

North America/ United States**Walking in Both Sets of Shoes**

Some reflections on the challenges that women face in the male-dominated world of commercial fishing

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I would certainly not call myself a fisher. As a young girl riding horses in California, I would have never imagined setting foot on a commercial fishing vessel. But here I was, on a hot morning in the far northwest of Australia, getting ready to depart on a boat to seek and catch one the fastest of the sea's creatures: tuna. Having spent the previous years in a more formal marine educational environment—the University—I was ready to learn about fisheries in a more direct fashion.

As a woman, finding a site on a commercial vessel can go one of two ways: very good or very bad. Women tend to draw men's attention. In fishing, this attention can come either in the form of respect borne of the fact that you are interested in a physically-demanding and mentally-taxing trade that is largely male dominated. Or the attention can be more perverse: you are seen to be interested not so much in the fishing, but in the fishers, that is, the men, themselves. Luckily, my first fishing trip drew attention of the former nature and I was successful in making good friends with my fellow fishermen. More lasting and compelling though, was the bond I made with the sea; one, not unlike most love affairs, forged in joy and pain, longing and fulfillment, pride and disappointment. This budding romance grew; eventually, it brought me to fish in the great waters of the Bering Sea, the South Pacific and the Northwest Atlantic.

Through my years of commercial fishing, two major lessons struck home. Whether on a 98-foot king crab

vessel out of Dutch Harbor, Alaska or on a 35-foot jig boat off of Cape Cod, these lessons stood me in good stead in every expedition. I learnt that women possess great versatility and can easily hone the talents inherent in both men and women. For example, through observation and patience, women can quickly learn the mostly male-centric skills of the fishing trade, such as hauling pelagic longline gear or mending nets. Women also have the restraint to think through a difficult situation—such as losing 30 miles of longline gear in the middle of the night—and face it not with anger or brute force, but with thoughtful deduction, seeking reasonable alternatives. This is not to say that all men face problems with brute force or impatience. It is, however, to say that women, especially in large fishing operations, often tend to draw upon their inner strength and talents to solve a problem or accomplish a task.

I have learned much more than I can describe from the captains and crews with whom I have had the pleasure to work. Above all, I have learned the importance of discovering my own strengths, as a fisher and as a woman, and how to use those strengths with grace, wisdom and humility. I work to enhance this lesson each day. I recall the days spent on deck, trying to push myself physically to the very limits to keep up with the men; to prove myself to my peers by drinking and adopting an image that I thought embodied being a “fisher”. But I have come to see that women can walk both worlds. We can step lightly and with dignity in a beautiful dress through a gallery in the evening, but also work hard in the hull of a boat shoveling squid, covered in black ink, during the day. This is the balance we can strike, and it is a blessing and gift to be able to walk in both sets of shoes.

I guess more than anything, fishing has taught me to be strong, not just in body but in spirit. All of us who have fished have prayed through a storm, hoping the storm windows in the wheelhouse would hold. We have all stared expectantly at the dark waters over the rail, hoping that the next set of hooks or net haul would be full of fish so we could go home early. I think every time we pray and each difficult moment we pull through makes us stronger and wiser. I have learned to draw upon energy reserves stored deep



within, to make it through a rough night or moments of great weakness, and overcome feelings of being alone on a vast sea, so many miles away from loved ones. These moments are the character-builders, the ones that shape our spirits, our world view and our attitudes towards life in general. Fishing has given me a sense of the raw materials that life is made of—the blood, sweat and tears. It has made me appreciate deeply the full value of life as well as its delicate brevity.

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