

Newfoundland and Labrador

We, women, are out there, fishing....

More women are fishing after the crisis, though the going is not always smooth

by Mildred Skinner

Mildred Skinner is an inshore fisher from Harbour Breton, Newfoundland. She is the representative for inshore fishers at the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union (FFAW/CAW) in her region.

I am a crew member and a partner aboard of a 38-foot longliner. I also fish lobster with my husband from a 22-foot open boat. Talk to any woman who fishes inshore for a living, myself included, and they will tell you they are fishing out of necessity. When the fish stocks started to diminish 12 years ago, that's when we women started to fish in our area. It just made sense financially for me to go fishing with my husband. It meant we could still make a living from the fishery, but now we have two shares coming to one household.

We were always part of our husbands' enterprises, but we weren't seen. Earlier, we took care of banking, and picked up groceries and other supplies for the vessels. We were the communication link to the Canadian government's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), the union, fish buyers, and other government agencies. Without our work, our husbands' enterprises wouldn't have thrived as well as they did. All of this was unpaid labor.

Now we are crew members. Most of us are getting fair wages for our work or receiving the same wages as other crew members on vessels. But we still have women out there in those fishing boats who are not getting paid or are getting what their husbands see fit to give them as a share. If fishing women in my area were asked, they would tell you that if another job became available, they would grab it in a second.

Most working women are stressed. Their stresses relate to childcare, work performance, and workplace issues. But for a fishing woman, these issues take on an entirely different dimension. Our work starts at three or four in the morning and ends at seven or eight at night. For those of us who need it, it is very difficult to find adequate childcare because of the long hours involved. If there are older children, they have to take

on more responsibility. One woman told me she got lucky last year because she found a good sitter. For the first time in ten years, she could fish and not have to feel guilty, for someone was taking care of her children.

Since we are seasonal workers, dealing with the Employment Insurance (EI) system has always been a nightmare. But, when you have to hire a caregiver for your children and work with this system, then you are dealing with a bigger nightmare.

I know one woman who was caring for her daughter's child this year. She is the grandmother and was doing this because the daughter is attending Memorial University. So, the time came for the grandmother to go fishing this year, and she hired another daughter to care for the child. She contacted all the right people in the government and they told her the exact deductions to take out of this daughter's cheques to pay for her EI premiums. She did it all right. Everything was fine and when the baby sitter/daughter filed for EI, she was approved and started to receive benefits. Meanwhile, her file came up at Revenue Canada. They are now reviewing her case. The reason? They think she was paid for too many hours. This should be a nine-to-five job, they think. They said: "You are not out there fishing for twelve hours a day. That's not possible." Somebody has to convince someone at Revenue Canada that fishing is not a nine-to-five job. I am sure there are a hundred stories like this one out there.

One woman told me this year: "Mildred, I've aged. Since I started fishing, I have aged because of the stress, the stress of feeling guilty. I feel guilty when I am out fishing because of the time I spend away from my family. If I take the day off, I feel guilty because my husband has to fish alone. If I am not aboard the boat that day and my husband comes to the wharf, I feel guilty when people think I'm not fishing and could think that I don't deserve my EI next winter. The chances are that someone will call the government and report that I wasn't in the fishing boat that day."

As women fish harvesters, we find that there is a stigma attached to us. People outside the fisheries see us as using the system. Some do. But for those of us who are legitimate fish harvesters, we constantly have to prove we are more than just fishing on paper. Most men think we shouldn't be on the fishing boat, to start with. One of the women on board a boat told me that

her husband feels guilty. He doesn't feel right when other men see his wife aboard the boat. Other men tell him: "You know, you are going to ruin her aboard of the boat; it's not good for her to be doing that. You shouldn't have her there to start with."

We find that women have very little voice in decisionmaking. Not many of us sit on an advisory board or fishermen's committee. We've no outlet, and most of us have gotten lost and feel overlooked, even within our own local union committee. Our women's committee at the FFAW is working hard to change this. I find all of the meetings that I attend are for



fishermen, and there are not many women who come to those meetings.

I remember last year we had one man in our meeting, and he was giving me a rough time about paying union dues. He said: "Most people get to pay Can\$150 and I have to pay Can\$300 a year." I said: "Why would you have to pay \$300 a year?" He replied: "I pay \$150 for me and a \$150 for my wife." And I said: "But isn't your wife aboard the boat fishing as well?" He said, "Yes." And I said: "But of course she pays her *own* union dues." But he could not understand that. In his mind, he was paying the dues for his wife. Even though she was aboard the boat doing as much work as he was doing, she really wasn't there in his mind.

On the south coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as in other areas, vessels are being forced further offshore. A lot of these vessels are not big enough to travel such long distances. Our boat went out to the Laurentian Channel this year, 110 miles from shore. The seas are very, very rough. It scares me when I think of the potential for disaster. If there is a disaster,

it won't be like it was in the past when fathers and sons drowned and mothers and wives were left. Now, mothers and wives would drown as well.

Another major problem I see is inadequate healthcare protection. Very few, if any, of us are paying into a medical plan. We know women who are developing ailments — back problems, joint problems, kidney infections...the list goes on. One thing I am really proud about is that our union is now in the process of bringing a medical programme to our membership for approval. This would be a tremendous help for us.

I am very proud to be part of our union. Somehow, we need to encourage women to get involved in issues that affect them. We are working to achieve that. We women fish harvesters are out there, and our numbers are increasing every year.