



Preface

This book tells an “other” story about the fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is about women from inshore fishing families who, during the past decade or more of tumultuous change in the fishery, have had little choice but to go to work on fishing boats. Given the marginalization of women in many aspects of the fishery, it attempts to bridge a gap in our collective understanding of the fishery by acknowledging and celebrating the lives of these women. It draws on women’s narratives which reveal their struggles for survival and their creative quests for some degree of moral, ideological, and material resolution of the seemingly unending tensions between their desires and needs living in rural fishing communities and the rules and laws determined by patriarchal culture and geographical centres in the provincial and national capitals.

This book seeks to create a space where we might imagine a different type of fishery and the possibility of a different role in it for women. It reveals dominant representations of fishery workers in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, challenging recent hostile neo-liberal representations of fishery workers as lazy, uneducated exploiters of government coffers or, alternatively, romantic ideas weaned from media shots of rugged, weathered men who make a living through high risk and heroism. It therefore attempts to engage with local politics by deploying alternate understandings of fishery workers and fishery policies, displacing essentialist ideas and questioning the very desires that motivate them. As such, it reveals intense detail about the impacts and workings of a “nervous system” (Taussig, 1992) of signs and agencies driven by broad fisheries and social policies and practices that have contributed to the degradation of marine environments, essentialized the motives of people from rural Newfoundland and Labrador, marginalized women and abstracted fishermen, and attempted to control, police, and fence in people’s interactions with and knowledge about their marine environment.

Another aim of this book is to explore the health impacts of such a system on women. It attempts to create a space for an alternate approach to understanding women’s health—one that is grounded in narrative detail rich in the complex



sociality of their lives. While the “social determinants of health” approach provides a place to begin studying women’s health, gaining a better understanding of their interconnections requires dispensing with its pre-determined rigid categories, its desire for decontaminated meaning and its preoccupation with ordered coherence. Rather, this book adopts a critical politics of embeddedness, entanglement, and implication drawn from narratives that weave a chain of truths about these women’s lives and health.

One of the greatest challenges in writing a book like this is representing fisherwomen’s lives and experiences in a way that actually improves their lives. My aim here is to articulate the barrage of forces acting on women, their impacts and the ways women are responding to them. I do not attempt to offer solutions to their dilemmas and concerns. These I leave to people and organizations charged with protecting people’s lives and livelihoods and ensuring the health of marine environments.

This book explores the dynamics of women’s relations within the household, within their communities and fisheries-related institutions, and their health and hopes for the future living in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Chapter One presents a view of the changing environment in the fishery as a nervous system of impacts and effects emanating from decades of modernization schemes that exploit fishery workers and take marine species to the brink of extinction. The focus is on fisherwomen’s views on this changing environment and their concerns about it. It also constructs a narrative framework that draws on the intense detail and sociality of fisherwomen’s stories, including ways they conceptualize their health. Chapter Two delves into women’s narratives about why they went to work on boats, their work responsibilities, work loads, and their relations with their husbands and co-workers. It discusses their informal learning aboard fishing boats and some of the implications of these experiences for their health and well-being. Chapter Three continues with the ideas developed in the previous chapter by exploring fisherwomen’s interactions with people outside their immediate households and with fisheries-related institutions. It then discusses fisheries professionalization and models used for fisheries training in the province, including a gender analysis of women’s participation in these formal opportunities for training.

Chapter Four takes a more in-depth look at women’s health and well-being, and the ways they understand their health in relation to fisheries policies and the health of marine species. It also considers the effects of fisheries management policies on the safety practices of fishers. Chapter Five begins with women’s views on the future of the fishery and their role in it and then concludes with a brief summary of issues arising from the use of narratives as an approach to understanding links between public policy, environments and women’s health.



CHAPTER 1

A Glimpse into a Nervous System¹

Since the mid-1980s the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery has been characterized by tumultuous change, uncertainty and displacement of people living in rural communities. While inshore fishers were dealing with declining fish landings in the mid-1980s, major political change began in 1992 when, after years of fisheries policies that resulted in over-harvesting, over-capacity, aggressive use of intensive technologies, and mismanagement of stocks, the commercial groundfish fishery was shut down. Two moratoria were called: one in 1992 on the northern cod stocks and a second on other groundfish stocks in 1994. Then in April of 2003, in a statement claiming that the cod stocks were not recovering, the Minister of the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans indefinitely closed the northern cod fishery and the northern and southern Gulf of St. Lawrence cod fisheries.

The 1992 and 1994 moratoria displaced an estimated 50,000 fishery workers throughout Atlantic Canada, and over 32,000 of those were from Newfoundland and Labrador (Williams, 1996, 21; Storey and Smith, 1995, 170). Job loss affected not only fishers and fish processing workers, but also people in various spin-off jobs associated with the fishery. These moratoria acted as a catalyst for renewing efforts at restructuring the fisheries at the policy level. There is little about this restructuring that could be considered neutral. It involved decreasing the number of processing workers, fishers, and plants by means of rationalization processes premised on competition, reduced access to social programs, and privatization and was driven by a belief that there were “too many fishermen chasing too few fish.” Anna Tsing refers to this restructuring, the making and remaking of natural and social landscapes, as environmental projects with social and material effects. These are “organized packages of ideas and practices that assume an at least tentative stability through their social enactment, whether as



custom, convention, trend, clubbish or professional training, institutional mandate, or governmental policy” (2001, 4). This latest environmental project in the Newfoundland fishery, which I call “fisheries restructuring,” has tremendous power to reshape local environments, places and people’s ways of life, and act as a major determinant of people’s health and well-being in rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

The cornerstone of fisheries rationalization was based on policies designed to enclose the commons through privatization and individualization of fish resources previously understood to be common property or open to the public. This involved increasing emphasis on the individual fisher as “entrepreneur,” seeking out new species such as crab and shrimp, and increasing market control within the industry (McKay, 1999, 301; Munk-Madsen, 1998, 229; Neis and Williams, 1997, 48). In Newfoundland and Labrador this neo-liberal ideological thrust resulted in increasing attachment to global markets while reducing local access to changing fishery resources and the size of the fishery workforce, and decreasing fishery workers’ reliance on the federal government’s Employment Insurance (EI) program for seasonal workers through restructuring of the EI program (MacDonald, 1999, 63).

An important aspect of fisheries management restructuring since the mid-1990s has been professionalization, a strategy adopted to control access to fishing licences and to reduce the number of fish harvesters in Newfoundland and Labrador. In 1996, the provincial government passed the *Fish Harvesters Act*, which requires that all fish harvesters in the province be certified by the Professional Fish Harvesters Certification Board (PFHCB). Certification is established at three levels: Apprentice, Level I and Level II. When the Act was passed, fish harvesters in the DFO’s registration system were “grandparented” into professionalization at all three levels. These new regulations require that all fish harvesters except those at Level II have a specified number of hours fishing with a Level II harvester and a range of education/training credits in order to upgrade to the next level. Only fish harvesters at Level II can obtain a fishing licence (PFHCB, 2000c).

For women throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, the fishery crisis was not just about over-fishing, tighter regulations and monitoring, and the need for new management structures. Women often articulate concerns about the financial and emotional stress on fishing families and the continued survival of rural communities (Fish, Food and Allied Workers [FFAW/CAW], 1994, 7; Cahill and Martland, 1993, 11; Jentoft, 1993, 72). The lack of employment resulting from the moratoria has forced many people to look outside the fishery and rural Newfoundland for work and, particularly, to encourage their children to do so. As rural populations decrease due to outmigration, local social support net-



works, which have in the past mitigated the effects of unemployment are also at risk (Neis, 1998, 10).

Methods

In 2000, I attended a workshop and conference where fisherwomen from Atlantic Canada spoke about the effects that the changes in the fishing industry were having on their lives and their health. They were concerned that fisherwomen were being ignored in occupational health research and in studies on the effects of all the changes in fisheries and social policies (Neis and Grzetic, 2000; *Yemaya*, August, 2000). My master's thesis research focused on these concerns (see Grzetic, 2002). While I have talked with many other women who are fishing since I wrote that thesis, this book is based primarily on my discussions with sixteen fisherwomen from the south and west coasts of the Island, which took place between 2000 and 2002. This includes recorded talks at conferences and workshops, taped one-on-one interviews in their homes, and numerous conversations by phone and e-mail.

Many of the narratives in this book were drawn from the semi-formal in-depth interviews done with these fisherwomen. I initially met some of these women at the workshop and conference in 2000 but others were introduced to me through friends and acquaintances in organizations such as the Bay St. George Status of Women Council and the Professional Fish Harvesters Certification Board. The interviews lasted from two to three hours. Most women allowed me to tape and these were later transcribed and erased. Once a draft report was produced, I contacted all the women again and asked them if they would like to review and comment on it. Thus began another series of conversations by phone and e-mail.

Given the stigma and suspicion associated with women's work in the fishery, I took some precautions to protect these women's identities. Therefore, the names given to women in this book are pseudonyms. I also decided early on not to ask questions about their income because I did not want women to feel that I was there checking up on them. In the interviews, I tried to assure them that their identities would not be revealed and that talking to me would not compromise their incomes in any way. Regardless, a couple of women were still quite concerned because of the suspicion that surrounds their work in the fishery, and their nervousness was obvious when we spoke. This is understandable because most women did not know me and were worried that there could be negative implications as a result of speaking to me. In these interviews, women took every opportunity to stress to me that they *really* do go out everyday and they *really* do work aboard the boat. When I spoke with Marilyn, her husband sat on the end of the couch near the doorway and listened to our conversation.



Can you tell me what you call yourself?

Marilyn: Well, I guess a helper I would say. I fishes with my husband.

Brenda: Do you ever call yourself a fish harvester or a fisherwoman?

Marilyn: Oh yes. I does my share.

Brenda: So if someone asked what you do for a living what would you say?

Marilyn: I fishes. [Laughs] That's the truth because I'm out there every day.

Brenda: What's your current status in the fishery with the certification board?

Marilyn: Well, I'm Level II this year and I'm proud of it too.

Brenda: What year did you start fishing?

Marilyn: In 1993. I found some receipts from 1993. I couldn't find any from 1992 so I guess I started in 1993.

The terms used to describe women who work on fishing boats reflect their marginalization and uncertain position in the fishery. In re-presenting their stories, I decided to call women who fish "fisherwomen," men who fish "fishermen," and the entire workforce of men and women "fishers.'

These fisherwomen are all married and they all fish with their husbands in NAFO fishing zones 3Ps, 3Pn and 4R (see the appendix for a map of NAFO zones around Newfoundland and Labrador). The women's ages range from thirty-six to fifty-six; the average age is forty-two. The husband's ages range from thirty-eight to fifty-seven; the average age being forty-six. Fourteen women worked for pay before going fishing and most had worked at least two other jobs prior to going fishing. Thirteen women were unemployed prior to going fishing. Three women left other jobs to go fishing: one quit a fish processing job, another quit a retail clerical position and the third left a temporary (on-call) clerical job. Two women were collecting unemployment insurance when they started fishing.

These women have been fishing from one year to twenty years: the average time spent fishing is ten years. Ten women fish alone with their husbands all the time. One woman fishes some species with her husband and other species on a bigger boat with an additional two crew members. Five women fish aboard boats that have three to five crew members all the time. At the time of the interviews most of these women fished mainly lobster, lump, cod, and crab. Since the latest moratorium was called in 2003, only five of these women currently fish cod. For this reason and others, I have included their comments about fishing cod and the health of groundfish stocks.

Although many of these women know other women who fish, they do not



work closely with these women. For some of them, the interview was a rare opportunity to talk more publicly about their work. I approached this research as both an exploration of women's work and a celebration of it, an affirmation of the importance and value of their work. And at times, women expressed such views as well. At the end of an interview with Bridget, she arrived at a place that is different from where she started: "I tell you, I does a lot. I never realized it till I was talking to you. I wants a raise."

The Importance of Women's Health Narratives

This book explores the health effects of a gendered nervous system and the ways women wear its impacts and represent them in their stories. These uneasy and at times shocking stories delve into an often ignored but critical part of a nervous system, showing the effects of the shifting inner workings of gendered institutionalized policies and practices. Underlying their stories are some common threads—or truths—about the effects of a "fix" (Taussig, 1992, 3) of fisheries modernization and rationalization that this nervous system desperately requires. These effects are most intensely felt by inshore fishery workers, who have become dispensable in recent years.

Why is it important to focus on women's narratives? Narratives are a basic and productive way of making meaning of our lives through stories. Feminist writers have long recognized their value to show both resistance to and compliance with master narratives, the dynamics of gender and power relations between women and men and between women and male-dominated institutions, and the ways women attempt to negotiate hierarchical and patriarchal systems in their daily lives (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, 5). Women's narratives reveal intense detail about what it is like to experience marginalization, to wear its impacts like signs on their bodies, and to speak its many meanings in everyday stories.

Tsing states that marginalization contains both exclusionary and creative elements (1993). Women's narratives reveal not just processes related to the production of gender identities and the workings of marginalization. They also *produce* ideas about gender and marginalization and their effects. Stewart defines narratives as "first and foremost, a mediating form through which "meaning" must pass. Stories, in other words, are productive" (1996, 29). Throughout this book, fisherwomen actively produce, dismantle, and re-produce meanings and concepts associated with gender and health. Through a language of embeddedness and implication, narratives expose the sociality of women's health in infinite detail, including connections with marine environments.

The effects of institutionalized, gendered norms on women's agency and choices are central to women's narratives. Societal discrimination affects not



only women's agency and hence their ability to act, but more importantly, their autonomy, which involves self-determination and the ability to make choices free of the influence of oppression. When women's capacity for autonomy is undermined by oppression and discrimination, so are their health and well-being (Sherwin, 1998).

A useful way to begin to explore health effects is provided by the "social determinants of health" framework (Health Canada, 1999), which recognizes the inter-relatedness of social and economic conditions and ways that health is affected by factors such as work environments and conditions, education and learning, social supports, and gender. In a practical sense, narratives help us resist an all too common tendency to create neat and tidy categories with health determinants that often have positivist outcomes. Narrative strategies are both local and global, tangible and imaginary, firm and fleeting. However, they are not linear. Instead, fisherwomen's narratives reveal the complexity and interconnectedness of human and environmental health and fisheries and social policies, following interpretive moves deep into their varied, disordered, and nervous effects. They create a space like a collage or montage where the social and moral order is revealed, analyzed, and re-figured in a way that places people within a wide scope of relations and memories (Stewart, 1996, 34). The aim is to focus on the density and detail of these narratives just long enough to catch a glimpse of women's struggles and accomplishments and delay the urge to make quick explanations, assumptions and categorizations about them (Stewart, 1996, 24).

Working with women's narratives creates a nervous oscillation in a text such as this one—a shifting back and forth between two epistemological stances—women's voices in their infinite complexity, detail, and embodiment, and mine, which attempts to represent and organize the force and power of the space their narratives create. Both stances are complex, especially when fisherwomen employ a type of doubletalk as they engage with master narratives that have them positioned at the centre. My stance is immersed in a struggle of representation as I try to close the distance between me, a researcher and writer, and fisherwomen, the objects of my writing, just long enough to challenge the secondary status afforded to anecdotes, to invert the hierarchy of "conceptual thought" over "hard data."

Women's narratives take both monologic and dialogic forms. They also have animated and performative elements: women are conversing with me but they also re-produce conversations with their husbands and children, speak to themselves, to other fisherwomen, and to the public, especially those in government and fisheries organizations. Sometimes this dialogue takes the form of backtalk where they challenge and resist outright dominant notions of fishery workers and gender ideologies that adversely affect their lives and health.