sup> Dona Lee Davis, "'Shore Skippers' and 'Grass Widows': Active and Passive Women's Roles in a Newfoundland Fishery," in *To Work and to Weep, Women in Fishing Economies*, ed. Jane Nadel-Klein and Dona Lee Davis, Social and Economic Papers #18 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1988), 211-29.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Porter, "'Women and Old Boats': The Sexual Division of Labour in a Newfoundland Outport," in *Gender and Society: Creating a Canadian Women's Sociology*, ed. Arlene Tigar McLaren (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 169-83.

<sup>4</sup> Messing and Reveret, "Are Women in Female Jobs for Their Health? A Study of Working Conditions and Health Effects in the Fish Processing Industry in Quebec," *International Journal of Health Services* 13:4 (1983).

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Lamson, "On The Line: Women and Fish Plant Jobs in Atlantic Canada," *Relations Industrielles* 41:1 (1986).

<sup>6</sup> Suzan Ilcan, "Women and Casual Work in the Nova Scotian Fish Processing Industry," *Atlantis* 11:2 (Spring 1986), 23-34.

<sup>7</sup> Claudette Lajoie (director), *Les Femmes aux Filets*, producer Eric Michel, NFB #1-0287-068, 1987.

cannery labour force: “. . . Indian fishermen and can-filling squaws. Many an Indian got a boat and gear from the cannery manager because he had a good can-filling or net-mending squaw.”<sup>8</sup> This bare (and racist) acknowledgement of the role of women has rarely been followed up in subsequent academic studies, which generally concentrated on ethnicity and race. Percy Gladstone, writing in 1959, referred to the ethnic make-up of the shoreworkers, and in fact provided useful and clear appendices about Indian, Chinese, and Japanese workers.<sup>9</sup> However, he failed to examine gender stratification. The studies that examined the structure of fish plants more closely included those by Duncan Stacey (mechanization),<sup>10</sup> Dianne Newell (archaeological remains of canneries,<sup>11</sup> and entrepreneurs),<sup>12</sup> Edward Higginbottom (history of cannery sites),<sup>13</sup> and Alicja Muszynski.

Muszynski's “The Creation and Organization of Cheap Wage Labour in the British Columbia Fishing Industry” (1987) argues that race, ethnicity, age, and gender are categories used to stratify the labour force in fish plants, resulting in the creation of a cheap wage labour force which works for wages below subsistence level. These labourers survived in the past, according to Muszynski, because they “were embedded in precapitalist social relations.”<sup>14</sup> As she also points out, “Another alternative [for survival when wages are below subsistence level] . . . is services and payments provided by the capitalist welfare state.”<sup>15</sup> I contend that, while all these labour-force dividing lines exist and are crucial to an understanding of the functioning of fish-processing plants, it is gender which places an individual in a particular spot on the assembly line and determines the amount of compensation she will receive.

<sup>8</sup> J. C. Lawrence, “An Historical Account of the Salmon Canning Industry, 1870-1900” (B.A. Graduating Essay, University of British Columbia, 1951).

<sup>9</sup> Percy Gladstone, “Industrial Disputes in the Commercial Fisheries of British Columbia” (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1959).

<sup>10</sup> Duncan Stacey, *Sockeye and Tinplate: Technological Change in the Fraser River Canning Industry 1871-1912*, B.C. Provincial Museum Heritage Record No. 15 (Victoria: B.C. Provincial Museum, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> Dianne Newell, “Industrial Archaeological Survey of B.C. Salmon Canneries Project: UBC/SFU: A Final Report on the Historical Research and Analysis Aspects of the Project” (submitted to the B.C. Heritage Trust, February, 1986), 24.

<sup>12</sup> ———, ed., *The Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry: A Grown Man's Game* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> E. N. Higginbottom, “The Changing Geography of Salmon Canning in British Columbia, 1870-1931” (Master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Alicja Muszynski, “The Creation and Organization of Cheap Wage Labour in the British Columbia Fish Processing Industry” (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1987), iii.

<sup>15</sup> Muszynski, 8.

The division of labour by gender<sup>16</sup> not only applies to formally assigned tasks — for example fish-washing for women and unloading boats for men — but also influences the amount of work available to an individual, control over the work processes, income levels, promotability, level of comfort or job satisfaction, and support and activism within unions, as well as more hidden benefits like the amount of vacation pay and unemployment insurance available to workers. From the day they enter the plant, women experience a world which differs, often sharply, from that of their male co-workers.

This research consists of interviews with twenty-three women shoreworkers in Prince Rupert, Vancouver, and Steveston. The women represent a wide range of ages, ethnicities, and work and family histories, with an emphasis on long-term employment in fish-processing. All the women interviewed are working in a unionized setting, as 80 per cent of the B.C. fish-processing sector is unionized. The average length of time employed in the industry is nearly fifteen years, providing a broader overview of the industry than interviews with more casual workers would have done.

The women were chosen in conjunction with the two fish-processing unions in British Columbia, and through contacts made 'on-the-floor' during my ten seasons' employment as a shoreworker. The interviews were conducted in Prince Rupert in the fall of 1988, and in Vancouver and Steveston in the spring of 1989. Most of the women were interviewed in their own homes, while four were interviewed in union offices, and one was interviewed at her work place. A standardized series of open-ended questions were asked, and the women were encouraged to elaborate on their answers.

All the women in this sample were or had been married, and all had had children, a state that would not apply to the industry as a whole. Eight of the twenty-three women were the sole support of their household or family. Most of the women had relatives in the industry, either in shore plants or employed in fishing. Of the sixteen women in the sample who gave educational level information, two had no or very little schooling, nine had less than grade 12, three had completed grade 12, and two had university degrees. Their ages varied from

<sup>16</sup> This inequality is often characteristic of factory work generally. According to sociologist Pat Armstrong:

About 8 per cent of women work in factories — packing fruits and vegetables, cleaning fish and chickens, making clothes and sorting paper — but . . . [f]actories remain highly sex-segregated, and women continue to do work that is very similar to the jobs they had at the turn of the century.

From "Women's Work, Women's Wages," in *Women and Men: Interdisciplinary Readings on Gender*, ed. G. H. Nemiroff (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Ltd, 1987), 370.

twenty-seven to sixty-seven. The largest number — seven — were in their thirties. Two were in their twenties, three in their forties, and five each in the next two decades.

Besides their fish-plant wages, the women reported several sources of income. Most of them collected unemployment insurance in the off-season, though one noted that she did not because she did not need it as her husband worked. One was in school in the off-season, and reported that her band helped her out financially. She also received compensation from the Workers' Compensation Board for the loss of a spouse. None of my sample reported other employment during the winters, though I am anecdotally aware that some women in the industry work at the Vancouver Post Office for the Christmas rush.

Who is employed in shorework? Statistical breakdowns of ethnic origin and mother tongue are available only on a national and not a regional basis, which, unfortunately, ignores the ethnic variation found among the 8.6 per cent of shoreworkers who live in British Columbia. One group that is particularly startling by its absence in the national statistics is First Nations people.<sup>17</sup> First Nations people make up a substantial part of the industry all over British Columbia,

<sup>17</sup> Table 1 represents ethnic backgrounds for shoreworkers all over Canada, and since 80 per cent of the country's shoreworkers live and work in Atlantic Canada, this chart more accurately represents them than it does the shoreworkers in British Columbia.

TABLE I  
*Population Characteristics of Selected Detailed Occupations*  
 (Based on the 1980 Classification), Canada, 1986 Census  
 20% Sample Data:

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Fish canning, curing and packing occupations: . . .  
 Female:  
 by ethnic origin:

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Single origin:	85.3%
English	50.0%
French	25.2%
German	0.9%
Italian	0.4%
Ukrainian	0.2%
Chinese	2.2%
Dutch	0.4%
South Asian	0.9%
Other single origins	5.1%
Multiple Origins	14.7%

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The ethnic breakdown for men was similar, with 2 per cent more workers of British origin and 1.5 per cent less of French origin. South Asian men accounted for only 0.6 per cent of the total, while 0.9 per cent were South Asian women. Statistics Canada, Catalogue 93-157 (1986 census), 290.

especially north of Port Hardy. If they make up 40 per cent of the female shoreworkers in northern B.C., as they do in the one plant for which we have a statistical breakdown, First Nations workers would account for up to 3.6 per cent of the national female shoreworker workforce. According to a union organizer in Vancouver, Chinese workers are under-represented in the national sample as well.<sup>18</sup> Canadian Fish at the foot of Gore Street in Vancouver, for example, draws heavily on Vancouver's nearby Chinese community. It would appear that, because 80 per cent of shoreworkers are in the Atlantic provinces, the ethnic variety found in British Columbia has been overlooked in the national statistical figures and has been subsumed into the category 'other single origins.'

The Prince Rupert Fishermen's Co-operative workforce of 467 individuals gives a good example of the ethnic heterogeneity of the labour force. In June 1988, the workforce was 5 per cent Chinese, 2 per cent Japanese, 3 per cent Vietnamese, 8 per cent South Asian, 5 per cent Italian, 4 per cent Portuguese, 2 per cent Filipino, and 40 per cent First Nations by origin, while the remaining 31 per cent were probably northern Europeans.<sup>19</sup> This is clearly a multicultural workforce, which will have unique ways of working together, and will in fact often find it difficult to communicate.

Another example of ethnic variety was found in random sampling for a 1990 herring roe popping study in the Greater Vancouver area, which indicated that 30 of 106 women (or 29 per cent of the sample) were from the British Isles or European, 65 (or 62 per cent) were Asiatic (including East Indian), 9 (9 per cent) were First Nations, and 1 did not indicate ethnic origin. In terms of their preferred language, 41 per cent preferred to speak English in the interview setting, 47 per cent preferred Cantonese, 2 per cent wished to talk in Mandarin, 6 per cent spoke Punjabi by preference, 4 per cent chose Korean, and 1 per cent spoke Yugoslavian.<sup>20</sup> These workers may have limited options for employment because of their lack of English,

<sup>18</sup> Jim Sinclair, UFAWU shoreworker organizer, interview with author, Vancouver, January 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Prince Rupert Amalgamated Shoreworkers and Clerks Union, answer to the question: "Please describe any significant ethnic groups in your membership, and their approximate size as a percentage of your total membership." Questionnaire originated with the Canadian Labour Congress.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Brubaker, Clyde Hertzman, Andrew Jin, Chris van Netten, and Helen Ward, "Prevalence of Muscle Tendon and Nerve Compression Disorders in the Hand and Wrist of Roe Production Workers in Fish Processing Plants," prepared for the Joint Committee on Repetitive Motion Injuries, project funded by Joint Committee of the Fish Processors' Association and the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union, June 1990, Table 4 and Table 5.

their race, or both, and this may be one factor keeping them in this low-waged occupation.

To return to the large, though variable, percentage of First Nations women employed in fish plants, it appears that the main characteristic that they shared, when compared to the rest of the sample, was that they tended to have more family connections in fish-processing and fishing, both currently and over the previous generations. They described kin networks that were much more flexible and supportive. In terms of child care, for example, older girls reported caring for several families' babies while their mothers worked and their fathers fished. It is likely that these networks were established out of necessity, in that there were few options and no services in rural canneries.

Given the long history First Nations women have had with fish-processing, it is important to note that some parts of the First Nations community still organize their annual schedules around salmon-canning in particular. The personnel manager at the B.C. Packers Prince Rupert plant reported that many people come from outlying towns such as Terrace, Kitimat, and smaller centres to work for the season. This was described by Virginia, a Tahltan and a charge hand:

. . . it's mostly Natives and East Indians, I think. . . . A lot of [Natives] just come here for the summer. . . . Prince Rupert is a fishing town. . . . a lot of people come in from all over the place to work with the fish. So, I think that's the busiest time of the year is the summer for this town. There's a lot more people here and in the wintertime when it's all over they all go back upcountry or wherever they're from. . . . Because a lot of them stay in motels. . . . When the season's slow they really don't like to come down because they got to pay their babysitter at home, a lot of them, and then they come down and stay in a motel — they have to pay that — and then they don't [get] very many days [work] in a week, eh — two days, three days — not even eight hours; it's not really worth their while, sometimes.

Much of the academic literature about fish-processing has concentrated on First Nations women and male Chinese shoreworkers.<sup>21</sup> As the figures above indicate, while First Nations women make up 40 per cent of the workforce in a plant in Prince Rupert, they only account

<sup>21</sup> Examples of current literature that in part carry on this historical tradition include A. Muszynski, "Race and gender: structural determinants in the formation of British Columbia's salmon cannery labour forces" (*Canadian Journal of Sociology* 13 (1-2) 1988), and Muszynski, "Class formation and class consciousness: the making of shoreworkers in the BC fishing industry" (*Studies in Political Economy* 20, Summer 1986).

for 9 per cent of the workforce in a plant in Steveston. While Chinese women workers make up 49 per cent of the employees in the Steveston study, they only make up 5 per cent of the workforce in the Prince Rupert plant. It is likely that, historically, it was possible to generalize about the ethnicity of the shoreworkers much more than can be safely done presently. As this article has indicated, shoreworkers come from a multitude of backgrounds, and work in an ethnically mixed environment.

As these women reported, tasks within fish plants are divided along gender lines. Typically, women stand in one place and manipulate small pieces of fish, with the pace of their work controlled by the assembly line belts passing in front of them. Men are often not tied to one spot, but can move from place to place, delivering fish and supplies, unloading boats, hosing down the dock, driving forklift and moving totes of fish from one place to another. They are also involved in controlling the flow of fish into the hoppers, overseeing the machinery and repairing it if it breaks down, running the retorts (steam ovens), and pushing bussies (carts full of cans) into the retorts. Other tasks men often do are more routinized, but typically involve more control over the work processes. Sorting fish as they come off the boat is a task generally reserved for men, as it receives slightly increased pay and has the potential to affect the speed of the work in the entire plant. "Indexing," also often done by men, is feeding the fish through the Iron Butcher, and is machine- and supply-driven, but in turn it controls the work of the women who wash fish.

Women's work tends to include several components not usually experienced by the men. There are often several women doing any particular task, like fish-washing or "patching" (checking each can of fish to make sure it is the proper weight and looks right, before the can is sealed), so each one has less autonomy. Men control both the speed of the belts as they pass by the women, and the supply of fish or fish pieces. Often men are the graders and inspectors as well, which means they are the ones judging the quality of the work the women do. Women can be found checking the empty cans as they pass by on their way to the canner, and checking each can (of thousands daily) after it has been through the retort, and before it is cased by machine. During herring season, women "pop" the roe (that is, take it out of the fish) and, after it is brined (a process often controlled by men), grade it into nine categories — a task that does not receive increased pay for skill, though the skill is learned and tested. It is women who fillet groundfish (another skilled and tested job — but at least it receives



increased pay) and men who freeze it (and also earn that increased pay, simply through time worked).

Twenty women will work together on an assembly line without looking up, almost literally, for years. Structuring the work this way reinforces divisiveness among workers and leads to extreme depersonalization for the women who do not have much chance to interact with each other, or in fact with anybody, because the machinery is too noisy for much talking. The men, with their relative flexibility of movement, become individually known and empowered relative to all the women. The result was described by one personnel manager:

I do the Step 2 grievances. One of the most recurrent themes is that, "the men get to do this, the men get to do that," leave early for coffee and stuff. I think there's some truth to it, the men are more like individuals while women are thought of as a group, if one can't come in you call another.<sup>22</sup>

Several indicators of this division of tasks by gender exist, and the divisions are quite insidious. Men often have more flexibility over the pacing of their tasks. Christina described it this way:

. . . men's jobs . . . differ so much than women's; even by doing their time you really see the difference. . . . we know where the women are every minute of the day. . . . they can't be off the line for more than ten minutes . . . 'cause usually somebody else is filling in for you. The men are doing the jobs . . . like swabbing, they go and pick up fish off the floor and pack it over here and . . . they're moving around. They're up on the catwalk or out on the dock and boats — there's no boats to unload, they'll all go sit and have a cigarette and a cup of coffee, and the women, that doesn't usually happen. You're on a production line and it is a lot different.

The very idea of sitting down and having a cup of coffee during "company time" is alien to women. If a woman line worker did have the nerve to sit and have coffee when the assembly line was running, she would be told by the payroll workers or first-aid workers (who are, incidentally, also women) to return to the line. It is much less likely that men who sit will be challenged.

<sup>22</sup> Chris Keehn, personnel manager, B.C. Packers Prince Rupert Plant, interview with author, June 1988.

The next question is, who works harder, and is this a justification for variable pay? Men are trained in the maintenance and repair of the machinery (which is a highly valued skill), and women are not. In terms of bulk-lifting, men are expected to do more than women, occasionally. Part of the reason for this division of labour is capability, part of it is perceptions of capability, and part of it is a holdover from previous provincial legislation that prohibited women from lifting more than thirty-five pounds.<sup>23</sup>

There are two theories of the structure of the labour market which mesh to provide a framework for the division of labour found in fish-processing. Both labour-market segmentation theory and the reserve army of labour help identify employment strategies that led to the current structure of fish-processing. It is also true, of course, that cultural beliefs often reinforce these labour-market structures.

Job segregation by gender is often justified in terms of the relative worth of the work performed by people in each category. In terms of the comparative worth of men's and women's employment, two aspects used to compare the difficulty of the two jobs are relative stress and relative skill levels. With regard to perceptions of skill, Jane Gaskell made the point that perceptions of skill are political in nature and that workers who have more collective power will be successful in defining their areas of expertise as "skilled." She said that "the differences arise in the power of organized male workers, their ability to monopolize access to their skills and the unwillingness of employers to invest in training women." She goes on to say,

. . . the problem for women is not in their skills, but in the way these skills are rewarded. With the same education and skills as a man a woman gets paid less. . . . Skill is a socially constructed category. . . . managing skill definitions is a political process, one that organized workers engage in continually. . . . the notion of skilled work is used in a way that devalues the work women do.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps because their work is more often defined as unskilled, women are found in the reserve army of labour (that is, available for

<sup>23</sup> "Factories Act: Regulations re Female Factory Employees, made by Order in Council No. 811, Approved May 11th, 1945," B.C. Reg. 195/59, *B.C. Gazette* — Part II (11 June 1959), 484. This regulation was repealed by B.C. Reg. 415/73, of 14 November 1973.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Gaskell, "Conceptions of Skill and the Work of Women: Some Historical and Political Issues," in *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1986), 362.

cyclical and temporary employment) in large numbers. As Harry Braverman says in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, women form by far the greatest sector of the reserve army of labour:<sup>25</sup>

. . . in a process which cuts across racial and national lines, the female portion of the population has become the prime supplementary reservoir of labor. In all the most rapidly growing sectors of the working class, women make up the majority, and in some instances the overwhelming majority, of the workers. Women form the ideal reservoir of labor for the new mass occupations. The barrier which confines women to much lower pay scales is reinforced by the vast numbers in which they are available to capital.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> One of the primary characteristics of a reserve army of labour is that it is employed and laid off in response to the needs of capital. Clearly the female fish plant workforce fits that definition. The male workers do too, but mobility between the two sectors — men's and women's employment — is severely limited at present. The two preconditions of a reserve army of labour are cheapness and availability, and the major condition is competition (that is, there must be more workers available for employment than there are jobs at any given time). All three of these conditions are met by women in the fish-plant workforce. There is no shortage of women available to work in fish-processing, as the lines of people outside plants applying to be hired at the start of each season attest. Braverman states that women form a reserve army of labour "for the 'female occupations'" specifically, indicating that he acknowledges the significance of labour market segmentation:

. . . This relative surplus population, the industrial reserve army, takes a variety of forms in modern society, including the unemployed; the sporadically employed; the part-time employed; *the mass of women who, as houseworkers, form a reserve for the 'female occupations'*; the armies of migrant labor, both agricultural and industrial; the black population with its extraordinarily high rates of unemployment; and the foreign reserves of labor. [emphasis added]

If we examine further the categories of reserve army of labour established by Braverman, it is clear that the fish-plant women constitute a 'floating' population of workers:

The *floating* form is found in the centers of industry and employment, in the form of workers who move from job to job, attracted and repelled (that is to say, hired and discarded) by the movements of technology and capital, and suffering a certain amount of unemployment in the course of this motion.

Fish-plant workers have the freedom to move from job to job, though they lose their seniority if they do. More to the point, however, they are hired and discarded several times annually by their specific employer, even if they stay with one plant. They do not need to float from job to job because they know when they will be rehired (at least approximately) and they can get unemployment insurance in the meantime. They form a pool of floating reserve workers who are *institutionalized* within the fish-processing system by capital and government. This institutionalization has been commented on before now. Patricia Connelly refers to women who work only in the domestic sphere as an "institutionalized inactive reserve army of labour." I would alter that phrase, in this case, to remove the word "inactive," which is used in her case to refer to domestic labour as opposed to commodity production. Women employed in fish plants — and many other places, for example the garment shops of Charlene Gannage's *Double Day Double Bind* — are active; they are clearly performing both unpaid and paid labour.

<sup>26</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, London: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 385.

Fish-processing is 'blue-collar' women's work, not 'pink,' but it certainly is a mass occupation in the sense that there is a need for large numbers of unskilled workers routinely.

The problem with this analysis, when it is combined with a segmented labour force, is that theoretically the effect of a reserve army of labour has been to depress wages for all sectors of the labour force.<sup>27</sup> But if the reserve army of labour is confined to certain occupations, then its effect may not in fact be to depress all wages. According to Connelly, the long-term effect of segregation of women into low-wage occupations is for men to run the risk of having their jobs reclassified into the lower-wage bracket.<sup>28</sup> However, inspecting salmon after they are washed and before they are canned is one task that is alternately performed by men and women, but the stratification of wages by gender is so strong in fish plants that differing rates of pay are often maintained, even for individuals working side by side. An argument for equal pay, moreover, often results in a management threat to reduce the men's rate to that of the women's. Both the condition that employment is divided by gender and the condition that employment is erratic and at the behest of capital are clearly in evidence in the structure of fish-processing. We have here a segmented labour force, within which the workers regularly become a 'relative surplus population.'<sup>29</sup>

To return to the gender division of labour, there are several crucial ways in which the amount of work available to an individual can vary. Men reap advantages in that they work more time. This is true in terms both of the length of season that they work and of overtime each day during peak season. Men are sometimes paid time-and-a-half or double time for working during the meal breaks. When the canning crew is reduced at 4:30, and some lines are kept going for overtime (a not uncommon practice), all the men tend to stay. I have been told by men, "Men never go home unless they're told to." and "Men always make more than the women." Even if women want to stay and they have the seniority to do so, they will be talked out of it because the jobs that need doing are "men's" jobs. In my experience, these jobs have included hosing a clean floor for two hours.

Informal access to training is another indicator of unequal status, as Mona, a charge hand, reported:

<sup>27</sup> Patricia Connelly, *Last Hired, First Fired: Women and the Canadian Work Force* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1978), 40.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Braverman, 386.

You have to be able to drive a tow motor before you can go to work in January. Otherwise you start at the end of February or March. . . .

And you can't tell me that a man sits on a tow motor for eight hours. But that's the way it works. . . . I drive a little, too, but I don't want to — I don't want to be called to work on those conditions. I want to be called to work because I'm seniority. I'm number two on the list — our list. And number three comes in to work before I do because he drives a tow motor. . . . So I don't think that's fair, either. But I'd have to go and drive a tow motor and that would — to say that's what I should be doing. But I'm sittin' here, I say, "No, I'm not gonna drive tow motor. I want to be called out in line of seniority."

This is one of many examples of the use of work task criteria — whether bona fide or not — to privilege one person over another; it is not surprising that the woman who is number two remains at home for a month annually while the number three person, who happens to both be male and be trained on a forklift, is employed.

Seasonality is a fact of life in fish-processing, as it is in fishing, and it results in erratic employment and variable annual incomes. Most workers would like there to be more work available to them on a more regular schedule. The crisis-like nature of fish-processing — the fact that fish must be processed before it spoils — has been ameliorated by technology like improved refrigeration on faster fish boats, the ability to freeze fish "in the round" (that is, whole, ungutted) and keep it for later processing, and automation like fish-washing machines and herring sexers. Overtime provisions in the union contracts have also made overtime a less attractive option for fish-plant managers. Since men do the annual and seasonal (as well as daily) plant preparation and clean-up, their work schedules are less disrupted by the amount of fish arriving at the plant at any given time. Women line workers are typically sent home the minute the line they are working on shuts down, which is not usually true of the men's more mobile jobs.

With regard to control over the work processes, certainly the machine men manage much of the process. While plant foremen and managers will decide which fish is processed when (as much as they can, given that much fish-processing is, obviously, driven by the catch), and may even decide at what speed to set the belts, it is machine men who have the knowledge required to do so. It is they who must fix the machines when they break, resulting in shutdown of the lines for a longer or shorter period of time, and it is they that create and install the machinery needed for each season's work. For

example, at one plant it was pointed out that a "slide" that would take the fish off a belt and have it fall into a tote would save a great deal of labour for the workers, who were at times required to pick up each fish and place it into the tote. It took most of two seasons for the slide to be manufactured, probably because it was not seen as a priority by the welder. This may have been because of a perception on his part that it would potentially reduce the required workforce at that point on the assembly line.

One particularly grating example of differential rewards for differential effort is to compare men who repair the machines with women line workers. Those men are permitted to stand and watch the process of salmon-canning when it is in operation, and much of their work is trouble-shooting, or fixing the machines when they break. In fact, one machine man was heard saying, "I'm not paid to work!" He was making at least three dollars an hour more than the women who were actually handling the salmon on the line, indicating that his expertise was considered to be worth more to the company than their labour.

As the comment above indicates, there is a wage disparity between typically female jobs and typically male jobs. Overall annually, women make approximately 60 per cent of what men make, though there is great wage variation, due to the callout and seniority system. Table 2 indicates the gender disparity.

TABLE 2  
*Wages in Fish Processing in Selected Provinces in Canada, 1985*<sup>30</sup>

PROVINCE	MALE FULLTIME	MALE AVERAGE	FEMALE FULLTIME	FEMALE AVERAGE
Nova Scotia	16,074	9,433	12,891	5,355
Newfoundland	15,609	7,249	11,621	4,280
British Columbia	24,677	11,188	16,587	8,621
Canada	17,425	7,949	13,101	4,782

Occasionally jobs are done by either men or women, depending on who is available. Making cardboard boxes and inspecting washed fish are two such flexible tasks. The pay rate does not necessarily go with the job, however. While any person performing a particular task can demand to be paid for that job classification, they do not necessarily

<sup>30</sup> Statistics Canada, catalogue 93-116, 1986, 1-171.

keep that classification (and that pay scale) when they are moved to other work. In the case of women, their wages often drop to the base rate, while there is more of a possibility that men's pay will remain at the higher classification. Very few women can do their own bargaining to improve their pay rate, while many men apparently can.

There are, however, some signs that the current gender stratification in the industry may be changing. One example of an attempt to break it occurred at the B.C. Packers Prince Rupert plant in 1988. The United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding with the Fish Processors' Bargaining Association entitled "Equal Opportunities for Employment." The text reads:

1. The Parties will endeavour to ensure that there shall be no discrimination between employees with respect to seniority or job opportunity. . . .
2. That each plant shall set up a small working committee to review plant procedures . . . to:
  - a) . . . ensure opportunity for employment is equal without regard to gender.

In response to this memorandum, women were training on forklifts and were put on a supplementary list as drivers at one plant in Prince Rupert. Forklift driving is the main primary-labour-force entry-level job<sup>31</sup> in the industry, and it is used as one main division-point structuring the internal labour market, so the movement of women into that skill area is a hopeful sign that access to better-paying jobs and more hours' work may be improving for women.

Thus, clearly in fish plants, there is a gendered division of labour. Women do different, more precise and routinized tasks than men do, for shorter lengths of time daily and annually, and have less control over their workplace and less chance of promotion on the factory floor.

Several of the women in the interview sample held strong opinions about this gendered division of labour, and not all felt that it was undesirable. Faye, for example, thought the traditional division of labour favoured women:

<sup>31</sup> As defined by Mary Lynn Stewart, "Economic theories to Explain Women's Position in the Labour Market," audiotape conversation with Anita Clair Fellman for Women's Studies 100 by correspondence, Simon Fraser University, course revised 1989.

Faye: Well I believe there are jobs for men and I believe there's jobs for women because [equal opportunity] puts a lot of women in a bad spot. . . . And you can't put a poor wee soul that's 90 pounds and you got to put an anchor on her to hold her down when the wind blows down there, how do you expect her to pick up more than her weight? . . . It can't be done, it can't be done. You get somebody that's 4' nothing, 70 to 80 pounds, I swore I'd never help, but I find myself helping because I'm a big clunk and I can't stand to see somebody wrestling something, so I go and give them a hand. . . . You know I still believe there's jobs for women and there's jobs for men because women are not built, young, yes, but when you get older, you're going to find a difference. You know, and we have a lot of older women in the plant.

The women were not all of that opinion:

Virginia: Oh, I think a lot of [men] could do a little more work than they usually do — they're just more or less walking around where the women have to just stay put where they're put and they can't move away from that job. . . . the men . . . get jobs where they're just either sweeping the floors or, you know . . . but it's always been that way it seems.

Virginia's perception that "it's always been that way it seems" gives an example of the stability of this gendered sense of place that many of these men and women experience in the plants.

When a woman did a man's job, she was not necessarily paid the men's rate unless she spoke up, as one woman learned to her cost:

Mary: . . . equal work, equal pay it should be, you know. And I myself have to do a lot of butchering in the plant that I work in. And I refused this year, I told them point-blank: if I don't get equal pay, forget it, I'm not doing it. . . . And then they offered, say, "Oh, we could give you butcher's wage while you're on it." And I said, "Nope. It's too late now." . . . I'm getting smarter, I think, not getting older. I was used quite a bit.

Perhaps the problem with being offered butcher's wages while she was butchering was that, in many plants and possibly in hers, once a pay raise was achieved, a man often remained at that pay rate no matter what he was doing. This situation very rarely occurred for women.



The fish plant appears, to those who work in it, to have as its organizing principle the unproven theory that women have greater skill at small, detailed tasks involving manual dexterity. My perception, from this study, is that fish-plant women certainly exhibit more patience and endurance on a daily basis than do their male counterparts.

Unionization in the fish-processing sector has not been entirely beneficial for women workers, according to some respondents. In particular there were complaints of the UFAWU's failure to address women's inequality. A long-time worker, Frances, pointed out:

. . . they're doing such a good job, why haven't they changed the policy of the woman getting the thousand hour rate? Never gotten that. So they're not doing a very good job.

The United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union is by far the largest union in fish plants in B.C. It represents both shoreworkers and fishers, and is criticized by some shoreworkers because its dual focus looks to them like unequal representation for shoreworkers in relation to fishers. Certainly the majority of its Board of Directors has traditionally been male.<sup>32</sup>

Several women, from both the UFAWU and the much smaller Prince Rupert Amalgamated Shoreworkers and Clerks (PRASCU), reported that unions were a good thing, even though the women themselves might not be particularly active. Balwinder was speaking about PRASCU:

. . . it's good to have unions. I am for unions. Because [there are] so many problems which you can't handle, and you won't even know what is going on. . . . And they can really make their point, while you as an individual can't. The union means the whole labour force is behind that. So they can get their point across to the bosses in a better way than an individual can do it.

Certainly the high level of unionization within shorework in B.C. has made the workers' wages and benefits the envy of both west coast American workers and Canadian east coast workers.

<sup>32</sup> See A. Muszynski, "Shoreworkers and UFAWU Organization: Struggles between Fishers and Plant Workers within the Union" in *Uncommon Property: The Fishing and Fish Processing Industries in British Columbia*, ed. P. Marchak, N. Guppy and J. McMullan (Toronto: Methuen Publications, 1987) for a fuller description.

Fish plant incomes, however, remain capricious and inadequate to support a single person, let alone a family, due to the seasonal nature of the employment. Many fish-plant women find that the combination of a relatively short fish-plant season and the unemployment insurance claim that results (if there is enough work) provides them with a source of income year-round and the chance to spend a substantial part of that year raising their children and caring for their husbands and homes. Women routinely work a double day of labour, involving tasks in both the factory and the home. This is, I would argue, the primary reason fish-plant women accept a situation in which they get less work than their equally senior male counterparts. Besides the fact that the work they do in the plant is often more onerous, they are also expected to perform more domestic tasks than the men they live with. Susan agreed that this seasonality is an advantage for women who work a double day:

I really like working in a fish-plant for the fact that, when you have children, it's great because you work your season — your herring and your halibut and your salmon — and then you collect UIC and you can be with your family.

As sociologist Suzan Ilcan says, with reference to Nova Scotia,

. . . unemployment insurance benefits can be seen to subsidize low wages in the [fish-processing] industry as well as to contribute to the maintenance of a reserve pool of labour in the community.<sup>33</sup>

Even though they often receive money from the government, shoreworkers remain poor. Without unemployment insurance, workers would perhaps be forced to move on, if they could, to something that provided an income all year. Alternatively, the companies would be forced to increase both the wages for their employees, and the level of mechanization in the plants. A case could be made that the unemployment insurance system helps maintain patriarchal relations of employment, in that it keeps the least advantaged employees (in the sense of last-called to work) available to do fish-plant work. The government fills the needs of these workers in much the same way as “pre-capitalist relations of production” have done in the past.

<sup>33</sup> Suzan Ilcan, “Women and Casual Work in the Nova Scotian Fish Processing Industry,” *Atlantis* 11:2 (Spring 1986) 32.

Shoreworkers' perception of money, though their access to it may become more routinized with farm fish, is different than that of people who receive a regular income. Currently, this perception is also different from the capitalist ethic of maximizing profit. Because the earnings are so irregular, a large amount of money can be earned in a short time. Even so, the salmon seasons in particular are so short, averaging less than six weeks, that there is often only one 'good' paycheque a year. Women shoreworkers sometimes describe themselves as greedy and only there for the money, but they are often satisfied with this seasonal pay, which results in low yearly incomes, even when combined with unemployment insurance. They can earn a large sum quickly and be free to fulfil other obligations, but the time that they must work in order to do this is not schedulable.

There is a definite discrepancy between the actual incomes of shoreworker women and their perceptions of them. Thelma, a veteran of twelve years at the B.C. Packers Imperial plant in Steveston, summed up the rewards of shorework:

I didn't start working for B.C. Packers as I say 'till I was in my forties and . . . I think it was the smell of the place, "oh, who'd want to work there?," and then everybody explained to me that oh, that's the smell of money.

Yet the reality is they remain poor.

The women I interviewed fit the description of powerless in many ways. The well-worn phrase "working poor" applies here. For most, waged work is not an available choice in the off-season. Although I would characterize these women as underprivileged, it is significant that many of them would take exception to that definition. Even though their income is not stable, large, or under their control, and the needs and pace of the workplace are also largely outside their control, they believe that they have successfully organized their financial lives. There is a dichotomy between the difficult realities involved in these women's shoreworking lives and their perceptions that they were living and coping well.

An important need of shoreworker women and their families is quality, available, affordable child care. Cannery workers during salmon season basically needed child care full time (often twenty-four hours a day) for six or seven weeks during the season annually. After that, the part-time weeks continue, sometimes until November. The seniority system and the unemployment insurance system are both

structured in such a way that people cannot choose whether or not to work on a given day. There is no flexibility in the work scheduling to meet children's needs. Many women rely on their mothers, or on friends. Some of the women indicated that their spouses, if they are not working themselves, are willing to take on the child-care role. Others, without family members who are free to babysit, hire nannies. In fact, the great majority of working mothers in Canada have had to rely on informal day care arrangements.<sup>34</sup> The main responsibility for providing or organizing child care remains with the women.

The way child care was worked out within the family, particularly but not only for First Nations women, often meant that an oldest girl would look after the younger children. Dora, a Haida woman, reported that her daughter started babysitting for her when she was twelve years old. Addie, a Nishga, described what it was like for her, when she lived in cannery housing at Wales Island as a child:

. . . my mom and dad, they were both working. I had to do the cooking and the babysitting for other people, you know, in the summer months. . . . I looked after quite a few babies. . . . I don't remember whether I did get paid. Maybe I got a dollar, two dollars here or there, then I cooked for mom and dad, I did all the housework, and everything for them 'cause she used to start at six in the morning, and she'd work till about ten, eleven at night, you know. She never had too much time for anything. I had to do all that. . . .

A 1989 Vancouver shoreworker child-care survey was filled out by eighty-three individuals, forty-two of whom needed child care.<sup>35</sup> Because of the unstable nature of callout in the industry, the majority of these workers reported that they would prefer a drop-in day care, open from six a.m. to eight p.m. (nobody worked the night shift in

<sup>34</sup> Geneviève Ledoux, "Current Issue Review: Child Care in Canada," Library of Parliament Research Branch, 11 March 1987, reviewed 7 December 1987, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Most respondents worked twenty to forty weeks annually, seventeen were single parents, and fifteen respondents had only one child. At peak season, if they needed to work overtime in order to increase their unemployment insurance earnings, women reportedly paid up to \$300 for a weekend's child care. Nine of the survey's respondents (out of a total of twenty-one who answered the specific question) spent between \$200 and \$300 a month on child care, and six spent more. During peak season, three respondents reported spending more than \$400 in a week. Twelve (out of twenty-seven workers who responded to this particular question) relied on family members, including spouses, to do child care, while nine hired babysitters, and five placed their children in licensed day cares. Ten out of twenty-three respondents indicated that they had missed work at some time or another because they were unable to find acceptable child care.

this sample). Most would pay a monthly fee, but a sizeable number (ten out of thirty-two) would prefer to pay by the day. Less than one-third would use an overnight service. For all the demonstrated need, a day care designed to meet drop-in, pay-by-the-day, seasonal needs, and changeable daily requirements, would be very difficult to organize. The UFAWU Vancouver workers have put their project on hold, though there is municipal support, albeit limited.<sup>36</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Shoreworkers in B.C. are a small population, about five thousand all told. Approximately two-thirds are women — women who have an irregular connection to wage-earning, because the seasons are so cyclical. Because of the division of jobs by gender, men have more autonomy on the job, access to preferential work and, usually, more pay. Women tend to stand in one spot and manipulate pieces of fish, responding more directly to the demands of the assembly line.

The two labour-market theories that are both supported by the evidence in this article are labour-market segmentation theory and the concept of the reserve army of labour. Women in fish-processing are relegated to particular tasks within the plants, and are also hired and fired (that is, called in and laid off) according to the needs of the processing line. The effect of this institutionalized unemployment for women in fish plants is that fish plants do not reduce the wages of men to the same level, because of the high degree of job stratification. Neither of these descriptions of the structure of the labour force works to the advantage of women shoreworkers.

All women who took part in this research agreed that men and women should get equal pay for equal work. If a woman were fool enough to do men's work, as some would have it, she should be equally compensated. But the concept of pay equity, or valuing men's and women's jobs equally though they were different, was not widespread. The women who believed that the traditional division of labour served them well tended to be older, with longer work histories in the plants, which suggests that the division of work by gender is something that becomes more acceptable or even agreeable over time. It is also possible that the ideas that women and men should have equal access to all jobs, and that equal work should be equally paid for both genders, are relatively recent, and so the younger women believe them more strongly.

<sup>36</sup> Geoff Meggs, interview with author, February 1990.

One example of lack of enthusiasm for a women's issue, on the part of both unions and management, is the repeated failure to establish any kind of day care for the children of shoreworkers. Studies have been conducted about the need for child care, both in Steveston and in Vancouver, but the results suggested that it would be hard to organize a day care because the workers needed a drop-in, seasonal, pay-by-the-day or pay-by-the-month operation with flexible hours, which would take a real commitment to organize. As it stands, many women hire their mothers, or look for on-call babysitters to care for the children, so that they can respond to the erratic needs of the industry. In shorework, some men appeared to take on some child care during the fish-processing seasons, but most women were still primarily responsible for finding and paying for it. Due to the social constructions of gender, specifically the way child care is defined as a female occupation, women face major constraints in redefining their roles at home or in the labour force.

Women in this industry make choices, and usually those choices (whether conscious or unconscious) are designed to maximize their contributions to their families. In the case of shorework, women balanced the amount of time they had to spend caring for their children and maintaining the household against their monetary contribution. The combination of a frantic, highly paid season during summer, when children are not attached to the routine of school (and other family members are perhaps available to babysit), and the ability to collect unemployment insurance during the winter, was attractive to many women.

These women did not earn large incomes. Statistically, their earnings were below the poverty line. This interview sample included women who had worked in the industry substantially longer than the industry average, so their earnings from fish-processing must have been minimally acceptable. There was a discrepancy between the actual incomes and shoreworkers' perceptions of their earnings. It was quite marked in several interviews, possibly because of the relatively high hourly wages and seasonal volatility.

Shoreworker women live a complicated, variable and, in terms of income, tenuous existence. Even though they are skilled workers, there are no guarantees in shorework, except perhaps that there will be change, especially in the daily and weekly scheduling. Shorework gives some of these women pride in their ability to work and earn money; others believe it gives them 'that little bit extra' and a chance

to socialize. Whatever their reasons, some shoreworker women stay in the industry for years.

As is true for women in Canada generally, shoreworking women work a double day (or double year) of labour. These women tend to do altogether more work than the men they associate with (because they work both on paid and unpaid labour), and are paid less. Evidence of the inequality that exists between men and women is borne out in this examination of the B.C. fish-plant community.

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