



A Qualitative Study on the Life Struggles of the Wives of the Seafarers

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ABSTRACT

The struggles that seafarers have faced during their careers have been the subject of a small number of scientific studies. On the other hand, the number of studies related with the wives of seafarers and the struggles that they experience when the seafarers are at service is scarce. Hence, "the struggles of the wives of the seafarers" has been selected as the topic of this study and the struggles that the wives of the seafarers face when the seafarers are at service, along with the methods that they have developed to overcome these have been put forth in a scientific manner. In this study, 15 seafarer wives residing in Izmir have been selected by way of judgmental sampling method and relevant data have been obtained via face to face interviews. As a result, the life struggles of the wives of the seafarers on land have been put forth via an exploratory research method. This study presented in "The First Global Conference on Innovation in Marine Technology and The Future of Maritime Transportation" in November 24-26, 2010, Istanbul.

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1. Introduction

In this study, seafarers have been defined as professional people serving at commercial ships within the context of a specific service agreement. Also, the seafarers whose wives we interviewed during this study are all serving as a ship master and officers in the ship. There is a ship master who is in command of the commercial ship that the seafarers serve. According to the hierarchical organizational structure of ships, there is a chief engineer just below the ship master responsible from the hull machinery and operations and a chief officer responsible from deck operations. Whereas below the senior management composed of the ship master, chief engineer and chief officer, there are machinery and deck officers who take part in ship operations. The position of these officers within the ship hierarchy is defined as a mid-level management position (Nas 2006). Apart from our subject matter, the seafarers at high and middle level management positions mentioned above; there are also deck, engine, cabin and rating seafarers aboard.

The human resource supply for high and mid-level seafarers in Turkey is generally provided by educational institutions at higher education levels. These educational institutions are

(Nas 2009), ITU Maritime Faculty, DEU Maritime Faculty, YDU, Maritime Faculty, KTU Faculty of Marine Science and NvFC Naval Academy. All seafarers the wives of whom were interviewed as part of this study have taken higher education.

Seafarers work within the scope of a service contract on the ships. These service contracts have a limited duration of 6 months for mid-level management positions. As part of the contract, the seafarers have a right for 1 month paid leave following a 6 month period of sea service. The seafarer holds the right to extend the duration of the contract provided that they take the consent of the ship authority. Seafarers at high level management positions work with contracts of 4 or 3 months. As seafarers travel around the world seas during their sea service, they do not have the option to leave their ship and job to go back to their loved ones unless there is an emergency situation. Even in emergencies seafarers mostly cannot leave their ships and go back due to the nature of the job. Often at the passage, they do not have means to be taken from the ship to go where they want to. Seafarers embark the ship knowing that they will not be able to get back when they want to and that even if they do they may not reach there on time. This puts seafarers who are married and who have kids in a very difficult position. Most of the responsibilities regarding the family are passed onto the spouse who is left behind. Taking care of the needs of the household, social relationships, child care and all the responsibilities about their health and education are placed on the shoulders of the spouse. Hence, the spouse selection of

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the seafarer, the agreement among the spouses, the sacrifices made by the spouse and their struggle to remain standing when faced with all these challenges gains utmost importance. The seafarer and his spouse always live by aiming to reach a future happiness, success and satisfaction. That is why concepts such as agreement, happiness and success hold a very important place in studies about marriage and family. A harmonious marriage and hence a successful family life is a relationship that is gained only as a result of the smart planning and efforts of the spouses and should be well protected. This relationship presupposes agreement, sharing and the acceptance by the spouses of their duties and responsibilities (Bilen, 1983). An economical, supervisory and psycho-social agreement and accordance should be attained in order to establish unity and togetherness within the family. Otherwise, there may be trouble regarding the attainment of unity and togetherness within the family and conflicts, emotional breakdown and disintegration may take place (Bilen, 1983). In studies by Thomas, Sampson and Zhao (2003), it has been determined that the most distinct cause for stress in seafarers is their separation from spouses and families.

2. Objective of the study

This study aims to shed a light on the problems that the spouses face when seafarers are on the sea service. The objective of this study is to determine by using patterned interview method the kinds of problems that spouses face when seafarers at mid and high level managerial positions are on the sea service and the solutions that they develop and to put forth the obtained data via descriptive analysis method.

3. Research methodology

First, a literature survey has been carried out. No national or international study has been found on the spouses of seafarers. However, there have been studies about marriage and marital spouse agreement. This is an exploratory study in respect of the goal to be reached. The data used is defined as "instantaneous data" due to the data collection process. In this study, interview method has been preferred for data acquisition. In the study, 15 seafarer spouses residing in Izmir have been determined by way of judgmental sampling method and related data have been collected via face to face interviews. Descriptive data analysis method has been used for data analysis.

3.1. Data Acquisition Method

Related with the data acquisition method used in the study, literature in social sciences regarding interview and qualitative research methods has been surveyed. The interview method used in the study is considered to be a form of both art and science due to the fact that it covers many dimensions such as ability, emotion, concentration, mutual understanding, prediction, mental alertness and discipline (Patton, 1987). In this

regard, interview is very different than a regular chat which is much more shallow and prone to misunderstanding. It is stated that during a quality interview, mistakes that occur during daily interaction and communication (such as listening deficiency, prejudices) are not made (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Stewart and Cash (1985) define interview as "A process of dyadic, relational communication with a predetermined and serious purpose designed to interchange behavior and involving the asking and answering of questions". According to Patton (1987) the objective of an interview is to be able to enter the inner life of an individual and to understand his/her perspective.

After the literature survey regarding the interview method, a "patterned interview form" was prepared. Past observations and experiences related with seafarers were used during the preparation of the questions used in the form. The questions have been prepared with a focus on processes related with the seafarer embarking on a sea service and his return. The first question was "*as a seafarer spouse, what kinds of problems do you have to struggle with when your spouse is at sea service?*" In order for a more detailed data acquisition, this question has been backed by 3 follow up questions. The follow questions have been determined as "changes in the social environment", "family support" and "for families with children, the changes observed in children after their father leaves". The next question has been prepared to determine the problems faced after the seafarer returns from sea service.

3.2. Sampling

The scope of this study has been limited with Izmir due to ease of transportation. The wives of seafarers within Izmir city limits have been reached via Istanbul Technical University Maritime Faculty Alumni Association Izmir Branch and Dokuz Eylül University Maritime Faculty Alumni Association. Due to the difficulty in reaching the wives of all seafarers as well as time constraints, the people to be interviewed within the scope of this study were selected by using judgmental sampling method. In this study, the wives of seamen who continue working at mid and high level managerial positions at sea service and those who have been at sea service but now continue working on land. The departments that the seafarers work at were taken into account while selecting the wives. Accordingly, the total number of participants was limited with a total of 15 seafarers, 11 of whom are from the deck department whereas 4 are from the engine department.

The seafarers were contacted prior to the interview to get the necessary permissions. After that the wives were shortly informed about the subject and the importance of this study over the phone. Afterwards, appointments were taken for a face to face interview. Some meeting took place at the houses of the seafarers whereas some took place outside at convenient spots. Face to face interviews have been carried out with all participants and these interviews have been recorded by using a voice recorder. The interviewed seafarer wives were all hospitable both at their houses and outside and seafarer traditions were continued during interviews that took place outside. The

interviews were completed during April – May 2010 over a 1,5 month period.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

The data obtained were analyzed by using descriptive analysis method which is one of the qualitative analysis methods. In descriptive analysis, the obtained data are interpreted after being summarized under headings which have been determined beforehand. The data can be classified according to research questions or they may be arranged according to the foreknowledge obtained during data acquisition stage. The objective of descriptive analysis is to put the raw data into a format which can be understood by readers and used if desired. To this end, the acquired data are first arranged logically. After that these descriptions (classifications) are interpreted and results are obtained. Whereas at the last stage, the researcher tries to offer an insight by making suppositions about the future (Altunışık et al., 2007). Also, the statements obtained during the study are used directly in the text thereby including the opinions of the participants. Hence, important or striking views are directly reflected.

4. Demographic analysis of seafarers and the interviewed wives

Among the 15 seafarers whose wives participated to our study, 3 are Dokuz Eylül University Maritime Faculty alumni, 1 is Karadeniz Technical University Faculty of Marine Science alumnus, 9 are Istanbul Technical University Maritime Faculty alumni and 2 are Naval Academy alumni. The seafarers who have been selected as the subjects of our study are divided into two groups based on their current occupation. The first group consists of seafarers who are still working at a ship under a certain contract. Whereas the second group consists of seafarers who have worked at sea service at some period of their lives but who are now working at maritime related agencies and institutes. The average age of the seafarers has been determined to be 39 according to information obtained from their wives. The average sea service span of the seafarers whose wives participated to our study is 12 years. Eight seafarers are still at sea service and the average period of service of the 7 seafarers who are working on the land has been determined to be 10 years. The age average of our data source, the wives of the 15 seafarers is 36 and their levels of education have been determined to be as follows: 2 Ph.D., 1 M.Sc., 7 B.Sc., 1 associate degree, 3 high schools and 1 primary school. Among the seafarer wives who have participated to our study, only 4 are still working. Of the 15 wives 11 have 1 child whereas 4 have none. The average wedding time span of the 15 participants is 11 years and the total average relationship time span is 15 years. The average time span for continuing sea service while married has been determined to be 7 years. Also, 4 participants have not gone to sea service with their husbands and the 11 wives who have gone to sea service with their husbands have spent an average time span of 1 year at sea.

5. Descriptive analysis and results

The first question on the patterned interview form has been arranged so as to determine the problems that the seafarer wives face when their husbands go to sea service. The information obtained from the acquired data has been summarized below.

It has been emphasized by the seafarer wives during the interviews that with the seafarer leaving house for sea service, all the financial (bank, invoices... etc.), technical (repair, modification, plumbing problems... etc.), external responsibilities (shopping... etc.) along with the tasks related with the children if any (school, private teaching institutions, travel... etc.), repair and maintenance of the car have to be carried out by the seafarer wives. It is stated that the biggest problem that the seafarers' wives face is communication with the seafarers. Since the seafarers sometimes cannot call or inform their wives while passing through regions that are dangerous due to the increase of piracy problems, the seafarer wives have stated that they worry about their husbands.

It has been stated by the seafarer wives that with the departure of the seafarers for sea service separation psychology, the demoralization caused by being away and emotions such as longing and yearning take over. It has been emphasized that this period becomes even harder in case of health problems. Some seafarer wives have stated that their children are sensitive and have health problems, thus exhausting them even more in this period when they have to deal with everything by themselves. They have also stated that besides their children, since their parents have reached a certain age they have to deal with the health problems of their parents and try not to reflect these to their husbands. The reason for this has been stated as trying to ensure that the seafarers do not feel sad and helpless during sea service from thinking all those that they left behind and it has also been stated that due to this reason all the hospital responsibilities have to be carried out by the seafarers' wives as well.

The first follow up question that is asked to support the main question was intended to determine the changes in the social environment before the seafarers embarked on the sea service and the results have been summarized below. It has been stated that when the seafarers go to sea service there is a discernible change in the social environment. It has been stated that when the seafarers go to sea service friendly gatherings as couples cannot be made and that they can only continue meeting with their woman friends. It has also been stated that when the seafarers are on at sea service their friends on land call their friends' wives to ask if they need anything or not. Seafarer's wives have stated that they do not prefer to attend social gatherings such as engagements, weddings, and circumcision ceremonies without their husbands unless they absolutely have to. Even though this is not possible for working wives and/or those with children, wives have stated that they prefer to postpone social activities such as cinema, bowling etc. until their husbands get back.

The second follow up question was asked in order to determine the support given by the seafarer's wife when the sea-

farer is at sea service. The wives of seafarers have expressed that the biggest support comes from their families. Whereas the third follow up question was asked to determine the changes in the children if any, after the seafarer leaves for sea service. The wives have put forth that their children exhibit two different during this period. The wives of seafarers have stated that their children become either introverted or that they display aggressive behavior. It has been expressed by their teachers that most children who live through such periods are more uncaring at school and they have problems such as attention deficit, focusing and orientation problems. The 6 wives who participated indicated that when their children reached the age of 3 they talked with them as if they were adults, telling them that their father has to go away and also gave information about when he will come back and why he has to go which made the child accept the situation more easily. It has also been stated that children who accept that their fathers will go became more understanding, stopped asking continuous questions about when he will come back and started to act more like adults. It has especially been indicated by families who have sons that the children started protecting the mother and started to sleep by putting an arm over their mother's shoulder. Seafarer's wives have stated that the most difficult subjects affecting their families are their children and childcare. In fact, this subject has become so important that the wives of working seafarers have indicated that they have quit their jobs in order to dedicate all their time to the children so that they are not affected by their fathers being away. Seafarer wives have explained the reason for this decision as trying to spend more time with their children and ensuring that they are not also deprived of their mothers when their fathers are away. Four of the wives who participated in this study do not have children and 9 have stated that they quit their jobs after having a child or after their child reached a certain age. It has been determined that the husbands of the 2 wives who have not quit their jobs have left sea service and started working on land.

Among the participating wives, there was only one who was married to a retired Captain and she stated that the social lives of navy officer wives change less dramatically than those of commercial mariner wives. It has been stressed out during the sea service wives who reside in the boarding houses support each other and that their social lives are not affected dramatically. It has been stated that the navy officers do not worry about their families since they live in a secure environment within the housing complex and since the military personnel is available for their immediate needs.

The second main question addressed to the seafarer wives was *What kind of problems do you face after the seafarers come back from sea service?* The wives have in general stated that they only face some minor problems.

It has been put forth that the most common problem that they face after the seafarers returns from sea service is that the seafarers go through a period of adaptation to living on the land which generally lasts for 1 week and that during this period they rather stay home than going out into a crowd. However, the wives who participated in our study stated that because they are happy to come together with their husbands

they think of this period as the start of socializing even though it is a holiday period for the returned seafarers. It is indicated that the first week is tough for the seafarer wives who have postponed all the things that they want to do or the holidays and their need for socializing until their husbands return. Yet they have stated that the seafarer returning home following a period of hard work wants to rest and relax in the comfort of his home and family. Besides, the seafarer wives have also indicated that the sleep patterns of their husbands change after a hectic and stressful work period and that they are generally accustomed to sleeping less, that their sleep patterns do not get back to normal for some time, that they wake up with a start at nights, hear even the slightest sound when sleeping and failing to go to sleep without noise. Another problem that is indicated regarding the period after the seafarer returns from sea service is that the wives cannot deal with repair and maintenance works and problems arise when the wife leaves the responsibility of these types of works to the seafarers. It is indicated that while the wives of shipfarers cannot bear to wait even 1 hour for this belated solution whereas the shipmen are unenthusiastic to solve such issues and that they continuously postpone them. It has been stated by all participants that the holiday season is planned according to the desires of the seafarer. It has especially been stressed out that all social activities, shopping and pleasure trips are made together with the shipfarers. The reason for this has been indicated to be the fact that the shipfarers wants to spend all his time with his family due to the longing that they feel towards their wives and children since they were away from them for a long time. It has been mentioned that a period of meeting with married friends, dinners, nights out and family gatherings start after the seafarer adapts to living on land after the sea service.

It has also been expressed that the children start to disobey everyone except their dads, being jealous of their dads and getting spoiled with him after the seafarer returns from sea service. One seafarer wife has stated that their child started acting uncaringly towards the father in order to punish him.

During the study all seafarer wives have indicated that they want the seafarer to quit sea service after some time, however they have also said that they leave this decision entirely to him. The reason for this has been stated to be the fact that the seafarers would be unhappy taking orders on land after the managerial positions they served in while at sea service and the wives of seafarers have also added that they do not want to take on such a responsibility. It has been put forth that the seafarers who have quit sea service have done so of their own accord and that their children were a factor in this decision. It has been determined that of the 6 seafarers who have started working on land, 4 has quit sea service because of their children. Of the other two, one has quit even though he does not have any kids and one has quit sea service because of an issue of rank in the navy. The seafarer wives who have participated in the interviews indicated that the hardest thing that the seafarer who quit sea service because of his children had to go through after returning from service were the reactions of his children such as "not recognizing him", "crying when he embraces them", "alienation from him". Eleven seafarer wives have

only one child and most have indicated the fact that their husbands continue sea service as the only factor making them not consider a second child.

6. Conclusion

While the seafarers struggle against nature when during sea service, their wives also go through a similar struggle on land. The life struggles of the wives of seafarers which have gone unnoticed until today has first been put forth with this study. The seafarer wives who participated in this study have also stated that they are very glad to be remembered and that such a study is being conducted.

This is a very important study in terms of determining the problems that the wives of seafarers go through. In this study, it has especially been stressed by the seafarer wives that they get the strongest support from their families while the seafarers are at sea service and that they are ready to make all kinds of sacrifices for their spouses and their families. One of the most important sacrifices is quitting their career in order to ensure that their children do not feel affected by the fact that their fathers are away. Besides, it has been determined that the thought of having a second child when the seafarer is at sea service causes concerns for the wife who is on land by herself. It has been stated that after some time the seafarer wives do not want their husbands to work at sea service, however this decision is left to the seafarer. It has also been indicated that the longing that the seafarers feel towards their children is an important factor in making them decide to quit sea service.

The patterned interview method used in this study to collect data is not very sufficient in terms of the generalization of the collected data. Also, this study was limited only with the city of Izmir. It is especially important to carry out this study

with the participation of the wives of seafarers who reside in Istanbul.

Many nations have commemorated their respect towards the nobility, sanctity and value of the life struggle of the seafarer wives by enacting a statue. The most beautiful ones can be listed as "Lady Carrying a Lantern" in the Fialgo Island of the United States of America, "Waiting on Land" at Sligo in Ireland, "Seafarer Wife" in Goteborg Switzerland, "Wives Who Wait for Their Husbands at the Harbor", "Seafarer Wife" in Tjome Norway, "Seafarer Wife" in Odessa Ukraine and "Seafarer Wife International Monument" in Glaxidi Greece. All seafaring nations need monuments to commemorate the sacrifices of the wives of seafarers.

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