



**HAL**  
open science

## How to deal with hard working conditions in the fishing sector: artisanal fishers and their wives

Marie Charvet, Fabienne Laurioux, Gilles Lazuech

### ► To cite this version:

Marie Charvet, Fabienne Laurioux, Gilles Lazuech. How to deal with hard working conditions in the fishing sector: artisanal fishers and their wives. OCEANEXT, Jun 2016, Nantes, France. hal-02425615

**HAL Id: hal-02425615**

**<https://nantes-universite.hal.science/hal-02425615>**

Submitted on 30 Dec 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Marie Charvet, Fabienne Laurioux, Gilles Lazuech**  
**CENS (UMR 6025), Université de Nantes**

***OCEANEXT*, Interdisciplinary Conference, 8-10 juin 2016, Nantes**

**How to deal with hard working conditions in the fishing sector: artisanal fishers and their wives**

Workers in the artisanal fishing sector are subject to hard working conditions (Banals, Chauvin, 2010; Le Roy, 2011; Daubas-Letourneux, 2012). This paper focuses on the consequences for fishers' households. Among these hard working conditions, we can mention the fishers' absence from home, for long periods or at unusual times. For instance, offshore fishers' trips sometimes last more than a week, and even if most inshore fishers spend their night at home, they have to leave very early, sometimes in the middle of the night. For all kinds of fishers, working days are long. Moreover, the time fishers spend on shore, at home, also bears the hallmark of their hard working conditions, since it is largely dedicated to rest and recuperate. So we can use the question of working hours as a lens, in order to better understand how fishers' households are affected by husbands' working conditions. This paper is based on some twenty interviews with fishers and their wives, in ports of Brittany and Pays de la Loire Regions. This field research took place between 2013 and 2015.

We have chosen the word "arrangement" to describe how fishers and their families deal with absence and hard working conditions, because of its double meaning, in French at least. On the one hand, it refers to the solutions the family finds in order to function as a family, whatever they imply for the husband and his wife and whatever the means by which they are achieved. On the other hand, the word "arrangement" also refers to the acceptance of something unpleasant (*on s'en arrange*). Both meanings are blended in what the fishers and their wives say, as most of them consider hard working conditions as normal features of the trade. More specifically, the arrangements include, for instance, whether the wife carries out an occupational activity, how everyday life is organized, or how parents share the responsibilities in the education of children. Thus, arrangements at the same time are rooted in representations of hard working conditions and constitute a way to deal with them. We try to describe the specific contents of these arrangements and the conditions which make them possible. Three types of conditions can be identified, rooted into three levels of social reality. The first level is the family setup (Lahire, 1995). It includes such characteristics as whether the household includes children and how old they are, and whether the parents have a tight network of family and friendly relationships. We must also take into account the wife's level of qualification and the husband's trade and status: is he an offshore or an inshore fisher? Is he a captain and owner of his ship or a mere deckhand? The second level is the local and

economic background: it includes such matters as the existence of a local market for women's workforce and the economic health of the fishing sector. This background has changed. On the one hand, the development of tourism has generated employment opportunities for women since the sixties (Renard, 1984; Lebahy, 2008). On the other hand, the fishing sector has undergone a series of serious crises since the eighties (Lazuech, 2014; Lesquesne, 2001). The third level is the societal background: during the last five decades, women's professional activity rate has increased (Mainguené, 2011); the general level of qualification has risen, due to a longer duration of school education (Baudelot, Estabiet, 2006), and the social roles of father, mother, husband and wife have undergone profound changes, toward more equality and less authoritarianism (Kaufmann, 1992; Martial, 2009; Singly (de), 1996). These changes in the societal background can lead to redefined family arrangements, which become more diverse and less stable, but their effects depend on the local context and on the family setup, which in turn are also partly a product of the societal background.

The interviews led us to distinguish two patterns of arrangements, rooted in different relationships to hard working conditions. Some households deal with absence and hard working conditions downstream: the domestics arrangements' purpose is to make them bearable, leaving the trade unaffected. Other households tackle the problem upstream: they try to reduce its level of painfulness by changing the way fishers practiced their trade. To refer to this patterns, we will employ the expressions: support and negotiation patterns.

### **I. The support pattern**

The support pattern refers to the fact that the fisher's wife creates conditions which allow her husband to work as a fisher, without any apparent counterparts from his side and more specifically without any changes in the way he carries out his trade. The supported painfulness pattern can take different forms.

#### *Coping with both absence and presence*

The kind of domestic arrangements we are about to describe were very frequent in offshore fishers' household till the eighties; they are less frequent nowadays. Till the eighties, offshore fishing trips could last up to a month, there was no communication tools such as cellphones and anyway wives prevented themselves from disturbing their husbands with everyday concerns.

Still today, due to their husbands' absence, some wives continue to take the entire responsibility of their family life. They of course take in charge all the current domestic chores but their role goes further. They manage the household finances. They are in charge of the relationships with the social

services dedicated to seamen. They also are in charge of dealing with the banks, which could be very tense during the fishing crises of the nineties. In these households, the mother's role is also defined by the father's absence. Mothers follow their children's progress at school and take all by themselves the decisions regarding their school career. The father's role is only occasional, restricted to some tasks compatible with his sporadic appearances, as, for instance, teaching his child how to ride a bicycle.

This distribution of domestic and parental work is by no way specific to artisanal fishers' households. But in these households, women do not only have to compensate for their husbands' absence. They also have to cope with their presence. Due to their husbands' sporadic presence, they have learned to be self-reliant and independent. When their husbands come back home, they break the family routine (Jorion, 2012), all the more so they require care and attention, as they need to rest and recover during their time ashore. They also require their wives to be available, in order to make the best of from their stay at home.

Coping with both absence and presence makes difficult to carry out a job, but some women manage to do it, especially those with a middle or high professional qualification. But their activity is always conditioned by the special needs of their husbands as fishers. Denise and Daniel gave us a concrete example of these arrangements. Denise is a nurse. She is married to Daniel, a former deckhand on board of an offshore fishing ship, now retired. Both of them have turned 50 and they have two grown up sons. Denise never stopped working, but she had to adapt to the needs of her husband's trade. Soon after her second son was born, she switched her full time-job in a hospital for a part-time administrative job in a home health center, where she does not need to work on week-ends. Staying at home on week-ends allowed her to look after her kids, thus making possible for Daniel to rest and recover.

This declination of the support pattern is an inheritance from the post-war boom decades. After World War II, a flourishing artisanal fishing sector developed (Meuriot, 1986; Delbos, 2006) and most fishers' wives agreed to cope with their husbands' absence and the responsibilities it implied because they found some counterparts: a large income and, as non working women, a local social status higher than farmers' wives (Salmona, 1985). But the changes in the societal and local contexts in the sixties rendered the acceptance less evident. To put it in a nutshell, being a non-working fisher's wife, in charge of the whole household and family duties and responsibilities, could have its charms when fishers made a large income, when most mothers were inactive and when anyway job opportunities for women were scarce. This position is less attractive when having a job is considered as normal for a woman and when your husband's income is liable to sudden and drastic decreases.

### *Working in a family fishing business*

Small scale inshore fishing business requires women's work in order to thrive or even to survive. Wives' contributions to the business are many and various. They mend fishing nets and keep accounts for instance, but most of all, they sell part or all their husband's catch to retail customers. As it has been frequently noticed for women's contribution in family businesses (Bessi re, Gollac, 2007), this work is often invisible, even though a statute of *conjointe-collaboratrice* (partner-collaborator) was created in 1997. For most husbands, this contribution is considered as normal. However, visible or not, normal or not, by this contribution, the wives relieve them from some of the hard working conditions attached to their trade.

Two couples gave us a concrete example of such arrangements. Annie is married to Antoine, a former inshore fisher and shipowner. She left her job as a clerk in order to sell part of her husband's catch, thus ensuring a higher and more regular income for the household. But the price for Annie is high: she had to wake up at four o'clock in the morning and handle boxes weighing more than twenty kilograms. Most of time, women working in a family fishing business have no other job. But some of them have a paid work, which is sometime essential for their family's survival.  lise is married to Etienne, a former offshore captain and shipowner.  tienne recently bought a small boat in order to carry on a small scale inshore fishing activity. To survive, this new business needs  lise's contribution as a retail seller, but the household also needs  lise's salary as a part-time cleaning woman in a school. Thus, what has rendered  tienne new career possible is  lise's very busy schedule, even though she was not very pleased with  tienne's decision. She was indeed used to be self-sufficient and worried about her husband's daily presence at home.

### *Supporting and assisting in case of occupational problems*

The support pattern can also take the form of a moral support through ordeals related to fishers' careers. Herv  and H l ne's story illustrates these ordeals and how wives can help their husbands to get through. H l ne is 26 and her family comes from Mauritius. She is married to Herv , 31, a second master and engineer on board an inshore fishing ship. Herv 's father, now retired, was a captain and shipowner. In his parents' minds, Herv  was supposed to follow his father's example. So they stimulated him into buying a boat. Herv  proved himself unfitted to be a master and had to resell his boat at a loss. From the beginning, H l ne was reluctant, but she supported Herv 's project, on behalf of the solidarity between husband and wife. After Herv 's failure, she did not put any blame on him, even though they had to go on paying for the loan Herv  had taken in order to buy his boat. The fact that H l ne does not belong to a fishing family partly explains her leniency.

Unlike some other fishers' wives, she does not consider that succeeding professionally implies being a shipowner.

### *Standing up for fishers' interests*

The support pattern can sometimes lead the wives to take part in a public mobilization, as in case of fishers' "strikes". Most of the time, these struggles are short, rather violent and lowly organized, and originate in a sectorial crisis, as in 1980 (Corlay, 1984) and in 1993-1994. In 1980, while only men engaged in spectacular and sometimes violent actions, some women stood by them for more peaceful and conventional actions, such as leafleting or gaining unlawful access to the Affaires Maritimes premises. After the strike, they took in charge the management of its consequences: they negotiated with the banks, with the fishers' social security service and with the social services dedicated to seamen. The social conflict which began in 1993 lasted longer than the previous one, and the women's involvement, which was usually welcome by the men, allowed the mobilization to go on while their husbands were at sea.

The support pattern means that only women are compelled to deal with the consequences on the family life of hard working conditions. It does not necessarily give them any power or authority, all the more because men do not acknowledge their wives' roles. In the households concerned with this pattern, the husband's trade and career are the pivot around which the domestic arrangements set up.

## **II. The negotiation pattern**

The negotiation pattern refers to domestic arrangements which affect the fisher's trade or more precisely the way he practices it. This is made possible by the changes in the local and economical background combined to the societal evolutions which took place since the seventies. For married women, working become more and more frequent and, on the Atlantic coast, the development of tourism has generated job opportunities for women, while the fishing sector has undergone a series of crises. Both men and women tend to be more strongly affected by the absence because of a new aspiration for a shared family life. The way how family roles and responsibilities are defined have also changed. Till the seventies, they were predefined. Nowadays, individuals are required to invent them (Kaufmann, 1992). In such conditions, no wonder that the effects on the family life of the trade, and its hard working conditions, are likely to be subject to negotiations. These negotiations most frequently concern children's care. Likewise, most of the concessions are made for their sake. The division of domestic labour is the second most important issue – this order being by no way specific to fishers' households (Zarca, 1990; Brousse, 2015). We can distinguish three ways by

which these arrangements are attained: mutual concessions, clarifying the agreement's terms and keeping the trade at a distance. Finally, failing negotiation can lead to a marital breakdown.

Let's try now to describe the specific contents of these arrangements and the conditions which render them possible, with the help of case studies.

### *Mutual concessions*

Guy and Gaëlle are exemplary of these transactions focused on work painfulness. Guy is 47 years old. He has recently been declared unfit to work after an occupational accident. He had undertaken a career as a fisher with the full support of Gaëlle. He began working as a deckhand on an inshore fishing ship before being qualified as a captain. Guy and Gaëlle for a time toyed with the idea of buying a boat, but they gave up the project because of its financial hazard. Instead of a boat, they bought a restaurant, which Gaëlle undertook to run. For his part, Guy wanted to switch from inshore to offshore fishing, since offshore fishing's working hours suited him better. So, he decided to resume a course of training, because qualifying as an engineer made this change possible while at the same time increasing his income. Once he passed his degree, the family achieved a balance. Guy made 10 days trips, earned a good income and liked his job. Gaëlle did not suffer from his absence. Running a restaurant and being an entrepreneur gave her a feeling of accomplishment.

However, this balance was called into question when their second child's met serious educational difficulties. Both parents refused to send him to a special boarding school. Guy's parents were too old to look after the boy on an everyday basis and Gaëlle's ones already looked after his elder sister. Thus Guy and Gaëlle had to reconsider their professional commitments. Gaëlle sold her restaurant, where she continued to work as a part-time waitress, thus surrendering the entrepreneur status she valued. For his part, Guy left his job to work on board of an inshore fishing ship, even though he difficultly stood the working hours of inshore fishing, as well as its work intensity. The change was all the more painful since he had chosen a ship where work was very intense in order to compensate for the loss of income induced by the sale of the restaurant.

In this household, the mutual concessions - apparently symmetrical - in the occupational sphere were motivated by the best interests of the family, as the son needed his parents' less occasional presence at home.

### *Clarifying the agreement's terms*

Contrary to Guy and Gaëlle, some younger couples do not need a family crisis to clarify the terms of an agreement which lied unspoken in previous generations.

Lucas, 20 years old, is a deckhand on an inshore fishing ship in Vendée. He has just moved in with his girlfriend Laura, employee in the large-scale distribution sector. Both are unskilled. Unlike Laura, Lucas does not belong to a fishing family. Despite her family background, Laura at first did not want Lucas to become a fisher. But, as Lucas explained in a very straightforward way during the interview, she accepted his decision because his income as a fisher allows them a lifestyle to which they could not pretend otherwise.

Lucas has the project to work on board an offshore fishing ship, in order to discover new aspects of the trade and to increase his income. Laura is reluctant, because she knows the price paid by offshore fishers' wives like her grandmother. Even though Lucas wants to become an offshore fisher, he does not intend to accept a job without Laura's consent. So he tries to convince her with the help of his friends and professional network. For instance, he has organized a meeting with a young woman whose boyfriend leaves home for week-long trips, to give Laura the opportunity to discover the weekly routine of an offshore fisher's partner.

While women from the previous generation were not in the habit to discuss their husbands' career decisions, Laura seems to have her say in the matter. Lucas and Laura are exemplary from a new kind of domestic arrangements, which are subject to negotiation and can be renegotiated. For instance, Lucas knows that Laura's acceptance of his career as an offshore fisher will cease if she becomes pregnant. He himself considers this job as incompatible with fatherhood. For him, being an offshore fisher can only be a transitory experience.

To understand how Laura's participation in Lucas' choices is possible, we have to refer both to the local background and the family setup. Lucas and Laura live in a touristic area, which offers job opportunities for unskilled women. So Laura does not totally depend on Lucas. Her autonomy and the negotiating power which goes with it also find their roots in a specific family setup. Lucas does not belong to a fishing family and, above all, he entered the trade through Laura: he indeed works on board of her brother's ship. This relationship of subordination with his girlfriend's family may weigh in the distribution of power between them.

### *Keeping the trade at a distance*

Another way to deal upward with the hard working conditions consists in keeping trade at a distance. For the women concerned, their husband's trade is supposed to have no specific effects on their marital and family life and does not impose any special obligation on them.

Antoine is an inshore fisher in Finistère. With his brother-in-law, he shares the ownership of a boat on board of which they fish nephrops. He is married to Martine, whose father was a fisherman. Both are 51 years old and they have two grownup sons. Martine's contribution to Michel's work is reduced to a minimal degree: twice a week, she buys meat for the meal on board, even though at the



beginning of her married life, she kept the accounts of her husband's business. She is not interested in Michel's job. She has never come on board his boat.

This detachment has some effects on how Michel practices his trade, as deterring investment. Michel and his brother-in-law's boat is the oldest of the port and has undergone few improvements. They have quite the same working hours as the workers ashore: they go to sea five times a week, never on week-end, and they come back around seven o'clock in the evening. Likewise, Michel's time ashore does not bear the hallmark of his vocational activities: he plays sport on the week-end and goes on holidays for a month every summer. Thus, the way Michel practices his trade limits its effects on the household. But the counterpart is a lower income, which Martine has accepted.

The way Martine keeps her husband's job at a distance expresses a more profound rejection. One of her sons wanted to become a fisher and she has successfully stayed in the way of his vocation. However Michel and Martine did not separate. The fact that Martine belonged to a fishing family and her local footing have certainly contributed to their marriage's soundness, as well as the fact that she stopped working in 1993.

These three case studies show that the negotiation pattern does not only concern the younger generations, and more specifically the couples where the wife does not belong to a fishing family and has a middle or high professional qualification level. What makes the negotiation pattern possible is the convergence between a family setup and a local background. However, sometimes negotiation is impossible, or fails, which can lead to a marital breakdown. Could leaving the trade sometimes conversely be the condition for the marriage to survive? As our panel consists in fishers and their wives, the study leaves these cases aside. However, since the nineties, statistics reveal a growing rate of turnover, at its highest for the fishers aged between 20 and 30 (Observatoire prospectif des métiers et des qualifications de la pêche, 2015).

This turnover combined with a decrease of the number of fishers entering the trade (Bourguenolle, 2015) generate a workforce shortage. This shortage brings about some responses. For instance, some offshore shipowners have established the *roulement*, a system which allows the crew members to stay ashore for longer periods: a ship is manned with a crew of seven, but only five on them are present, so that each man alternates four trips on board and one trip ashore. Thus, fishers spend more time ashore but the price for it is a more intense work. For their wives, the deal is a husband whose presence is less occasional, but with a greater need to rest and recover. This fool's bargain and the series of crises the fishing sector underwent tend to make the trade less attractive for young men and their wives or partners.

However, a new recruitment pool could make its appearance with the promotion, by the European Union and by environmental NGOs, of a new model of "sustainable and responsible fishing". This

model attracts new kinds of candidates. Some of them become fishers after a first career in various sectors related to sailing. Others are recent graduates from general education, who do not belong to fishing families, willing to practice a craft profession in contact with nature. These “new fishers” can partially give the lie to the previous observations of a recruiting crisis. For these new fishers, short circuits can appear as an attractive model, both economically livable and ethical. In this new model, fishers' wives can find their place, for instance in the retail sale, under the status of *conjointe-collaboratrice*. Thus, the fishing sector would follow the path laid out by the agricultural and artisanal sectors more than ten years ago (Mazaud, 2013; Mundler, 2010).

## Bibliography

- Banals M.-L., Chauvin C. (2010), « Mesures des risques psychosociaux dans le secteur maritime », in Dedessus-Le-Moutier N., Douguet F. (dir.), *La santé au travail à l'épreuve des nouveaux risques*, Cachan, Lavoisier, pp. 187-197.
- Baudelot C. et Establet R. (2006), *Allez les filles ! Une révolution silencieuse*, Paris, Seuil, 2006.
- Bessière C. et Gollac S. (2007), « Le silence des pratiques. La question des rapports de genre dans les familles d'"indépendants" », *Sociétés & Représentations*, n° 24, pp. 43-58.
- Bourguenolle M. (2015), *Enquête sur le renouvellement des générations de marins pêcheurs en Bretagne, Pays-de-la Loire : contraintes, enjeux et réalité d'aujourd'hui*. Mémoire de M2 Sociologie, Nantes.
- Brousse C. (2015), « Travail professionnel, tâches domestiques, temps "libre" : quelques déterminants sociaux de la vie quotidienne », *Économie et Statistique*, n° 478-479-480.
- Corlay J.-P. (1984), « Le conflit des pêches françaises en 1980 : essai de socio-géographie halieutique », *Norois*, n° 121, pp. 155-169.
- Daubas-Letourneux V. (2012), *Étude sociologique sur les accidents du travail et les maladies professionnelles dans les secteurs de la pêche et des cultures marines en Bretagne. Phase 2 : Enquête qualitative auprès des marins*, DIRECCTE Bretagne.
- Delbos G. (2006) « Pêche artisanale : la fin du "ménage" », *Ethnologie française*, XXXVI, pp. 531-542.
- Kaufmann J.-C. (1992), *La trame conjugale. Analyse du couple par son linge*, Paris, Nathan.
- Jorion P. (2012), *Les pêcheurs d'Houat*, Broissieux, Éditions du Croquant.
- Lahire B., (1995) *Tableaux de familles. Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires*, Paris, Seuil/Gallimard.
- Lazuech G. (2014), « Comment gérer les ressources marines ? Jeux d'acteurs autour de la PCP », *Économie rurale*, n° 344, nov.-déc., pp. 29-44.
- Le Roy Y. (2011), *Synthèse des principales études menées par l'Institut maritime de prévention pour le compte de la région Bretagne depuis 2005*, Bruxelles.

- Lebahy Y. (2008), « L'économie de la villégiature : une hérésie en termes d'aménagement », *Pour*, n° 199, pp. 139-145.
- Lequesne C. (2001), *L'Europe Bleue. À quoi sert une politique commune des pêches ?*, Paris, Presses de science Po.
- Maline J., Dorval P. (1991), « Analyse du travail d'un équipage : prise en compte de l'activité des marins-pêcheurs », *Le Travail humain*, n° 54 (2), pp. 165-184.
- Mainguené, A. (2011), « Couple, famille, parentalité, travail des femmes. Les modèles évoluent avec les générations », *INSEE Première*, n° 1939.
- Martial A. (2009), « Le travail parental : du côté des pères séparés et divorcés », *Informations sociales*, n° 154, pp. 96-104.
- Meuriot E., (1986), *La flotte de pêche française de 1945 à 1983. Politiques et réalités. Ressources de la Mer*, IFREMER.
- Mundler P. (2007), « Les Associations pour le maintien de l'agriculture paysanne (AMAP) en Rhône-Alpes, entre marché et solidarité », *Ruralia* [En ligne], 20, <http://ruralia.revues.org/1702>
- Observatoire prospectif des métiers et des qualifications de la pêche (2015), « Marins pêcheurs en 2009 : que sont-ils devenus 5 ans plus tard », *Note*, n° 2.
- Renard J. (1984), « Le tourisme : agent conflictuel de l'utilisation de l'espace littoral en France », *Norois*, n° 121, janv.-mars, pp. 45-61.
- Salmona M. (1985), « L'"échappée belle" ou la mobilisation des femmes dans l'agriculture en France », *Tiers-Monde*, t. 26, pp. 371-382.
- Singly F. (de), 1996, *Le Soi, le couple et la famille*, Paris, Nathan.
- Zarca B. (1990), « La division du travail domestique : poids du passé et tensions au sein du couple », *Économie et statistique*, n° 228.