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**PROCESSING DISCONTENT: WOMEN'S ORGANIZING AND THE
NEWFOUNDLAND FISHERMEN, FOOD AND ALLIED WORKERS
UNION, 1971-1987**

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in the Faculty of Arts and Science

TRENT UNIVERSITY

Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Processing Discontent: Women's Organizing and the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union, 1971-1987

Sandra Ignagni

This thesis aims to explore the motivations and processes underlying women's active organizing in the Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union (NFFAW) during the 1970s and 1980s. Central to this interdisciplinary analysis is an exploration of how and why the organizational structure of the union produced a hierarchy of interests where the assumed gender neutrality of the collectivity obscured the exclusion of women's needs from the union's agenda. By identifying and questioning the gendered subtexts of the priorities and practices of the NFFAW, as well as the official discourses used to mobilize and promote the interests of the rank-and-file, I attempt to reveal the norms and assumptions which defined the scope and character of women's paid employment and labour organizing during this period. My focus is on understanding women and men's motivations for entering paid processing work, the hierarchical and gendered division of labour within fish plants, and the ideologies and discourses which informed and sustained these divisions. I provide evidence to suggest that, by the 1980s, collective identities had been fashioned from the common experiences of fishery employment in rural Newfoundland and that workplace cultures had not only emerged among workers, but had also fundamentally transformed women's strategies of workplace resistance. The formal and informal networks of understanding which emerged from these cultures were integral to subsequent efforts to address women's needs and promote 'feminist' process by establishing a Women's Committee within the NFFAW's formal leadership structure. I argue further that only through the processes of separate organizing were women able to collectively challenge the gender neutrality of union practices and processes, and articulate their gendered needs to the broader union membership.

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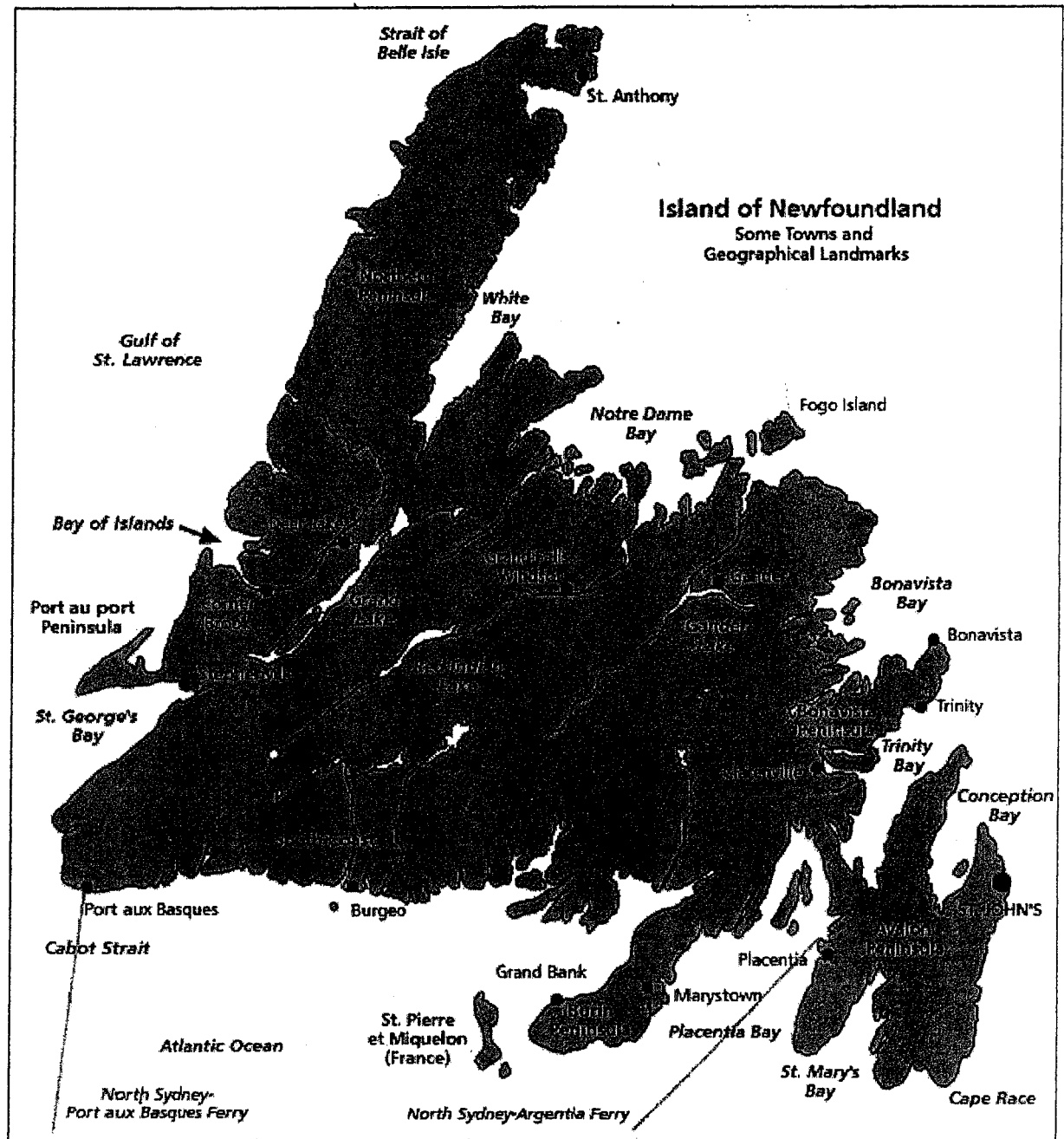
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Source: The Island of Newfoundland, map, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage, Memorial University of Newfoundland, CRB Foundation, 1997, 29 August 2003 <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/nfld_fullmap.html>

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Introduction: Locating the Historical Roots of Women's Organizing in the Newfoundland and Labrador Fishery

The official collapse of Canada's North Atlantic groundfish industry in 1992 continues to have devastating impacts on the thousands of men and women who relied on fishery resources for their livelihood. It is estimated that recent crises in the fishery have affected over 50,000 people in both Quebec and Atlantic Canada and a further 47,000 others in fishery-related occupations.¹ In Newfoundland and Labrador today, the personal, familial and community well-being of those living in rural outports is under threat as the future of the fisheries remains a subject of much political and public debate. This persisting turmoil in the industry is particularly significant given its far-reaching social, political, economic and environmental implications. However, workers displaced by fish plant closures and those whose current employment relationship within the fishery remains precarious at best, have not been silent during this period of conflict and crisis. Faced with widespread poverty and a critical depopulation of rural outports, workers and communities have developed both individual and collective strategies to express their discontent with the current situation. The organized responses and increasing level of participation among working women, an historically marginalized group in this male-dominated industry, is particularly striking.

At the time of the industry's collapse, women comprised thirty percent of the fishery workforce, representing approximately fifty percent of fish plant workers² and fifteen percent of inshore fish harvesters.³ In understanding the local contexts of the crises in Newfoundland, Barbara Neis has highlighted the importance of recognizing that

women “share a dependency on fisheries for food, work, income, and identity.”⁴ Men *and* women have been affected by the moratoria, both in similar and uniquely gendered ways. Central to women’s struggles are their differential patterns of employment. Many women, for example, have entered and left the industry to accommodate caregiving and other domestic or familial responsibilities. Coupled with an historical devaluation of women’s contributions to the maintenance of outport communities, it is not surprising that women have experienced greater difficulty accessing state-sponsored income supplements, and the retraining and ‘adjustment’ programs designed to assist displaced workers. Where women have successfully accessed such assistance measures, they have gained only a mediocre level of compensation in relation to their needs.⁵ Many women’s frustrations with these programs are exacerbated further by inaccurate or sensationalized depictions of the fisheries crisis by the mainstream media.⁶

Women have, however, actively resisted these discriminatory structures and processes through various forms of collective action. One of the more positive impacts of the collapse of Newfoundland’s fishing industry is that it has given rise to unprecedented rates of formal and informal political and labour activism among women workers. Neis has recently documented how the Newfoundland and Labrador Women’s FishNet, a broad-based women’s group formed in 1993, has supported women’s active organizing and other awareness-raising activities over the past decade.⁷ Comprised of union representatives, government and community development workers, members of local women’s and non-governmental organizations, academic researchers, and fishery workers, FishNet’s mandate was primarily to empower women in urban and rural

Newfoundland and Labrador.⁸ The network used conventional and creative ways of providing information and resources to women displaced by the crises in the fisheries. Although this group was dismantled in 1996 due to government funding cutbacks and tensions between the two main fish workers' unions in Newfoundland, its legacy continues as many of its members remain committed to the task of addressing the gender dimensions of fishery moratoria and policy developments which affect those living and working in Canada's Atlantic region.

This interdisciplinary thesis is one attempt to explore the historical roots of women's organizing efforts and the distinctly gendered struggles women face as they attempt to vocalize their needs and interests as women and as workers in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. The primary research question that guides this study asks how and why many women actively responded, in both formal and informal ways, to their gendered experiences of fish plant work. This is also a study of the gendered politics of industrial unionism, where I evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of using formal union structures to rectify gender inequalities among fish plant workers. I attempt further to unearth the norms and assumptions that defined the scope and character of women's labour organizing during the 1970s and 1980s.

To explore these subjects, I have begun a study of women's active organizing in the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union (NFFAW). In the spring of 1984, the provincial women's committee of the NFFAW was initiated by a dedicated group of fish plant workers who were concerned with the status of women within the union. Representing several distinct regions of the province, five fish plant workers

committed themselves to the crucial task of representing and vocalizing the concerns of women working in the union's onshore division. Little is known about their efforts. This thesis attempts to uncover the primary motivations and processes underlying this challenge of formalizing and promoting women's active involvement in the NFFAW between 1971, when the union was formed and 1987, the year it split into two separate unions.⁹

I have organized my study into four chapters that will highlight some of the gender dimensions of labour organizing and union processes within the Newfoundland and Labrador fishing industry. In Chapter One, I present an overview of the secondary literature that has informed this study. More specifically, I evaluate scholarly work from within the fields of women's studies, history, sociology, anthropology and political economy that have explored women's historical roles in the Newfoundland fishery and the processes of labour organizing within the NFFAW. I also present the theoretical and methodological literature relevant to the interdisciplinary, socialist-feminist framework I have employed in analysing my data.

Chapter Two provides an historical overview of the processes of industrialization in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. Using relevant secondary sources, I trace the industry's transformation from a primarily inshore and family-based enterprise into a large-scale commercially driven operation. My emphasis is on understanding women and men's motivations for entering paid processing work, the hierarchical and gendered division of labour within fish plants, and the ideologies and discourses that informed and sustained these divisions. Significant attention is given to an evaluation of how dominant

notions of masculinity and femininity guided men and women through the daily rituals of processing work.

The emergence of work cultures on the processing lines in fish plants during the 1970s and 1980s are the focus of Chapter Three. I evaluate how formal and informal networks of understanding between workers were formative in the rise of mobilization and militancy within the industry. By analysing oral histories collected from women fish plant workers, company and union officials, I document the processes through which workers negotiated and accommodated managerial controls, highlighting the strategic use of institutional discourses by both the NFFAW and fish companies. Lastly, I discuss how both formal and informal strategies of workplace resistance emerged among workers and were distinctively gendered.

Chapter Four presents an overview of women's formal participation in the grievance procedure and the collective bargaining process as well as the strengths and limits which these strategies offered in achieving workplace equity. I then examine the efforts of fish plant workers to formalize and promote feminist process through the formation of a provincial women's committee. Particular attention is given to the relationship between the NFFAW and broader social movements, such as the labour and women's movements, as they developed throughout the province.

Women's experiences of fish processing work and labour organizing have transpired on a distinctly gendered terrain. Faced with ideological and material marginality within the fishing industry, women's informal and formal organizing, strengthened by cultures of resistance in the workplace, has encompassed a constant

struggle to articulate and meet their needs. Using formal union channels and a strategy of separate organizing, many unionized women have identified and challenged effectively the intersecting gender and class inequalities which characterized their work environment, the NFFAW and the regional context of rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

¹ Barbara Neis, "In the Eye of the Storm: Research, Activism, and Teaching Within the Newfoundland Fishery Crisis," *Women's Studies International Forum* 23.3 (2000): 287.

² Susan Williams, *Our Lives Are At Stake: Women and the Fishery Crisis in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1993), 1.

³ "Women and the Fishery," (St. John's: Fish, Food and Allied Workers, n.d.), 3.

⁴ Neis, 290.

⁵ Williams, 21-45. Also see Jane Robinson, "Women, A Fishplant Closure, and 'Adjustment:' The Case of Trepassey, Newfoundland," (M.A. Thesis, University of Toronto/OISE, 1994); Nicole Gerarda Power, "Women, Processing Industries and the Environment: A Sociological Analysis of Women Fish and Crab Processing Workers' Local Ecological Knowledge," (M.A. Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1997), Chapter Eight.

⁶ Nancy Robbins, "Gathering Our Voices: Women of Fishing Communities Speak," (M.A. Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1997).

⁷ Neis, 289-90. A similar group was formed in Nova Scotia.

⁸ Neis, 290.

⁹ In 1987, the NFFAW split into two separate unions that still exist today. One is the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union (FFAW-CAW) and the other is the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). Although the reasons for the NFFAW's break up are not entirely clear to me, I understand that rivalry and tension still exist between the two unions. Both the FFAW-CAW and the UFCW have retained active Women's Committees.

Chapter One: Understanding Work Organizations as Regimes of Inequality in the Newfoundland and Labrador Fishery

In 1969, Reverend Desmond McGrath began informally organizing fishermen in the basement of his local Port au Choix parish on the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland. This group, although also interested in plant workers' issues, became known as the Northern Fishermen's Union and fought actively to address issues of concern to inshore harvesters, such as the chronically low price of fish. During roughly the same years, the Canadian Food and Allied Workers Union (CFAWU) held jurisdiction over a handful of local units in Newfoundland. These included fish plants in Burin, Marystown, Catalina, Bonavista, Fermeuse, Harbour Breton and Trepassey. In 1971, these two labour groups merged and became known as the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food, and Allied Workers Union (NFFAW). Later that year, the union's strength and endurance was put to a crucial test in Burgeo, a community of two thousand people on the south coast of Newfoundland. There, the owner of several local fish plants, Spencer Lake, had fought actively for over a year to prevent plant workers from unionizing under the NFFAW. Although the NFFAW had been certified as a bargaining agent for the Burgeo workers in January of 1971, contract negotiations with Lake broke off shortly after union certification and a summer-long strike ensued. One union publication explained the importance of the strike, claiming that "if the union had lost the strike in Burgeo, its credibility would have been shattered and the damage irreversible."¹ The success of the NFFAW in Burgeo was certainly as formative as its founding convention.²

Since its official inception, the NFFAW has proven a dynamic and influential presence in Newfoundland's commercial fishery. Unique in its potentially fractious composition of onshore, inshore, and deepsea workers, the union has undergone numerous battles to gain prominence and recognition as one of Newfoundland's strongest private sector unions. Few would disagree that those behind the initial formation of the union are greatly responsible for an overall improvement in the working conditions within various sectors of the commercial fishing industry, despite the consistent turbulence and decline of the industry over the last three decades in Newfoundland.

The perseverance of the NFFAW has garnered considerable interest among scholars. Several historical and anthropological studies have documented how solidarity among workers and a dedicated leadership team resulted in previously unimaginable success for the union. The earliest study of the NFFAW is David MacDonald's 1980 book, *Power Begins at the Cod End*. MacDonald provides a chronological account of central events in the union's development as well as a detailed discussion of the trawlermen's strikes of 1974 and 1975. At the centre of his analysis is union co-founder Richard Cashin, a lawyer by profession whose strong ties to the Liberal Party were no secret among fishery workers. According to MacDonald, Cashin's political allegiances and forthright leadership tactics made him both a controversial spokesperson for union organizing and an essential force behind the rise of widespread public support for the NFFAW.³ He further argues that the success of the union largely rested with Cashin's ability to command and manoeuvre effectively the public rhetoric surrounding labour

disputes, enabling him to expand the key issues beyond wages and working conditions to “high policy and questions of human dignity.”⁴

Similar themes are developed by Gordon Inglis, whose 1985 study of the NFFAW, *More Than Just a Union*, remains the most comprehensive to date. Like MacDonald, Inglis highlights the charismatic leadership style brought to union organizing by Richard Cashin, but the efforts of Reverend Desmond McGrath, union co-founder and Catholic priest, are also given considerable attention. According to Inglis, because of their respective ties to the spheres of politics and religion, the unique duo of Cashin and McGrath served to establish them achieve greater political support and influence among those both internal *and* external to the operation of the fishing industry.⁵ This prominence extended beyond the realm of organized labour, to the extent that the NFFAW became an influential presence in Newfoundland’s political landscape.⁶

Inglis’ study of the NFFAW’s development is traced through an analysis of several key strikes during the union’s first decade in existence. He demonstrates how the NFFAW came to occupy a significant and permanent place within the collective political and cultural consciousness of Newfoundland. Inglis’ analysis provides a detailed macro-level account of the processes of union development. He asserts that the rise of the NFFAW did not signal a new class consciousness among fishery workers, as workers had since pre-industrial times been aware of their dependent and unequal relationship with fish merchants.⁷ For Inglis, the emergence and success of the union should be understood further within the context of the extensive social transformation that was occurring in Newfoundland, as elsewhere, during the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁸

Despite Inglis' contentions, the NFFAW is given significant attention in Wallace Clement's study of class formation in Canada's fisheries. Clement examines the importance of industrial management and property relations which, he argues, provided the primary impetus for collective organizing within the East and West Coast fisheries.⁹ While Clement reaffirms the importance of strong leadership to the success of the NFFAW, he also highlights how state control of the fishery encouraged union organizing efforts. With the increasing foreign control of fishing that accompanied the industrialization of the fishery, the provincial government of Newfoundland saw the NFFAW as a potential defender of local interests.¹⁰ Subsequently, it removed legislative barriers to union organizing, thus allowing fishers collective bargaining rights. Newfoundland was the first Canadian province to enact such legislation.¹¹ The importance of Clement's study rests in its effective analysis of the regional diversity of fishery-related work and of the ever-changing character of organized resistance by fishery workers.

I review these historical accounts of the NFFAW not to dispute or debate the motivations for union formation. Rather, I hope to highlight that such discussions have neglected a critical analysis of the differences in labour organizing participation between various members of the rank-and-file during this early period in the union's history. Although some of the studies cited above have acknowledged the possibility of competing interests among the employment positions occupied by male fish plant workers, inshore harvesters and trawlermen, they have, in one way or another, hailed the successes of the NFFAW as an exemplary model of the power of class militancy and

solidarity. As Clement has shown, a wide range of state policies could, at times, mediate such relationships. Concealed within such discussions, however, is a masculine bias. Within these accounts, the gender dimensions of union formation, particularly in the regional context of rural isolation and employment insecurity, are not fully explored. Oversimplified interpretations have tended to obscure instances of resistance and negotiation within a complex network of relationships among workers, union leaders, management officials, and various levels of government. Little is known about how and why the growth of unionism was experienced differently by those living and working in various regions of the province, in a wide range of jobs within different sectors. One aim of this study, then, is to further illuminate the heterogeneity of labour organizing by exploring the gendered experiences of some women fish plant workers.

This thesis will revisit and interrogate the historical development of the NFFAW through an examination of the gender, class, regional and cultural dimensions of labour mobilization and militancy. Unlike the existing studies of the union, I am less interested in examining the role of executive leadership in union formation and more concerned with how and why the goals of labour organizing and formal unionism offered differential responses to the needs of men and women who worked in the industry between 1971 and 1987. My primary concern is to explore the gendered experiences of waged labour among women working in fish plants in an effort to enhance our understanding of how and why women became active in unionism and labour organizing, as well as the nature of their activism. By examining the structures and institutional practices of the NFFAW, I provide an analysis of women's active participation in

workplace cultures, their negotiation of competing discourses about their roles as women, workers, and union members, as well as their strategies of workplace resistance.

I begin by presenting a brief historiography of critical feminist studies of women's work in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery prior to the industry's official collapse in 1992. My focus is on how gendered divisions of labour have been conceptualized in feminist historical and sociological writing. I also discuss how our understanding of the emergence of the Canadian welfare state and its influence on women's social and economic independence within Newfoundland's outport communities has simultaneously developed within this same literature. Although my selection of secondary material presents an essential cross-section of women's roles in both the family fishing enterprise characteristic of the merchant-led fishery and of women's participation in paid employment as fish plant workers, I do not mean to oversimplify the industry's transition and expansion into 'modern' or industrial forms of processing. For decades these two systems operated in tandem where capital and region were fundamental factors in determining how men and women could make their living through fishing. Lastly, I conclude this section with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological insights that have guided me through this research process.

* * *

Within the literature that is specific to historical and contemporary fishing economies of rural Newfoundland, some debate exists over the significance of the gender division of labour on the scope and value of women's work. Women's social and economic independence has been analysed in relation to the patriarchal and capitalist

processes embedded within the structures of work in outport communities. What follows is an examination of the most influential writing on this subject, with particular attention to how scholars have both conceptualized and challenged the assumptions and ideologies about women's labour contributions to the maintenance of outport communities over the last century.

The earliest attempt to discuss the impacts of a gender division of labour in rural Newfoundland was made by Ellen Antler in the late 1970s. Using a Marxist approach, her study documents the transition of the fishing industry from a family-based operation prior to Confederation to one driven by industrial capitalism. By assigning a monetary value to women's labour production in the pre-industrial fishery, she attempts to demonstrate a sharp decline in the value of women's labour as it was moved from the shore to the fish plant. Simultaneously, Antler argues that this process, which she describes as "coercive," has effectively proletarianized women in fishing communities and has resulted in the exploitation of their labour within fish processing plants.¹²

At approximately the same time that Antler's study appeared, Hilda Chaulk Murray's depiction of outport life on the Bonavista Peninsula also emerged and offered an ethnographic approach to understanding the centrality of women's work to the pre-industrial fishery. Murray was similarly concerned with the gendered division of labour within fishing households and communities in rural Newfoundland and her study documents women's permanent and necessary contribution to economic and social life in her community of Elliston between the years 1900 and 1950. By detailing the wide range of labour tasks and social rituals that were primarily the responsibility of women in the

community, she provides ample evidence to support her claim that women provided more than half the support needed for the survival of families. More importantly, women's labour contributions obtained a cultural significance and were, thus, widely acknowledged and respected by community members.¹³

The importance of women's labour to the establishment of permanent settlement in Newfoundland and for survival under the formidable conditions of the merchant fishery is a theme which is also given considerable attention in Marilyn Porter's early work on fishing economies. Her arguments echo those of Antler and Murray. She emphasizes how women's labour helped maintain both the home and inshore fishing operation prior to its industrialization. Central to her analysis is a critique of several anthropological studies that equated a gender division of labour with male dominance or oppression, and by extension, did not allow for a positive interpretation of women's culture.¹⁴

Porter emphasizes the "interrelationship and interdependence of men's and women's economic efforts" within the context of outport life in an attempt to reveal the inaccuracies of anthropological, historical, and sociological thinking which analysed the labour capacity of men and women within fixed and independent realms of 'public' and 'private.'¹⁵ Because of the specificity of the Newfoundland case and the material deprivation of outports more generally, she argues that the gender division of labour, accompanied by respect for women's work, often translated into women's active negotiation of power and the relations of production.¹⁶ Porter employs the concept of

‘separate spheres’ to signal women’s – the wives of boatowners in particular – “autonomy, control, and authority” within households and the fishery.¹⁷

Dona Davis and Jane Nadel-Klein have suggested that Porter’s select emphasis on the material conditions of the gender division of labour in Newfoundland outports neglects an examination of how women have served their communities at a symbolic level.¹⁸ Davis attempts to fill this void through her feminist ethnographic research of a Newfoundland outport. Although her contemporary anthropological study is based in a community that no longer operates under the direction of the local merchant, her analysis reveals, and is indeed dependent upon, evidence of the continuity and permanence of historical roles of women. Building on Porter’s analysis, Davis examines some of the ‘instrumental roles’ of women in the fishing community, but unlike Porter, she follows with an exploration of women’s ‘expressive roles,’ arguing that, together, the two functions produce a “complex, multi-dimensional, overlapping” socio-cultural system of fishing life.¹⁹

In an analysis of what Davis terms ‘instrumental roles,’ or the many tangible, easily recognized, labour activities of women, she asserts that the focus “should not preclude analysis of the more ideational, emotional, or expressive aspects of the fisher husband/wife relationship, nor should it obscure the relationship of the fishing enterprise to the overall community ethos.”²⁰ At a symbolic level, women in outport communities were expected to assume emotional responsibility for men at sea. The potential danger involved in fishing endeavours left women with the “status enhancing moral duty” of worrying about their male kin.²¹ Whereas Porter uses the term ‘skippers of the shore

crew' to refer to what Davis would define as 'instrumental roles,' Davis employs the term 'grass widow' to describe the 'expressive roles' outlined above. A 'grass widow,' in its most traditional, literal sense invokes the image of a woman waiting passively and patiently on a grassy – mossy – rock for her husband at sea.²² Davis claims that the task of worry reinforced women's sense of purpose and belonging within fishing communities.²³ Moreover, a pronounced gender division of labour that includes emotional worry strengthens the overall importance of women's labour. Although this traditional expressiveness was an essential component of the pre-industrial fishery, Davis claims that this function of the 'grass widow' still holds contemporary significance. Consistent with the feminist analyses highlighted earlier, she maintains that women have negotiated a space within which they have created a powerful and meaningful position for themselves.

Sociologist Barbara Neis has critiqued the works of Murray, Porter, and Davis. While these early feminist studies highlighted how a gender division of labour could result in autonomy for some women, such as the wives of boatowners, Neis questions how single mothers and widowed women, for example, fared in such conditions. Her critique is centred on the inability of these accounts to engage in a necessary analysis of social and economic relations as "terrains of struggle" for women, particularly in the context of a modernizing fishery and Newfoundland's changing social structure after Confederation with Canada in 1949.²⁴

Using Jane Ursel's study of 'familial (or private) patriarchy' and 'social (or public) patriarchy' in the context of the contemporary Canadian welfare state, Neis

describes the social relations which tied women's well-being to men prior to and following the industrialization of the Newfoundland fishery. She maintains Ursel's socialist-feminist, dual systems approach to conceptualizing the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, and similarly interprets the state as a "mediator between the spheres of reproduction (the family) and production."²⁵ Despite the arguments made by early studies which indicated the importance of women's overall economic contribution to the familial fishing enterprise, Neis argues that marginal women (including women on welfare, widows, daughters who were forced out of the fishery and non-unionized plant workers)²⁶ remain, to their disadvantage, dependent on men or a male-dominated state. She further contends that the decline of the merchant fishery and its replacement with one of waged-labour employment produced a shift in women's ability to integrate their reproductive and productive labour activities. For many women, economic survival became dependent upon access to newly established forms of social assistance. Moreover, women's dependency on men through the family unit was unsettled and the state, through its social welfare mechanisms, became the new locus of support for many women. One important distinction made by Ursel, and Neis by extension, is that social patriarchy did not override familial patriarchy. The two operated simultaneously, although the state regularly heralded the male-headed household as the preferable family form and economic unit.²⁷

Neis' study is particularly important because it provides a pivotal discussion of the lives of working-class women after the industrialization of the fishery and the rise of the welfare state in Newfoundland. It serves to strengthen our understanding of the

multiplicity of women's lives in Newfoundland, while highlighting the state's ideological assumptions and practices during an era of social transformation in the province. Neis challenges effectively early feminist arguments that unproblematically associated 'separate spheres' with women's autonomy. Throughout the next section, I will elaborate further another conceptual shift in feminist understandings of the gendered welfare state that will challenge what has been developed by Neis. Following this, I discuss the theoretical literature through which I have developed a framework for understanding the specificity of women's organizing in the NFFAW.

Like Neis, Glynis George's recent study of grassroots feminist organizing on the West Coast of Newfoundland also focuses on the challenges women faced as they attempted to earn a decent living during the 1990s. George presents a constructive challenge to Ursel's conceptualization of the state's "dual commitment to the wage-labour system and patriarchy,"²⁸ asserting that it fails to account for the institutional mechanisms by which women can secure greater social and economic independence for themselves. Similar to Neis, her analysis focuses on less privileged women. She advances Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser's understanding of welfare provision as involving discursive, historically contingent "registers of meaning" to show how current feminist thinking has effectively moved beyond an analysis of 'public patriarchy' to an interrogation of the specific mechanisms and state appendages which produce and reinforce discourses of dependency.²⁹ George further adjusts Gordon and Fraser's framework to fit the local political economy of the Atlantic region.³⁰ The "politics of needs interpretation," she argues, include overlapping contexts of dependency, where "the dependency of Newfoundland coincides with [some women's] dependence on the state

for welfare and employment payments.”³¹ According to George, identifying such complexities is an essential step to dismantling the ideologies of individualism that structure work and restrict women’s opportunities to reproduce family while earning a living from waged labour.³² By modifying Gordon and Fraser’s approach to include regional particularities, George produces a framework through which insecurity in Newfoundland can be identified as emerging from the intersection of the multiple contexts of dependence found in region, gender, and family.³³

Any study of Newfoundland that centres on paid employment should not evade an examination of the prevailing conditions of unemployment and underemployment that have dominated the province during the twentieth century. Particularly within the context of the fishery, income supplements made available through the social welfare state have always comprised an integral component of the annual incomes of those working in the industry.³⁴ As such, I have incorporated George’s insights into my own research on women’s organizing in the NFFAW.

This study will also show how it can be problematic to exclude unionized women from the group of ‘marginal’ women identified by Neis. We should not assume that women who engage in paid employment within unionized fish plants are uniformly reaping the benefits of improved wages and working conditions. Whether intentional or not, the research presented earlier has rigidly characterized unionized and non-unionized workers as respectively advantaged and disadvantaged. Within the unionized fishery workforce in Newfoundland and Labrador, the men and women who comprise the rank-and-file often differentially experience the benefits of labour organizing. While there *are* clear benefits to obtaining unionized work in a region with scarce employment options we

should remember that unionism does not automatically guarantee the abatement of all forms of inequality. Unionized work environments are not immune to male dominance and other power imbalances. Even where the formal structures to challenge patriarchal gender relations exist, there are often limits to women's usage of such structures.

Although the historical and contemporary social and economic context of the West Coast fishery is quite different from Newfoundland and Labrador, the theoretical insights of scholars like Alicja Muszynski are also useful. In her 1996 study, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia*, she explores effectively class, gender, and race as structural determinants that framed the organization of labour in salmon canneries.³⁵ Muszynski's analysis reveals the impacts of such structures on workplace hierarchies, where she notes the emergence of male and female forms of work. Similar to the Newfoundland fishery, state policy also played a significant role in shaping the B.C. fisheries, but so too did the agency of workers through their unions.³⁶

* * *

To explore further the class and gender dimensions of union organizing, I have employed an interdisciplinary critical socialist-feminist theoretical framework of inquiry. Interdisciplinarity offers the possibility of evaluating and challenging the "establishment, content, parameters and powers of disciplines and the prevailing approaches to research they engender."³⁷ Although I draw many insights from within the fields of sociology and history, my approach is fundamentally rooted in feminist political economy. Specifically, I am most concerned with understanding what Meg Luxton and Heather Jon Maroney explain as a "fundamental contradiction between the demands of the way paid labour is organized and the requirements of domestic/household life, the brunt of which is borne by

women, who mediate the contradictions between the two production processes and locations.”³⁸ In this study, socialist-feminism refers to a theoretical examination that is necessarily concerned with the class and gender dynamics that structure and inform women’s social and economic lives. Particularly in industrial capitalist societies, class and gender are central determinants in the overall debasement of women’s productive and reproductive labour that results further in their subordination both at home and at work.³⁹ My analysis, however, moves beyond Ursel’s dual systems approach to understanding the workings of capitalism and patriarchy. I thus heed George’s criticisms that highlight the inability of such explanations to provide a holistic account of the tensions and contradictions in the Canadian social welfare state, particularly as women attempt to negotiate the terms of their productive and reproductive labour.

I adopt Joan Acker’s theoretical explanation of how class, gender and race/ethnicity dynamics in work organizations act as “complexly related aspects of the same ongoing practical activities” as opposed to “autonomous intersecting systems.”⁴⁰ I similarly conceptualize class and gender relations as patterned and fluid constituents of a historically specific set of work structures and processes. For Acker, inequality can be measured in any organization, regardless of its nature, by examining how class is fundamental to the structure of work systems and is, at all times, informed by gender and race/ethnic relations. She uses a broadened definition of class, arguing that economic exploitation necessarily involves both the relations of production *and* distribution, where intersecting class and gender inequalities are the product of power imbalances inherent in industrial capitalism.⁴¹ Using her strategy of analysing work organizations as “regimes of inequality,”⁴² I attempt to account for the ways in which women’s interests have been

excluded from the processes of formal labour organizing among fishery workers in Newfoundland.

In this study, the managerial strategies of commercial fish processing companies are juxtaposed with the organizational functions of the NFFAW to reveal how gendered processes were embedded in the structure of fish plant work and unionism and how this, ultimately, impacted the scope of some women's participation in their union. And while class and gender appear to comprise the most significant factors determining women's experiences of unionized waged labour, the homogeneous Anglo-Celtic ethnicity of most Newfoundlanders is not taken as unproblematic. Nor are the relationships and tensions between those with Protestant and Catholic religious affiliations. Region also emerges as a particularly significant catalyst for labour mobilization as experiences of fish processing work varied at different times throughout different regions of the province.

This study also begins an exploration of how and why the organizational structure of the union, despite its commitment to the tenets of social justice, produced a hierarchy of interests where the assumed gender neutrality of the collectivity obscured the exclusion of women's demands from the union's agenda. Nancy Fraser's call for an analysis of the "institutionalized patterns of interpretation" used to structure welfare systems is also useful to our understanding of the union processes through which women's needs as workers are defined.⁴³ By identifying and questioning the gendered subtexts of the priorities and practices of the NFFAW, as well as the discourses used to mobilize and promote the interests of plant workers, it is then possible to identify what Fraser terms the "tacit norms and implicit assumptions" that are contained in the struggle to define and meet people's needs.⁴⁴ This thesis will examine how the assumed gender neutrality in

union priorities and processes marginalized the gendered interests of women fish plant workers. I will also attempt to understand how and why many women came to employ formal strategies of separate organizing to challenge this position and further their interests in the NFFAW. Ultimately, these processes are evaluated for their ability to transform the gendered character of union organizing.

To explore effectively the gendered subtexts of union organizing as 'regimes of inequality,' I have analysed three collections of primary data. Within the context of trade unionism, it is essential to understand how formal union processes and institutional texts produce authoritative, objectified accounts of labour organizing. This study relies heavily on an analysis of the NFFAW's monthly news publication, *Union Forum*. Three issues of this magazine emerged in 1971, but because of financial restrictions the magazine was discontinued until 1977. After that year, the publication was relatively stable (producing a magazine either monthly or every other month), and few interruptions occurred between 1977 and 1984. The publication lost consistency during 1985 and 1986, and by the time the NFFAW split in 1987, *Union Forum* was no longer in production. In total, sixty issues of this magazine form the basis for qualitative textual analysis in this thesis.

The purpose of this magazine was to keep onshore, inshore, and deepsea fishery workers informed of the union's activities. Because of the seasonality of the industry and the isolation of outport communities, such communications were necessary for effective labour mobilization. Although I have not undertaken a full content analysis of *Union Forum*, it is important to note that the overt references that address specifically the concerns and interests of women fish plant workers are few in number and thus comprise only a small minority of articles within this publication. By reading these documents as a

series of institutional discourses, I examine how these accounts define the parameters and priorities of labour organizing and why the gendered realities of fish plant work are excluded in this process. My study also raises important questions as to how and why textually mediated institutional ideologies were understood, accepted, negotiated and resisted by women working within the margins of the union process.

Perhaps the most revealing historical documents used in this study are a sample of seventy-seven labour arbitration hearing reports of employee grievance cases that appeared before the Labour Arbitration Board of the Newfoundland Department of Labour and Manpower between 1971 and 1987. From well over two hundred cases, I have sampled every case involving women fish plant workers as well as a sample of roughly twenty cases involving men and disciplinary discharge. These cases provide detailed descriptions of working conditions and workplace disputes in the fish processing sector. They reveal the structure and tensions of relationships between the union, the employer, and workers – and even among workers themselves. The most telling examples include cases of disciplinary discharge, where both the union and the fish company use ideologically informed arguments in debate over the relative insubordination of workers in question. When reading these documents, the power relations embedded in the processes of making such judgements are clearly evident. Moreover, these documents highlight the various strategies of workplace resistance employed by men and women fish plant workers and reveal further how workplace relations were microcosmic manifestations of larger class and gender inequalities.

By asserting the importance of understanding the intersection of class, gender, and race structures and hierarchies in work organizations, Joan Acker has suggested that in

order “to develop knowledge about different women’s situations, the social world must be viewed from their diverse points.”⁴⁵ In developing a methodological framework for this study, I have borrowed some insights from the discussions of feminist standpoint theory developed by Nancy Hartsock and Dorothy Smith. Feminist sociological studies which aim to explore the power systems and institutionally established systems of authority that structure social relations should originate from the vantage point of those who comprise the most marginal members of society. Social organization and social processes can be analysed from the standpoint of women so as to produce knowledge that is both relevant for women and accounts for their subjective experiences.⁴⁶ Hartsock contends that such analyses should be grounded in an examination of the class and gender structures that inform women’s material activity.⁴⁷ She cautions, however, that “[a] feminist standpoint may be present on the basis of the common threads of female experience, but it neither self-evident nor obvious.”⁴⁸

Although such a research methodology generally warrants a substantial number of interviews, this study analyses the oral histories of six women who were either integral to the formation of the provincial women’s committee of the NFFAW or held positions within local committees after 1984 in a preliminary attempt to understand the class and gender subtexts of industrial unionism from the organizing experiences of women most intimately involved in formal union processes. As their leadership status within the NFFAW signifies, these women do not comprise the most marginal members of the fishery workforce. However, their narratives do offer invaluable accounts of the gendered structure of women’s lives at home, at work, and within the union in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. By sharing their personal stories of work and women’s organizing

with me, these six women have allowed me to understand better the forces shaping their day-to-day experiences. Using their insights, I have tried to document how these women were committed to their female rank-and-file counterparts, how they came to challenge the male-dominated interests of the union and how they were, ultimately, able to help increase women's participation in formal unionism and also raise awareness of women's gendered workplace struggles among the rank-and-file.

I also interviewed NFFAW co-founder Richard Cashin to gain a broader sense of the efforts made by union leaders to include women in the processes of labour mobilization and, lastly, my sample included an interview with a former production manager for Fishery Products Limited. Many people at Memorial University and the Fish, Food and Allied Workers-Canadian Auto Workers (FFAW-CAW) were integral to the process by which I was able to contact potential interviewees. Over two research trips to Newfoundland and Labrador – one in February of 2002 and the other the following summer – I compiled a small list of those women I knew had been involved in union organizing over the last thirty years. I made initial contact by telephone and, in all but one case, followed up with a detailed letter explaining my reasons for pursuing the study, the scope of the research, and what I hoped to accomplish through an interview. I included a list of open-ended interview questions with each letter, suggesting they be used only as a guide. I consistently welcomed input and suggestions from my respondents. Because of the serious time limits within which I had to collect data in Newfoundland, only six interviews were conducted in person, with the remainder done over the telephone. All interviews were tape recorded, although this was optional. As well, the decisions of some women to not follow through with an interview after many telephone conversations may

indicate the reluctance of these women to discuss the internal politics of the NFFAW with an outsider.

By exploring the narratives of women who were integral to the processes of women's organizing in the NFFAW, this study attempts to unearth the complex, multi-layered, sometimes contradictory, gendered ideological systems which structure social and economic life in Newfoundland. Oral history offers the possibility of understanding the class and gender dynamics that shaped women's experiences of unionism. As Joan Sangster notes, it is important to understand and question "why and how women explain, rationalize and make sense of their past" in addition to "the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture."⁴⁹ In this thesis, I use oral histories to highlight how women negotiated the tensions they felt as part of a working class of fish plant workers and, in many cases, as mothers and wives, linking their understanding of work to the social conditions framing their work lives.

Sangster has argued further that researchers should question "how gender, race, and class, as structural and ideological relations, have shaped the construction of historical memory."⁵⁰ In analysing women's narratives, I have remained cognizant of the ways in which these structures have informed women's stories and recollections. Similarly, it is important to recognize how the information emerging from my interviews resulted not only from my respondents' experiences and opinions, but also from the kinds of questions I asked, the subjects I chose to address, and my respondents' knowledge that the information they provided me with would be documented. For example, while the women I interviewed clearly articulated their frustrations with gendered processing work,

they adamantly defended the importance of the NFFAW to their overall well being, the latter possibly reflecting the fact that my interviews were done with committed unionists. In analyzing six women's experiences, I have remained aware of their loyalty and dedication to class solidarity within the NFFAW, recognizing that this has, perhaps, resulted in women's reluctance to discuss more personal issues, such as sexual harassment in fish plants, during the interviews.

My central aim is to provide an account of women's organizing that is inclusive of the gendered experiences of unionism in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. In order for such an endeavour to be honest and ethical, I must acknowledge here the power, privilege, and responsibility involved in processes of collecting and analysing oral histories. As Sangster explains, "it is our privilege that allows us to interpret and it is our responsibility as historians to convey their insights using our own."⁵¹

¹ "The Burgeo Strike: A Crucial Test," *Union Forum* August 1977:10.

² "The Formative Years: Struggling for Survival," *Union Forum* June 1977: 10-11. For an in-depth study of the formation of the NFFAW, see Gordon Inglis, *More Than Just a Union: The Story of the NFFAW* (St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1985).

³ David MacDonald, 'Power Begins at the Cod End: ' *The Newfoundland Trawlermen's Strike, 1974-75* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980), 16.

⁴ MacDonald, 123.

⁵ Gordon Inglis, *More Than Just a Union: The Story of the NFFAWU* (St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1985), 289.

⁶ Inglis, 293.

⁷ Inglis, 186.

⁸ Inglis, 286.

⁹ Wallace Clement, *The Struggle to Organize: Resistance in Canada's Fishery* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1986), 16.

¹⁰ Clement, 114.

¹¹ Clement, 113.

¹² Ellen Antler, "Women's Work in Newfoundland's Fishing Families," *Atlantis* 2.2 (1977): 111.

¹³ Hilda Chaulk Murray, *More Than Fifty Percent: Woman's Life in a Newfoundland Outport 1900-1950* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1979).

¹⁴ Marilyn Porter, *Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1993), 49-51; 40. Porter's critique primarily focuses on the following anthropological studies of outport social life: John Charles Faris, *Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement* (St. John's: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1972); Melvin M. Firestone, *Brothers and Rivals: Patrilocality in Savage Cove* (St. John's: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1978); Joseba Zulaika, *Terranova: The Ethos and Luck of Deep-sea Fishermen* (St. John's: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1981). She argues that these accounts too rigidly focus on women's work load, male dominance in the household, patrilineal inheritance laws, and the practice of exogamy.

¹⁵ Porter, 51.

¹⁶ Porter, 53-4.

¹⁷ Porter, 51.

¹⁸ Dona Lee Davis and Jane Nadel-Klein, "Terra Cognita? A Review of the Literature," in *To Work and To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies* eds. Dona Lee Davis and Jane Nadel-Klein (St. John's: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1988), 19.

¹⁹ Dona Lee Davis, "'Shore Skippers' and 'Grass Widows': Active and Passive Women's Roles in a Newfoundland Fishery," in *To Work and To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies* eds. Dona Lee Davis and Jane Nadel-Klein (St. John's: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1988), 212.

²⁰ Davis, 216.

²¹ Davis, 217.

²² Davis, 220.

²³ Davis, 217.

²⁴ Barbara Neis, "From 'Shipped Girls' to 'Brides of the State': The Transition from Familial to Social Patriarchy in the Newfoundland Fishing Industry," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* eds. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 439.

²⁵ For an in-depth examination of state involvement in the 'modernization' of the Newfoundland fishery, see Miriam Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times: The State and the Industrialization of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1934-1968* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001). An analysis of gender ideology in post-Confederation 'modernization' schemes is also discussed in Wright's "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery: Images of Gender in Government Plans for the Canadian Atlantic Fisheries," in *Their Lives and Times: Women of Newfoundland and Labrador A Collage* eds. Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis and Marilyn Porter (St. John's: Killick Press, 1995). Also see Sean Cadigan, Michelle McBride, Gregory S. Kealey, "Jobs at any Cost: The Political Economy of Development in Twentieth Century Newfoundland," in *The Resilient Outport: Ecology, Economy and Society in Rural Newfoundland* ed. Rosemary E. Ommen (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2002).

²⁶ Neis, 439.

²⁷ Jane Ursel, *Private Lives, Public Policy: 100 Years of State Intervention in the Family* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1992), 39.

²⁸ Ursel, 6. Glynis George, *The Rock Where We Stand: An Ethnography of Women's Activism in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 97-8.

²⁹ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs* 19.2 (1994). Quoted in George, 98.

³⁰ George, 99.

³¹ George, 102.

³² George, 130.

³³ George, 102.

³⁴ See Barbara Neis and Susan Williams, "The New Right, Gender and the Fisheries Crisis: Local and Global Dimensions," *Atlantis* 21.2 (Spring-Summer 1997) for a good discussion of how blame for the recent crises in the fisheries has been placed on UI programs which apparently made fishery work too appealing.

³⁵ Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Colombia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

³⁶ Muszynski, 237-253. Another important comparison is the extent of workers' dependency on waged labour for survival. Unlike Native shoreworkers in British Colombia, Newfoundlanders were unable to rely heavily on pre-capitalist forms of subsistence to supplement their wages. See Muszynski, 132-135.

³⁷ Alison Hearn and Liora Salter, *Outside the Lines: Issues in Interdisciplinary Research* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 38.

³⁸ Meg Luxton and Heather Jon Maroney, "Gender at Work: Feminist Political Economy Since 1988," in *Understanding Canada: Building on the New Political Economy* ed. Wallace Clement (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 92.

³⁹ Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, "Introduction: Reclaiming Anticapitalist Feminism," in *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives* eds. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4. For an overview of some key distinctions and debates between and among socialist-feminist and Marxist-feminist scholars, see Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 94-129. Also see Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988) for a discussion of socialist-feminist theory and practice in the Canadian context.

⁴⁰ Joan Acker, "Revisiting Class: Thinking from Gender, Race and Organizations," *Social Politics* 7.2 (Summer 2000), 205. Also see Acker, "Class, Gender and the Relations of Distribution," *Signs* 13.3 (1988).

⁴¹ Acker, 196.

⁴² Acker, 205.

⁴³ Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 146.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Acker, 201.

⁴⁶ Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

⁴⁷ Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing The Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Feminism and Methodology* ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 175.

⁴⁸ Hartsock, 174.

⁴⁹ Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader* eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (London: Routledge, 1998), 88.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Sangster, 93.

Chapter Two: Industrialization in the Newfoundland and Labrador Fishery, The Family Wage and the Emergence of Gendered Work in Fish Processing Plants

The industrialization of the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery resulted in a significant movement of women's labour from the shores of the family-based enterprise to the processing lines at the local fish plant. This shift occurred irrespective of the gender distinctions embedded in industrialization rhetoric which maintained that a modern fishery and, by extension, a modern Newfoundland, would free women from the arduous labour of fish processing work. This chapter attempts to interpret the processes through which these changes transpired by exploring how the dominance of the family wage model upheld a normative structure for the gendered relations of production and distribution¹ that ultimately impacted the social and economic dimensions of fish processing work. The family wage ideal held that male household heads should earn wages large enough to keep their wives and children economically dependent at home.² Historians have noted the significance of the family wage on women living in urban regions of Newfoundland during the 1920s and 1930s.³ Similar assumptions and expectations about women's paid work emerged in public discussions of fishery development slightly later, roughly halfway into the twentieth century. By the 1950s and 1960s, women who were able to secure a limited number of jobs in fish plants had their labour capacity still largely restricted by a rigid gendered division of labour, at home and at work, which upheld dominant understandings about the appropriate form of women's paid employment. In this chapter, I reveal how this male breadwinner ideal translated into a material devaluation of processing jobs performed mainly by women. While some

women were able to articulate clearly the difficulty involved in fish plant work and dispel myths about their overall transience as workers, the ideal of the family wage served to reinforce the dominance of males in the fish plant and community, among both management and workers.

* * *

Over the course of the twentieth century, Newfoundland's fishing industry underwent profound structural and technological transformation. Miriam Wright has argued that the most significant development was a sharp increase in the level of government intervention in the management and regulation of the industry.⁴ The primarily inshore and family-based saltfish enterprise which had characterized Newfoundland's economy throughout the region's history was regularly unsettled by attempts to maximize its export capacity through the processes of industrialization. The state's financial contributions to the development of commercial fish processing infrastructure tacitly supported the replacement of the salt fishery with one that was "modern, offshore" and "structured along corporate lines."⁵ Political officials at various levels of government contended that economic underdevelopment and widespread insolvency were largely attributable to the precariousness of the merchant-led fishery which kept fishing families in a continual state of social and economic dependency. Political debates regarding the future development of Newfoundland were dominated by discussions of the potential for replacing antiquated forms of household saltfish production with larger scale forms of fish product manufacturing. The arguably hegemonic and ideologically driven 'modernization' schemes which were developed to

assist this process were laden with assumptions about how the state could facilitate the planning and development of an efficient, technologically advanced mode of production that could adequately respond to market demands, particularly those emerging in the United States.⁶

These theories of modernization espoused by those with policy-making authority in Newfoundland, both prior to and following Confederation with Canada, were often accompanied by corollary assumptions about the gendered nature of industrial development. Wright has demonstrated how, during the 1950s, various policy planning groups advocated for restructured fishing economies that no longer included women's productive labour. In 1951, for example, Premier Joey Smallwood created the Newfoundland Fisheries Development Committee (NFDC) in an effort to establish a long-term development strategy for the fishery.⁷ This group, led by Chief Justice of Newfoundland, Sir Albert Walsh, focused primarily on "improving the efficiency of harvesting and processing methods."⁸ The two chief reports which emerged from the NFDC in 1953, *The Report of the Canadian Atlantic Sea Fishery* and *The Report of the Newfoundland Fisheries Development Committee*, held particularly resolute prescriptions for men and women in fishing economies. Largely influenced by dominant Western development theories, it was believed that Newfoundland's transformation into a 'modern' society would be accompanied by a withdrawal of women from fishery work. The reports argued that the region's integration into a system of industrial capitalism would result in the "liberation of women from the hard and unsuitable work of fish-making" where they could "devote their time to their household duties ... in an

atmosphere of human dignity as wives and mothers.”⁹ By the 1960s, Smallwood was heralding “the absence of women and children from the flakes as a sign of progress.”¹⁰

The development of Newfoundland’s industrial fishery involved the separation of home and work, and such changes signified a clear break from past practice. Prior to the emergence of commercial fish plants in the early twentieth century, women’s labour was both permanent and integral to the maintenance of the household enterprise. While men’s work consisted of daily fishing trips, the fish they caught was processed onshore by women. Women were simultaneously responsible for a wide range of domestic labour, including child and elderly care, and a variety of subsistence work in gardens and within the home.¹¹ Rosemary Ommer and Peter Sinclair have suggested that the maintenance of outport life depended on the mutual support of a formal sector, involving the production of saltfish, and an informal sector, which mostly included self-provisioning.¹² Although this system was characterized by a rigid gender division of labour, it tended to obscure a clear delineation of the realms of public and private, since women were able to combine their productive and reproductive labour tasks.¹³ Thus, the inevitable separation of home and the sites of industrial fish processing to some degree rationalized and strengthened the legitimacy of the gender norms which suggested the overall unsuitability of fishery work for women and idealized their ‘proper’ place within the home.

Such intersections of gender ideals, those that worked to justify, legitimize, and naturalize differences between men and women, with dominant theories of industrial development were grounded in the notion of the family wage. It is also worthwhile, then, to bear in mind how these relations were also informed ideologically, where they

strengthened the interests, legitimacy, and class positioning of dominant groups in the Newfoundland fishery.¹⁴ While resting on the economic importance of the male wage, this ideal relied upon the supplementary support provided by the wife's unpaid reproductive or domestic labour. Thus, it was believed that by subscribing to specific gender roles, household subsistence could be adequately achieved in systems of industrial capitalism. Feminist theorists have pointed out that such thinking is inextricably linked to the social and economic relations of distribution in capitalist societies. However, the motivations behind achieving a male breadwinner system of wage distribution and the gendered impacts of such a strategy on working-class cohesion and consciousness has instigated critical debates among scholars. While some have argued that the persistence and defense of the male breadwinner family ideal by the working class throughout the era of industrial capitalism indicate its overall material contributions to the improvement of living standards among men and women alike, others have contended that the pursuit of the family wage has resulted in increased dependence and oppression for women, in both private and public arenas.¹⁵ This latter view elaborates further that the male breadwinner model, understood as a myth perpetuated by the capitalist classes, actually stifled militant action among the working class, created divisions among men and women engaged in paid labour, and extended the view that social welfare was best achieved by the wage rather than by the state.¹⁶ More recently, feminist labour historians have conceptualized the family wage as neither solely the outcome of patriarchal motives nor of the desire to achieve adequate levels of subsistence (although the immediate implications of higher wages for men only are acknowledged). Rather, the male breadwinner model is argued to

have emerged as a result of political conflict between labour and capital and as a means by which employers sought to achieve greater social control over workers.¹⁷ Some feminist scholars have also highlighted how the oppressive elements of the family wage could, in some instances, motivate women's collective organizing.¹⁸

Within the context of the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery, Joan Acker's suggestion that the structure of social relations encompassed by the male breadwinner ideal resulted in a "gender-based structure of the wage" is particularly useful to an understanding of how wage differentials and women's subordinate status within the labour market developed within newly industrialized outport economies.¹⁹ Acker notes further that the gendered relations of distribution within the family resulted in women's struggles, often divergent across class lines, to "increase their control, and thus their power and security" both within and outside the home.²⁰ Beyond the realm of personal distribution, then, this powerful and largely unattainable ideal of a male breadwinner also informed the social and structural organization of paid work.

While asserting the overall importance of women's labour contributions to the maintenance of the private sphere, the family wage did allow for *some* women's conditional involvement in paid employment. As one government report of 1953 stated,

[t]he committee considers that in a programme of development of the fisheries child and female labour should find no place, except in the case of young women who will be employed at suitable work in plants and senior school children who will undoubtedly help in fish curing during the summer vacation.²¹

Fishery work was considered acceptable as a *temporary* occupation for young, single women awaiting marriage.²² Older schoolchildren were also encouraged to seek seasonal

employment in fish plants during the summer months.²³ Similar to what had occurred elsewhere in North American manufacturing industries, women's paid labour had also provided a critical contribution to the fishing industry and Newfoundland's economy during times of labour shortages such as the Second World War, when even married women were recruited to fill workplace vacancies.²⁴ Thus, it was under these specific circumstances that women's paid employment entered into the dominant framework for industrial development in the fishing industry and the regional economy more broadly. As Wright has noted, gender distinctions often defined the suitability of certain types of work for women and were, at all times, accompanied by an underlying assumption that the scope of their work would be both "limited and temporary."²⁵

Like many aspects of the state's prescription for the expeditious development of the Newfoundland fishery, this gendered vision was never fully realized. As the form and organization of industrial systems of fish processing solidified in Newfoundland, increasing numbers of women entered paid processing employment.²⁶ Between 1951 and 1971 the percentage of women in Newfoundland's labour force nearly doubled, rising from 16 percent to 27.8 percent of the total workforce.²⁷ Although these statistics encompass all employment sectors, in most cases it was fishery work which provided the only available option for women seeking employment outside urban centres.²⁸ Hence, (particularly between 1949 and 1955) these figures also reflect broader workforce participation trends in the fishery which involved a complete overhaul of the merchant credit system, women's withdrawal from the domestic (and unpaid) commodity production of saltfish and their entry, alongside men, into waged labour.²⁹ The 1940s had

been a crucial period of transformation as a handful of fish companies took the unprecedented risk of entering into large scale commercial processing, operating eighteen frozen fish plants throughout the province.³⁰ With women taking these newly established jobs in fish plants, overall labour force participation rates increased.

As in other regions of Canada, the ideal of the family wage remained unattainable for most of Newfoundland's families subsisting by means of wage labour during the post-war years of widespread industrialization. Dominant beliefs among policy makers, such as the assertion that paid employment was only acceptable for single women, were countered by labour market statistics. Between 1951 and 1971, single women's participation in the region's workforce dropped from 76 percent to 43.5 percent,³¹ while married women's rose from 6.1 percent to 51.8 percent.³² By 1981, the number of working married women reached nearly 65 percent of the total female workforce in Newfoundland.³³ Given that the national average labour participation rate of married women was just over 50 percent during this same year, the region's figures are significant.³⁴ While government and economic planning officials were initially amenable to allowing young single women and older school children to form a temporary or seasonal source of labour, many married women also desired paid positions in order to increase their family's income.³⁵ Similarly, women who wed after they began to work in fish plants saw little incentive in leaving their jobs after marriage.

Even the introduction of Canadian family allowances proved an inadequate measure by which to alleviate rural poverty in Newfoundland. Such programs were effectively used by Joey Smallwood and his advocates to increase popular support for the

region's Confederation with Canada during the latter years of the 1940s.³⁶ These policies were infused with gendered understandings of the family and prescribed that women's labour return to or remain within the household.³⁷ Dominique Jean has noted that while family allowances and similar social welfare programs provided immediate economic and social benefits to rural Canadian families, federal policy planners underestimated the amount of support needed to sustain a household.³⁸ In Newfoundland and Labrador, monthly cash supplements were often used to purchase shoes and clothing for children and, as Barbara Neis has noted, "\$15.00 (the cheque for three children in 1949) seemed like a lot of money to a young mother."³⁹ However, monthly allowances proved ineffective in alleviating the systemic poverty facing outport economies of Newfoundland.⁴⁰ Even with family allowances, as late as the 1980s, the average income in families where both a husband and wife sought or had paid employment was 32 percent higher than in those families adhering to the male breadwinner model.⁴¹

The prescription of dominant gendered norms inherent in the processes of fisheries development were thus ineffective in discouraging women, particularly married women, from entering the paid labour force.⁴² This shortcoming was especially significant since it was precisely those women with children (married or otherwise) for whom paid employment became most crucial. One resident of the Northern Peninsula remarked that her family's survival, as late as the 1970s and 1980s, depended not merely on the work of her husband, but on her own contributions as well as those of her two children: "What we had was our home. We didn't have much ... but we made it. Four of us working together and that's the way to do it. And you only bought what you really had

to buy because that's all you could afford to buy."⁴³ In many cases, two or more incomes acquired from fishery work alone could not ensure resources adequate for subsistence. Goods purchased from wages (a mere eighty-one cents per hour in 1965) one woman recounted, regularly excluded items such as a small assortment of homegrown root vegetables, and meats like moose, rabbit or caribou, that could be secured through hunting.⁴⁴ Even with these supplements, the average household required two incomes in order to meet its most basic needs.⁴⁵

As the number of frozen fish operations grew in Newfoundland, particularly after Confederation, women's 'shorework' was replaced by work in fish plants.⁴⁶ Yet, insofar as women, regardless of marital status, were able to secure employment within the newly established fish plants dotting Newfoundland's rural landscape, the ideological significance of the family wage emerged in other meaningful ways. Despite the sharp increases in women's workforce participation beginning from the years of the post-war period of capitalist expansion, they still only represented less than one-third of the paid workforce. This underrepresentation was in many ways linked to high rates of underemployment and unemployment as the number of available jobs, especially in rural areas, remained scarce. In a region with few opportunities for work, a married woman's potential for paid employment was tied to the employment status of her husband. Where work was only available for one household member, the husband would be more likely to emerge as the primary breadwinner. However, this might depend on the nature of job openings, as men were not known to perform tasks such as packing fish. As one former Fishery Products Limited Production Manager commented,

in those communities and especially in St. Anthony area, the unemployment rate was high – so it was easy to get a man. So if you got one person out of the house to work, if the man was available, that was the person you would hire instead of a female. I'm not so sure that was intentional as much as, well, the way we do things.⁴⁷

A woman's ability to make an economic contribution to her family unit through paid labour was clearly secondary to that of her husband, and was generally motivated by the insecure social and economic conditions prevailing in rural Newfoundland. In short, women's reasons for not entering into paid employment had little to do with the imagined luxury of the family wage, but rather, with a serious scarcity of job opportunities.

In addition, policy initiatives, particularly surrounding education and income supplements, left no ambiguity regarding the place of women in the industrialized fishery. In 1964, as a result of a federal-provincial funding collaboration, the College of Fisheries, Navigation, Marine Engineering and Electronics was opened in St. John's.⁴⁸ At its official opening, Premier Smallwood prophetically declared how "men," and not money, would lead the future fishery, making development "worth it."⁴⁹ Such gendered sentiments were echoed in the school's programming. In addition to likely barriers surrounding the accessibility of these programs to women, such as childcare commitments, most programs were not actually *intended* for women. As Wright argues, the educational programs that were expected to reaffirm the state's plans for modernization in the fishery aimed to "give male breadwinners the opportunity to learn skills to support their families."⁵⁰ The only course at the College of Fisheries in which women were encouraged to enrol was one which taught net braiding. The program was designed for women and, according to Wright, held very limited opportunities for

employment upon completion.⁵¹

Another overt example of the prominence of the family wage in state planning was revealed in the distribution of Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits to the wives of fishers and other women who were involved in onshore processes of saltfish production. Upon Confederation with Canada, social welfare state policies and benefits were extended to residents of Newfoundland. Federal policies proved consistent with those of provincial officials, particularly in regards to women's place in the fishery.⁵² Gendered assumptions about the nature of women's work saturated the planning and implementation of income supplement policies for fishery workers.⁵³ While the men who were hired to complete various aspects of shorework in the household enterprise became eligible for UI during the 1950s, such benefits were not extended to women who performed similar kinds of work. As Barbara Neis explains,

It did not matter whether women were fishermen's wives, daughters, or 'shipped' girls from other households who combined domestic work with drying fish, they were not eligible for UI. Fishermen's UI thus perpetuated the existing discriminatory practices of allocating the wealth and benefits resulting from women's labour to men, and defining women as dependents of men in the inshore fishery.⁵⁴

Such blatant inequalities remained unchanged until the 1980s, revealing how the gendered relations of production and distribution during the period of industrialization in the Newfoundland fishery were characterized by the intersection and mutual reinforcement of the family wage with state-sanctioned fishery development and social welfare policies.⁵⁵

While the gendered underpinnings of fishery development could not successfully prevent women's permanent entry into paid employment within the industry, it certainly

played a significant role in defining the structure and value of their work. The fundamental belief that women's engagement with fishery work should be both temporary or seasonal and limited to specific forms of work, such as packing and trimming fish, held serious material consequences for working women. In the following section, I explore some of the more salient aspects of the gendered structure of the wage as it pertained to women's employment in the fish processing sector. Using oral histories collected from women who worked in groundfish plants in St. Anthony, Port aux Basques, and Catalina as my primary sources of data, I detail the typical design of plant work characteristic of the 1970s and early 1980s, and discuss how the gendered underpinnings of a rigid gender division of labour discouraged women from securing the most gainful positions on the processing line. I argue further that such segregation emerged primarily as a result of the dominance of the family wage model that defined and naturalized the suitability of 'temporary' and marginal work for women.

* * *

It is important to consider the ways in which the gendered parameters and conditions of fish plant work in Newfoundland and Labrador were often dependent upon the seasonality of processing plants. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s most fish plants were informally designated as either year-round or seasonal plants, although, with the relative abundance (or perceived abundance) of resources in peak periods during the 1970s and even into the 1980s, 'seasonal' plants would sometimes operate straight through the winter months. The ratio of women to men in fish processing plants generally corresponded with the seasonality of the work. The percentage of women as part of the

total workforce tended to be higher in seasonal plants than in year-round operations.⁵⁶ Such trends are telling. Where fish plant work was considered stable and permanent, men were employed in large numbers. By contrast, where work was insecure, temporary, and seasonal, women comprised the majority of workers. According to union co-founder Richard Cashin, women's dominance in seasonal plants sometimes translated into opportunities for entry into "elite" processing positions, such as handcutting.⁵⁷ In plants with greater parity between the number of men and women workers, women found it more difficult to obtain such positions. These differences had profound implications for union organizing, and these will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Across Newfoundland and Labrador, other factors such as the variety of species processed, the processing capacity of a plant, and the nature of the employer (family-owned versus corporate ownership)⁵⁸ impacted the availability and conditions of fish plant work. Despite the variances in the rates of participation between men and women in seasonal and year-round plants, most workplaces were characterized by a rigid gender division of labour which held serious implications for the scope and value of work done by women and men.

The women I interviewed gave several reasons for entering processing work. For some, the decision to seek work in the local fish plant was a natural choice given their residence in a remote outport with few opportunities for employment and/or their familial attachment to fishery work. Others pursued a variety of available part-time jobs such as waitressing and caretaking before obtaining a job at the local fish plant. In all cases, however, the rising cost of providing for a family, both with or without additional support

from a husband's income,⁵⁹ compelled women to seek secure employment. As Barbara Neis has explained, fish plant jobs often provided many women with "a better pay cheque than domestic service; a badly needed second income for some and, for others, a break from brutal home situations."⁶⁰ In addition, this work did not usually demand high levels of academic training. The highest level of education among most women I interviewed was grade eight, and this level proved adequate in obtaining available fish plant jobs, which generally had no minimum educational requirements.

The physical layout of the plant was marked by a series of production lines.⁶¹ Most plants offered well over fifty possible jobs, although this number varied according to the size of the plant and the species processed. The employment positions most directly related to the production of fish (ie. excluding more technical positions such as electricians, tradesmen, journeymen, and engineers) can be loosely divided into four areas, each with upwards of ten possible jobs. The first category covered those workers who initiated the production process by administering the entry of raw material into the plant. Employment opportunities in this area included a variety of wharf work with jobs such as crane operators, trawler discharge and icers, dockside graders, and forklift operators. After the material entered the plant, a second production line was responsible for cutting the fish. Various species were filleted by either handcutters or machine. In the case of shellfish, crab was butchered and shrimp was fed through a peeling machine. Cut and peeled product were then fed through a machine that removed its skin. This was only one of several jobs that comprised a third stage of production. This line also included trimmers, candlers, boners, and wormers, whose responsibilities included the inspection

of fish and the removal of any defective areas. Large pieces were then sectioned by trimmers according to production specifications and moved to a separate line, where the production process concluded with the weighing, wrapping and packaging of fish. As fish processing methods became more sophisticated and international competition grew after industrialization, Newfoundland-based companies attempted to produce fish products of the highest possible quality. By the 1970s, attaining this goal required additional quality control workers, whose jobs generally consisted of random inspections of fish before and after the packaging of products. These tasks were generally performed in a separate area of the plant. At all stages of fish production, a foreman supervised the workers.

These processing areas, particularly prior to the unionization of individual fish plants under the NFFAW throughout the early 1970s, were clearly divided along gender lines. Without exception, men were responsible for wharf work, or the entry of raw material into the plant for processing. This labourious work was performed outside the plant and, except for those positions which involved the operation of a crane or forklift, generally required little experience. Men were also concentrated in the second area of processing outlined above -- in filleting, butchering and peeling work. In trimming and inspection areas, the gendered pattern of work was not as explicit as other areas. In year-round plants, men often operated skinning machines and were also found in trimming positions. In seasonal plants, women occupied most of these positions. It is also possible, however, that some plants deviated from these patterns where the gendered breakdown of trimming positions followed no discernable pattern and thus cannot be explained by seasonality. Lastly, those jobs associated with the packaging of fish, such as wrappers,

packers, and pan washers, for example, were almost exclusively women's positions. Fish plant work thus clearly included gendered divisions, although some overlap did exist at various stages of production.

What is most significant to my analysis of these divisions are the ways in which concentrations of men and women in certain occupations served to reinforce the dominant ideal of the family wage. As Cashin's above description of jobs further hints, an implicit and widely accepted job hierarchy defined certain jobs as 'elite,' with men holding a monopoly over these positions prior to the 1980s, before women workers began to challenge collectively the gendered division of labour in fish plants. Elite jobs, then, were commonly understood to mean, and simply referred to as, 'men's jobs.' Similarly, tasks that were filled primarily by women, such as packing-related positions, were known as 'women's jobs.'⁶² In contrast to men's position on the top of the job hierarchy, 'women's jobs' were both more numerous and clustered within margins of processing work. As one FPI Production Manager commented: "Packing was an easier job. Some people looked at it that way. I think some people looked at it as 'they're women, they get a little less.' I don't think it was even done intentionally as much as it was a way of life. It was accepted."⁶³ Clearly, gender and accepted gender norms were central determinants in defining the value associated with certain types of work.

From the early 1970s, the unionization of plant workers and the inclusion of seniority rights in collective agreements meant that rigid gender divisions on the plant floor became increasingly open to challenges by women. These struggles will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three. For the present discussion, it is important to note

briefly that formal opportunities for job advancement were created shortly after the NFFAW's inception. A small number of women were able to utilize options made available through seniority clauses and, subsequently, entered into and maintained a limited number of 'men's jobs.' While the term thus became somewhat antiquated and inaccurate from the 1970s and into the 1980s, it was not immediately abandoned from within the dominant discourses which workers and management employed in understanding their place in the industrialized fishery. However, the challenges to the job hierarchy presented by women and the resultant breakdown of the rigidity of the gendered division of labour which existed in fish plants prior to unionization did not signal any corresponding change in the actual gender composition of 'women's jobs.' While men's elite positions were made open to some senior women labourers, women's labour force concentration overall, and on the packing line in particular, remained unchanged.

Thus, any slippage in the gender division of labour during the early 1970s went only one way: women sometimes performed men's work but men did not cross over into women's work. When asked why this was, the women I interviewed offered a handful of suggestions. One common explanation expressed by a woman who worked in a variety of processing positions in the St. Anthony fish plant was that men never occupied packing positions because there were always enough women available to do the work. Another woman explained: "I guess they thought it was women's work. Some men can be pretty masculine too, right? There was more women than there was men, so there was always enough women to do the job."⁶⁴ Packing and similar tasks occupied the lowest rungs of

the fish plant hierarchy. Unlike cutting or filleting jobs that were considered permanent positions, packing work was thought to be suitable for a transient workforce; these jobs were filled mainly by women and seasonal student workers.⁶⁵ Moreover, the supply of workers to fill these positions often exceeded the number of available jobs⁶⁶ and higher turnover rates compared with those in coveted positions like cutting contributed to the notion that such work required little experience.

Women also explained how such divisions of labour in the fish plant reinforced dominant gender roles and expectations. Dense concentrations of male workers in heavy wharf work is not surprising given the long-standing association of masculinity and heavy manual labour. However, men's dominance in cutting line and sometimes trimming positions is less easily understood. One woman who worked in the Catalina fish plant on the Bonavista Peninsula described how the use of a simple tool – a knife – served to exclude women from entering cutting and trimming positions:

... in the 70s there was still this little thing known as men's jobs and women's jobs. And mostly all the women's jobs at that time in the plant was packers. That was, packing the fish once it was ready to go into the freezer. And mostly the rest of the jobs had knives and they weren't considered women's jobs. I always had to question, you know, how come that's not a women's job? Are we not capable of using a knife without cutting our fingers off?⁶⁷

Similar observations have been made in other Canadian manufacturing industries. In her study of gender, class, and ethnicity within Toronto's garment industry and the Jewish labour movement during the first three decades of the twentieth century, Ruth Frager has noted how cutting and pressing positions "constituted a male job preserve" where the skills associated with this line of work were "highly valued because of their scarcity and because these workers played crucial roles in the production process."⁶⁸ However, in the

context of the fishery, the conditions noted by one respondent above, did not uniformly exist across all plants in the industry. In a different interview with a trimmer from Port aux Basques, I questioned whether there similarly existed some contention regarding women's use of knives in her workplace. In the Port aux Basques plant, which was designated seasonal but operated virtually year-round during the 1970s and 1980s, no issues were ever raised regarding women's use of knives.⁶⁹ Even packers, at one point, used scissors to complete their tasks. When I asked why certain jobs, such as packing, were then held primarily by women and not men, she offered the following suggestion: "I think [men] just thought [packing] was a woman's job and it was sissy to go down on the packing table. Never ever have you ever had a man who even wanted to pack!"⁷⁰

It is difficult to identify the roots of such sentiments. Frager, describing a hierarchal and gendered division of labour on the garment manufacturing shop floor where tasks were rigidly considered either men's or women's work, highlights how employers regarded women's labour as unskilled, replaceable and distinct from the contributions made by their male counterparts.⁷¹ Such differentiations between women's and men's work, she argues, were "related to the low valuation of women's household skills carried over into their jobs in the garment industry."⁷² Frager further notes the significance of the family wage ideal: "[p]art of the rationale for women's low wages was the expectation that male breadwinners were obliged to support families, while female workers were not expected to do so."⁷³ In the case of the Newfoundland fishery, workers' understandings of fish plant work and the gendered division of labour were closely associated with dominant ideals of masculinity and, to a lesser extent, femininity. Similar

to Frager's analysis, the 'worker' was not a gender-neutral term, but actively shaped and understood to be male and embraced a masculine character.⁷⁴ Such common perceptions were also linked to dominant understandings of women's secondary status within fish plants. However, the first narrative indicates that women were ready and willing to question assumptions about women's ability to perform certain types of work. In some cases, women aspired to occupy the most materially rewarding positions of employment in the plant. Yet, as the second narrative reveals, it was difficult for some women to provide an explanation of why men did not perform marginal work in the plant. If we accept that the gendered model of the family wage was integral to the development, implementation, and structure of the commercial fish processing industry, women's understandings of the gendered character of plant work can be understood to be a fundamental rejection of their status as marginal workers. As subsequent chapters will reveal, some women soon began to challenge the gendered assumptions of the masculine breadwinner model which accorded respect and value to men's work while devaluing women's work.

Moreover, women's descriptions of packing covertly challenged the dominant understanding of this work as occupying the lower rungs of the processing hierarchy. In contrast to the FPI Production Manager's assertion that packing was an easy job, the women I spoke with never once described their work as simple. Rather, they recounted their initial frustrations in learning to package fish. As one woman explained: "The cellophane isn't much bigger than the fish! I used to say, 'how the hell am I going to get this piece of fish wrapped in that?' You'd turn it over and roll it, and the next thing I

know, the tail part is hanging out the other end!”⁷⁵ One woman differentiated packing work from other jobs, explaining how someone trained to bone fish, for example, could not simply replace a packer because the packing positions required both “experience” and “know how.”⁷⁶ Women further vocalized the difficulty involved in meeting the packing yields set by management during eight hour shifts.

Despite women’s belief in the value of their work regardless of their processing position, wage rates in female dominated positions remained marginal throughout the period covered by this study. The gendered structure of fish plant work and the overall devaluation of ‘women’s jobs’ translated into the lowest wages for women fish plant workers. The integration of the family wage ideal into visions of industrial development reinforced women’s status as secondary wage earners. Moreover, women’s concentration in positions that were marked by high turnover rates and those which fluctuated greatly by season fuelled the notion that their work was not permanent, but temporary and transient. While union co-founder Richard Cashin boasted of the NFFAW’s ability to negotiate the abolishment of separate wages for women and men plant workers in the union’s first contract in 1973, differential wages accorded to various sectors of fish processing persisted at least until the collapse of the fishery in 1992.⁷⁷ In 1984, women still made 28 cents less per hour on average than men in cutting positions.⁷⁸ Interestingly, the very few men in packing positions made, on average, 24 cents per hour less than their female counterparts (See Table 1-2).⁷⁹ Such differences were also reinforced by discriminatory provincial minimum wage policies in which women’s base rate was set lower than men’s. This legislation was not amended in Newfoundland until 1974.⁸⁰

TABLE 1-1 HOURLY WAGE RATES IN FISHERY PRODUCTS LIMITED PROCESSING PLANTS UNIONIZED UNDER THE NFFAW, 1975 – 1987

Job Description	1975 (\$)	1977 (\$)	1979 (\$)	1981 (\$)	1985 (\$)	1987 (\$)
Packers Wrappers Weighers	\$3.10	\$4.10	\$4.80	\$6.00	\$6.95	\$7.70
Trimmers Candlers Boners	\$3.25	\$4.20	\$4.90	\$6.10	\$7.05	\$7.80
Cutters Butchers Checkers	\$3.35	\$4.30	\$5.00	\$6.20	\$7.15	\$7.90

Source: *Collective Agreement By and Between Fishery Products Limited and Local 1252, Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers*. Effective September 16, 1975 to December 31, 1976, 36-8; *Collective Agreement By and Between Fishery Products Limited, Fishery Products (Marystown) Limited and Locals 1245, 1252, 1252, and 1253, Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers*. Effective January 1, 1977 to December 3, 1979, 36-8; *Collective Agreement By and Between Fishery Products Limited and Local 1252, Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers*. Effective January 1, 1980 to September 15, 1982, 42-4; *Collective Agreement By and Between Fishery Products International Limited and Fishermen's Union Local 1252, United Food and Commercial Workers*. Effective January 1, 1985 to October 31, 1988, 48-50.

TABLE 1-2 COMPARISON OF 1984 WAGE RATES BY GENDER (AVERAGE WAGES AMONG UNIONIZED AND NON-UNIONIZED WORKERS)

Job Description	Women's Wage	Men's Wage	Difference
Fish Cleaner and Cutter	\$6.36	\$6.64	\$0.28
Fish Processing Machine Feeder	\$6.21	\$6.85	\$0.64
Fish Grader	\$5.72	\$6.77	\$1.05
Packer	\$6.49	\$6.25	\$0.24
Tallyman/woman	\$6.94	\$6.96	\$0.02

Source: Dorothy Anger, Carmelita McGraw, and Sandy Pottle, *Women and Work in Newfoundland* (St. John's: Background Report to the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment, 1986), Appendix 1, 6.

* * *

The roots of women's material inequality in processing work can be traced through the gendered development of the industrial fishery. Joan Acker has suggested that "gender distinctions" are embedded within the structure and organization of paid employment and that these distinctions often "embody and perpetuate male dominance and the subordination of women."⁸¹ The rigidity of the gender division of labour can signify how, despite women's increased presence in fish plant work (often to the point where they comprised the majority of workers), they could not effectively dissolve gender segregation or challenge the values accorded to men's and women's work. This supports Acker's claim that "increased employment rates of women alter but do not fundamentally change" the underlying relations which uphold and structure the workplace.⁸² While women were able to articulate effectively the importance of packing work, their narratives and indeed the perceived importance of their work remained marginal. The pervasive and gendered theories of development outlined at the onset of this chapter maintained and supported the belief that women's work in the fish plant was both temporary and required little experience. These assumptions saturated most workers' understandings of the gendered character and divisions of fish plant work, although their narratives generally revealed 'common-sense' explanations such as the availability of women, or men's adherence to masculine ideals. The basic support for these sentiments can be found in the prominence and ideological underpinnings of the family wage and its influence on the structure of the gendered relations of production in fish plants.

¹ Joan Acker, "Class, Gender and the Relations of Distribution," *Signs* 13.3 (1988): 497.

² Acker, 481-2.

³ Nancy Forestall, "Times Were Hard: The Pattern of Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars," in *Their Lives and Times: Women of Newfoundland and Labrador, A Collage*, eds. Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter (St. John's: Killick Press, 1995), 76-92; also in *Labour/Le Travail* 24 (Fall 1989): 147-166.

⁴ Miriam Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery: Images of Gender in Government Plans for the Canadian Atlantic Fisheries," in *Ibid*, 129.

⁵ *Ibid*. Also see David Alexander, *The Decay of Trade: An Economic History of the Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1935-1965* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1977).

⁶ Miriam Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times: The State and the Industrialization of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1934-1968* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38. Wright's usage of the terms ideology and hegemony are borrowed from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Similarly, my own use of these terms should be understood to mean the processes by which dominant and powerful 'systems of ideas' organize and inform actual social and political practices, including the emergence of gendered norms and assumptions among dominant and subordinated groups. For an excellent discussion of the uses and contested meanings of the term 'ideology,' see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁷ Wright, 59.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Canada and Newfoundland, Newfoundland Fisheries Development Committee Report (St. John's, 1953). Quoted in Wright, *A Fishery For Modern Times*, 62.

¹⁰ Barbara Neis, "From 'Shipped Girls' to 'Brides of the State': The Transition from Familial to Social Patriarchy in the Newfoundland Fishing Industry," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, eds. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 448.

¹¹ Hilda Chaulk Murray, *More Than Fifty Percent: Woman's Life in a Newfoundland Outport* (St. John's: Breakwater Books Limited, 1979), 13. Also see: Ellen Antler, "Women's Work in Newfoundland's Fishing Families," *Atlantis* 2.2 (Spring 1977):106-13; Cynthia Boyd, "'Come On All the Crowd, On the Beach!': The Working Lives of Beachwomen in Grand Bank, Newfoundland, 1900-1940," in *How Deep Is the Ocean? Historical Essays on Canada's Atlantic Fishery*, eds. James E. Candow and Carol Corbin (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1997), 139-160; Marilyn Porter, *Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women* (Aldershot, England: Avebury Publishing Limited, 1993); Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter, eds., *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador, A Collage* (St. John's: Killick Press, 1996); Dona Lee Davis and Jane Nadel-Klein, eds., *To Work*

and *To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1988).

¹² Rosemary E. Ommer and Peter Sinclair, "Outports Under Threat: Social Roots of Systemic Crisis in Rural Newfoundland," in *Local Enterprise on the North Atlantic Margin*, eds. Reginald Byron and John Hutson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). Quoted in Peter Sinclair, "Endangered Communities: Approaching the End of History in Rural Newfoundland and Labrador?" Workshop on Rural Canada, University of Guelph, March 2002, 4.

¹³ Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 139.

¹⁴ Eagleton, 29-30.

¹⁵ For an account of the working-class defence of the family wage, see Jane Humphries, "Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working-Class Family," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1 (1977): 241-258. In a similar piece, "Protective Legislation, the Capitalist State, and Working Class Men: The Case of the 1842 Mines Regulation Act," *Feminist Review* (Spring 1981): 1-33. Humphries presents a critique of Heidi Hartmann's analysis of the patriarchal relations inherent in the bourgeois ideal of the family wage. Also see Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," *Capital and Class* 8 (1979): 1-83. For a critique of Humphries, see Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, "The 'Family Wage': Some Problems for Socialists and Feminists," *Capital and Class* 11 (1980): 51-72.

¹⁶ Barrett and McIntosh, 59.

¹⁷ Martha May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage: The Ford Motor Company and the Five Dollar Day," *Feminist Studies* 8.2 (1982): 399-424; "Bread Before Roses: American Workingmen, Labour Unions and the Family Wage," in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labour History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 1-21.

¹⁸ Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas, "Rethinking Women's Oppression," *New Left Review* 144 (March-April 1984): 33-71. Also see Maurine Weiner Greenwald, "Working-Class Feminism and the Family Wage Ideal: The Seattle Debate on Married Women's Right to Work, 1914-1920," *The Journal of American History* 76 (June 1989): 118-149.

¹⁹ Acker, 489.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Canada and Newfoundland, *Newfoundland Fisheries Development Committee Report* (St. John's, 1953). Quoted in Susan Williams, *Our Lives Are At Stake: Women and the Fishery Crisis in Newfoundland and Labrador* Report No. 11 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1993), 9.

²² Williams, 9.

²³ Newfoundland and Canada, *Newfoundland Fisheries Development Committee Report* (St. John's, 1944). Quoted in Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 141.

²⁴ Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery" 139. Also see Ruth Roach Pierson, *'They're Still Women After All': The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), Chapter One.

²⁵ Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 139.

²⁶ Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 130.

²⁷ Elizabeth Batten, et al., eds., *Working Women in Newfoundland* (St. John's: The Group, 1974), 4.

²⁸ Batten et al., 3.

²⁹ Batten et al., 21.

³⁰ Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times*, 26.

³¹ Batten et al., 4. *Ninth Census of Canada 1951 Labour Force Occupations and Industries* (Department of Trade and Commerce: Dominion Bureau of Statistics), Table 19-20.

³² Batten et al., 4.

³³ Dorothy Anger, Carmelita McGraw, and Sandy Pottle, *Women and Work in Newfoundland* (St. John's: Background Report to the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment, 1986), Appendix 1, 6.

³⁴ Hugh Armstrong and Pat Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994), 191. Also see Erin Phillips and Paul Phillips, *Women and Work: Inequality in the Canadian Labour Market* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Ltd., 2000), 39.

³⁵ Williams, 11.

³⁶ James G. Snell, "The Newfoundland Old Age Pension Program, 1911-1949," in *Social Welfare Policy in Canada: Historical Readings*, eds. Raymond B. Blake and Jeff Keshen (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1995), 96. *Joey Smallwood: Between Scoundrels and Saints*, dir. Barbara Doran, 44 min., Morag Productions in association with CBC, 1999, videocassette.

³⁷ Dominique Jean, "Family Allowances and Family Autonomy: Quebec Families Encounter the Welfare State, 1945-1955," in *Canadian Family History: Selected Readings*, ed. Bettina Bradbury (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1992), 405. Also see Neis, 445; Antler, 110.

³⁸ Jean, 426.

³⁹ Neis, 445.

⁴⁰ James Struthers, "Family Allowances, Old Age Security, and the Construction of Entitlement in the Canadian Welfare State, 1943-51," in *The Veteran Charter and Post-World War II Canada*, eds. Peter Neary and J.L. Granastein (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1998).

⁴¹ Anger, McGrath and Pottle, 46.

⁴² Williams, 11.

⁴³ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Williams, 13.

⁴⁶ Wright "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 130.

⁴⁷ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.

⁴⁸ Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 141-2.

⁴⁹ *Trade News* vol. 16 no.7 (Jan. 1964), quoted in Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 142.

⁵⁰ Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times*, 146.

⁵¹ Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 142.

⁵² Neis, 445.

⁵³ The Newfoundland and Labrador fishery was not entirely unique in this respect. According to Ann Porter, during the postwar period (1945 to early 1960s), Canadian Unemployment Insurance schemes were largely influenced by gender ideologies which covertly called for the return of once-employed married women to the home. Those who remained in the workforce were often forced into lower-paid and insecure work. In either case, women's dependency within the family, particularly on the male household head, significantly increased during this period. See "Women and Income Security in the Post-War Period: The Case of Unemployment Insurance, 1945-1962," *Labour/Le Travail* 31 (Spring 1993): 111-144. Also see Ruth Roach Pierson, "Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada 1934-1940," *Labour/le Travail* (Spring 1990): 77-103.

⁵⁴ Neis, 447.

⁵⁵ Wright, "Women, Men and the Modern Fishery," 143. Also see Barbara Neis, "From 'Shipped

Girls' to "Brides of the State:" The Transition from Familial to Social Patriarchy in the Newfoundland Fishing Industry."

⁵⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Richard Cashin, Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union Co-Founder and Past President, St. John's, July 31, 2002.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ While it is difficult to make generalizations about the attitudes of fishery workers towards corporate-owned fish companies, one 1978 edition of *Union Forum* noted the tendency of multi-nationals to "pull out when times are tough." This article argued further that locally-owned fish processing plants were more inclined to be genuinely committed to the overall development of the province. "The History of Foreign Ownership," *Union Forum* January 1978: 6.

⁵⁹ Of the six women I interviewed, five were married with children between the years 1971 and 1987 and two of these are now widowed. The remaining respondent is a single mother.

⁶⁰ Neis, 446.

⁶¹ The following description of a typical Newfoundland fish processing plant is based on two respondents' account of the physical structure of the plant and its jobs in St. Anthony, a community of roughly 3000 people, on the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland. Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002; Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁶² Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.

⁶³ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.

⁶⁴ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁶⁵ Gerald Burnable, "The Fresh Frozen Fish Plant in the Newfoundland Outport Setting" (Undergraduate Essay prepared for Sociology 322, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1982).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.

⁶⁸ Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 102.

⁶⁹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port Aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Frager, 102.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Frager, 124.

⁷⁴ Frager, 121. For a good anthropological study of gender roles in Newfoundland's outport communities, see Dona Lee Davis "'Shore Skippers' and 'Grass Widows': Active and Passive Roles in a Newfoundland Fishery," in *To Work and To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies*, eds. Dona Lee Davis and Jane Nadel-Klein (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1988), 211-229. A more recent account by Davis is "Cultures of Conflict and Discontent," *Women's Studies International Forum* 23.3 (May-June 2000): 244-353. Also see Marilyn Porter "'She Was Skipper of the Shore Crew': Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland," *Labour/Le Travail* 15 (Spring 1985): 105-123.

⁷⁵ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁷⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁷⁷ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Richard Cashin, Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union Co-Founder and Past President, St. John's, July 31, 2002.

⁷⁸ Anger, McGrath, and Pottle, Appendix 1, 7.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Neis, 447.

⁸¹ Acker, 497.

⁸² Ibid.

Chapter Three: Processing Cultures and Gendered Workplace Resistance in Newfoundland and Labrador Fish Plants During the 1970s and 1980s

The gender distinctions embedded in the industrial development of Newfoundland's commercial fishery were largely responsible for many women's social and economic marginalization as fish processors during the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike their male counterparts, women were understood to comprise a transient and flexible workforce, and their wages were generally understood to be of 'secondary' importance to the family income. Such common sentiments held serious implications for women's overall placement on the lower rungs of an informal plant hierarchy. Because of their concentration in the lowest-paid positions such as packing, trimming, and weighing, the material implications of a gender division of labour disproportionately affected women processors. But while many women faced undue hardship as a result of gendered workplace divisions, they were not passive actors in this process. Indeed, women challenged the multitude of power systems that upheld the structure of their respective workplaces. Women working in fish plants across the province of Newfoundland came to recognize similarities in their day-to-day battles, identifying the gender, class, and to a lesser extent, regional bases of their adversity. Many unionized women came to an understanding of how their positioning as workers and as women necessitated gendered strategies to adequately address their workplace concerns. Such conscious responses, however, flowed from well-established work cultures that framed workers' understandings of the internal and external functioning of Newfoundland's industrial fishery and their central place within this system.

This chapter explores the processes by which identifiable work cultures emerged among fish processing workers in Newfoundland's seasonal and year-round plants during the 1970s and 1980s. I attempt to understand how a complex network of social relations among workers (both male and female) and between workers and management emerged and formed the basis for individual and collective resistance during this period. I am further interested in understanding how the rise of the NFFAW and official union discourses about the needs of workers resulted in formal and informal opposition to managerial controls. My primary concern is to uncover how gender factored into workers' experiences of workplace resistance and mobilization. I argue that while the work cultures that emerged in the decades after the industrialization of the fishery were not solely or exclusively women's domain, processors experienced the daily pattern of work and subsequent challenges to management in gendered ways. This discussion will provide the basis upon which I will engage in a focussed discussion of the rise of feminist organizing within the NFFAW in the next chapter.

* * *

Feminist scholars have paid significant attention to how work cultures, and women's work cultures more specifically, have emerged from workers' common experiences of paid labour. Sallie Westwood made one of the earliest contributions to our knowledge of women's shop floor cultures in the 1980s. Her contemporary socialist-feminist study of working women in the British hosiery manufacturing industry inspired a rich body of feminist literature on the meanings and contradictions of shop floor life and worker resistance. Using the insights provided by Stuart Hall, Louis Althusser, and

Antonio Gramsci, Westwood maintains the significance of ideology to the definition of work culture, describing *culture* as the common-sense, shared meanings and symbols which signify the daily life rituals of people united within a particular group.¹ She further asserts the importance of recognizing how gender could, in some cases, pose contradictions and tensions for women who laboured within a clearly defined shop floor culture. In recounting women's own understandings of the workplace, Westwood accounts for the prevalence of dominant and patriarchal ideologies of femininity and womanhood among factory workers. More importantly, however, she suggests that these negative aspects did not eclipse more positive elements of shop floor culture -- ones which inspired resistance, solidarity and sisterhood as women attempted to exert control over their own lives.²

Westwood's study is supported by more recent feminist historical accounts that offer similar analyses of women's work cultures. Susan Porter Benson, in her examination of saleswomen in American department stores during the first half of the twentieth century, understands work culture as a "realm of informal, customary values and rules" which women negotiate as they "confront the limitations and exploit the possibilities of their jobs."³ By introducing customers into the sales culture equation, Benson's account is unique from analyses that focus on the relations between workers and managers on the shop floor. Saleswomen strategically used their relationships with customers to further managerial aims, but often on their own terms. Benson effectively provides the possibility of exploring work culture as a site of worker consciousness. Moreover, her analysis of women's work culture suggests that the underpinnings of

saleswomen's resistance flowed from common understandings of their multiple, and sometimes contradictory, roles as women, workers, and as consumers.

The importance of women's work cultures to the scope and character of their workplace organizing has also been given considerable attention in Canadian feminist historical and sociological literature. Notably, Joan Sangster, using the framework offered by Benson, has explored the centrality of family and community to the development and maintenance of women's work cultures in manufacturing industries between 1920 and 1960 in Peterborough, Ontario. Specifically, she examines how dominant ideologies of masculinity, femininity and domesticity impacted women's understanding of waged work. Commonly held notions of domesticity, Sangster argues, were central to the functioning of gendered and patriarchal ideologies and impacted both the subjective and collective experiences of men and women workers during this period.⁴

Pamela Sugiman contends that groups of Canadian women in auto manufacturing work actually developed a 'feminist' consciousness. Interestingly, her description of shop floor cultures between 1937 and 1949 locates a communal gender identity that is solidly rooted in very conventional ideals of femininity.⁵ When women did recognize and resist the labour process, she argues, they did so in "individual, indirect, and distinctly feminized ways."⁶ The woman-centred work culture that emerged in auto plants was predicated on women's central struggle to reconcile their aspirations of meeting dominant gender norms with the reality of their labour in a male dominated industry. Sugiman identifies these highly feminized networks of understanding as feminist, arguing that

“female auto workers moved carefully and somewhat ambivalently between conventional womanhood, patriarchal unionism, and a working class feminism or feminist unionism.”⁷

Among these formative accounts, scholars have documented effectively the distinctively feminine elements of workers’ consciousness. While the social pressures to conform to the norms of domesticity and womanhood undoubtedly held some influence among women in Newfoundland, my analysis of work cultures focuses more broadly on the gender dimensions of informal and formal challenges to the managerial administration of discipline within the workplace. Unlike the accounts described above, most women did not occupy a separate work area and the gender division of labour within fish plants, however rigid, still rendered women in very close proximity to their male counterparts. Coupled with the prevalence of men and male leadership within the NFFAW, it is understandable that little space, ideological, physical or otherwise, was left for women to form what Benson and others have identified as ‘women’s work cultures.’ However, in analysing the development and gendered character of workplace cultures within the fishery, I have remained mindful of Benson’s critique of “the longstanding assumption that women’s consciousness is overwhelmingly the product of domestic imperatives” which oversimplify the “complicated dynamic of women workers’ daily lives.”⁸ The work cultures that emerged among men and women fish processors integrated common understandings of workers’ marginal social and economic positioning within the industry. My analysis of workers’ responses to managerial controls and the plant rules reveals further that women and men did not always act, politically and culturally, in unison. The work cultures that existed in fish plants both emerged from and

were shaped by the social pressures of masculine and feminine gender ideals. My interviews and critical reading of authoritative texts also reveals that women and men experienced industrial fishery work and, subsequently, labour mobilization in gendered ways.

While the impact of women's domestic responsibilities on the development of fishery workers' consciousness may seem scant by comparison to the accounts described above, particularly those observations made by Sugiman, an interrogation of the ways in which women workers accommodated and resisted managerial controls reveals their crucial initiation of and integration into the processes of both class and gender mobilization within the union. The impacts of domestic ideologies are, however, given full attention in the next chapter, where I evaluate more closely the rise of women's organizing in the NFFAW. For now, it is imperative to examine how women came to understand and respond to formal and informal managerial authority within the workplace.

* * *

My descriptions of the culture of fish plant work and women's individual and collective responses to management and company directives have developed from careful analysis of three primary sources: labour arbitration cases files; the *Union Forum*; and oral histories collected from women fish plant workers, former NFFAW president Richard Cashin and one production manager for Fishery Products Limited (later Fishery Products International). Although the nature of grievance records may be inherently conflictual, they provide, as American labour historian Stephen Meyer has noted,

“important windows into the workplace” by highlighting daily activities and wider “social relations of power” that emerge in both overt and covert ways within the formal and informal work environment.⁹ Women’s narratives also provide useful first-hand accounts of fishery work, relations with co-workers and management as well as community life during the 1970s and 1980s in rural Newfoundland. It is important to note, however, that the women I interviewed for this study all held official local-level union positions at some point during their careers, and this no doubt impacted both their relations with management and the extent to which they were allowed, according to standard practice among industrial unions, to engage in illegal forms of workplace resistance such as wildcat strikes and work stoppages. However, their narratives reveal that even with some restrictions, women were able to articulate clearly the stresses involved with fishery work and the ways in which resistance could take more subtle forms.

To begin, fishery work, in any form, was unequivocally exhausting for women and men alike. The physical conditions that characterized fish plants during the early 1970s, particularly in the frozen fish sector, were anything but comfortable and this was made readily apparent in the interviews. As one woman remarked, “[i]f I had to teach someone what it was like when I started working there, well, the first thing I’d have to tell them is to have a good pair of rubber boots, my dear! And some warm socks. And dress warmly because it’s freezing!”¹⁰ These simple observations were echoed by other workers:

You could see your breath all the time! You couldn’t dress up warm enough to keep yourself warm in the fall of the year. There was no way. The plant was bigger and the conditions that it’s in now – well, the plant was old y’know, and

the ceiling was so high! ... We used to be down there sometimes until December-time. ... We'd be downstairs for an hour and then we'd have to go upstairs for ten minutes or so to try and get warm. Come down again for another, perhaps, half hour. That's how cold it used to be then. We just went along with the cold.¹¹

Cold temperatures and dampness were undoubtedly intensified by long shifts of eight to ten hours, where most workers had little physical mobility. But as one woman from Port aux Basques confidently rejoined when describing her work as a trimmer, "[n]ow some people would say 'I don't know how you can stand there for eight hours in one spot,' but that is the best thing I like to do in the fish plant - is trimming."¹² For this woman, the tiring and repetitive nature of the work she performed did not override her overall satisfaction with fish processing work. However, her attachment to her job might have stemmed more from the social and community-oriented nature of her work environment than the actual details of trimming tasks.

Indeed, one's ability to maintain a positive perspective was supported by a tight network of peers within the workplace. Although workers often varied in age, a close community of friends developed in plants with as many as 700 workers. "We were all friends," one respondent recalls, "[f]rom the day we stepped foot in the plant, if you came in today, you was our friend as soon as you got there. That's the way we were."¹³ Personal relationships between workers were often confined to the workplace, but this was mainly because many employees travelled from neighbouring outports to work in the fish plant. In the St. Anthony fish plant, for example, only ten percent of the workforce resided in the town. The remainder of workers travelled as long as one hour to work.¹⁴ Christmas parties, hockey leagues, and 50/50 draws gave workers some occasion to engage in authorized social activity at work.¹⁵ In rare instances, workers, both men and

women, would meet at a club on weekends.¹⁶ For the most part, however, plant floor friendships did not transcend the formal work environment.

Friendly relations on the plant floor often extended into a genuine concern for the social and economic stability of co-workers, their families and the wider outport community. Recognizing the widespread precarious nature of employment across Newfoundland and Labrador, workers often engaged in fundraising activities in order to provide immediate assistance to those faced with sudden need. As one woman explains, workers were “always collecting money for something. If somebody died, you went around to everybody and collected fifty cents, a quarter, a dollar, whatever.”¹⁷ In one case, a group of workers made a contribution towards the purchase of a special chair for a quality control inspector with chronic back problems.¹⁸ Another example included support and financial assistance for a worker who needed to fly to St. John’s for medical purposes.¹⁹ Whatever the cause, the widespread generosity and co-operation among men and women fish processors was a key feature of the work cultures that emerged in fish plants. Furthermore, it is not surprising that, as one worker further recounts, “the wages went up, the donations went up.”²⁰

In one telling example, workers in the St. Anthony fish plant collected over \$1200 in donations from employees. Workers scrambled to gather money after a fire destroyed two homes in the town: one that belonged to a co-worker and the other to a foreman in the plant. Interestingly, workers were equally generous in their monetary contributions to assist the foreman, a person in a position of greater wealth and authority, who found himself and his family unexpectedly in need. Collections were made for

anybody and everybody, “one no more than the other.”²¹ Underlying this conscious choice not to differentiate between the deservedness of fishery workers based on class status or hierarchical divisions among workers, lay a common understanding of the importance of region and regionalism in the Canadian political and economic landscape. For many workers, there was no escaping the reality that a personal or familial crisis, no matter who it befell, was of notable severity given the economic and social marginality and isolation of Newfoundland’s outport communities.²²

The significance of friendly informal and cultural rituals increased as commonly held sentiments of goodwill and co-operation were met with workers’ growing understanding of how trade unionism could potentially assist the equitable distribution of social welfare. During the NFFAW’s first and formative 1971 strike in Burgeo, Newfoundland, the newly established and critically inexperienced union relied heavily on similar methods of collective action to provide financial support for its striking workers. Plant workers in Harbour Breton, Port au Choix, and St. Anthony initiated an effort to donate one dollar a week to support the Burgeo Strike Fund, and other plants across the province soon followed their lead.²³ As knowledge of and support for trade unionism continued to spread throughout fishing communities in Newfoundland during the 1970s and 1980s, these communal efforts became woven into the NFFAW’s institutional discourses and practices of social justice. For example, a tragic fire in 1980, similar to the one described previously, incited a formal union response whereby a trust fund was established to provide ongoing assistance to one Catalina family.²⁴ Over time these actions came to permanently occupy an institutional place in the NFFAW and were

further understood as an integral component of trade unionism. This is evidenced by one worker's appreciation of the union's aid during a medical emergency. As he wrote in a letter published in *Union Forum*: "[t]his was not financial help but because of their understanding and willingness to help us they made the right contacts for me to get the assistance I badly needed ... It is too bad more people don't realize the benefits of our union and how they can be of help to them when needed."²⁵

The social networks, inclusive of a sincere concern for the overall health and welfare of co-workers and communities throughout the province, comprised a central component of the work cultures that emerged in the processing sector of Newfoundland's industrial fishery. Subsequent to widespread unionization in the industry, humanitarian interests found an institutional home within the NFFAW and this no doubt increased the frequency and scope of formal support offered by fellow workers and the union. However, while relations between workers could easily be identified and characterized as friendship and camaraderie, I do not want to represent Newfoundland's coastal communities in an overly idealistic manner. While a holistic concern for the social and economic security of those engaged in fishery work was espoused by both workers and union officials, community or regional ties could, at times, cause tension and potentially divisive attitudes among workers. For example, residents of more remote communities without a fish plant or similar infrastructure to sustain permanent processing employment sometimes complained they lived in a "forgotten area."²⁶ Similarly, one worker referred to the residents of the Great Northern Peninsula, the most northwest region of Newfoundland, as "forgotten people."²⁷ These accusations, whether critiquing the state's

management of the industry, a particular fish company, union policy, or even the collective actions of neighbouring communities, could sometimes strain relations between workers.

Also important is an analysis of how and why regional ties affected the daily processes of work in the fish plant. The most prominent examples of workplace tensions based on community affiliation emerged when regional marginality intersected with dominant class relations in workers' interactions with management. When asked if geographical segregation ever emerged in the workplace, one manager responded: "[a]lways. People always stuck together."²⁸ From a perspective of formal authority in the plant, he observed further that an allegiance to a particular community manifested itself as a desire for some workers to "stick together, eat together" and "work together" and that such relations were often considered by management in assigning work and particularly in the distribution of overtime hours:

... if you went down and said, 'I want you to work overtime,' – this was one of the things you would have to be very cautious of because, if you were going to ask some one from Goose Cove to work overtime, you had to ask everyone from Goose Cove to work overtime. There was a reason for that. Number one, they wanted to work together and the other part was that they carpooled together.²⁹

However, management's decision to offer overtime hours to a group of workers on the basis of their local community sometimes resulted in tensions between workers. In 1978, for example, two workers at the Bonavista Cold Storage Co. Ltd. fish plant in Fermeuse, filed a grievance after the company offered extra work to less senior employees. The company fully acknowledged in a statement made to the Labour Arbitration Board that their decision to call certain workers in for overtime had been made because these employees lived in close proximity to the fish plant.³⁰ Although this grievance explicitly

involved the honouring of seniority rights, interrogating the details of the case reveals the significance that community and region could have on the equitable distribution of resources in rural fishing economies.

Another more overt example of regional tensions in the workplace is evidenced through an examination of the circumstances surrounding a “manly fight”³¹ which broke out in a National Sea Products fish plant in St. John’s. Here, a male employee was discharged after threatening and assaulting the plant supervisor. According to the grievor, his personal interactions with plant management had consistently been marked by teasing and harassment because he was “from around the Bay.”³² In his arbitration hearing, the grievor said to company officials: “you’re always picking on me. If you’re from Shea Heights there’s nothing said to you, but if you’re from around the Bay, you’re picked on.”³³ While there is no question of the inappropriateness of this worker’s physical response to managerial controls, the discourses he drew upon to explain his behaviour - namely, discrimination on the basis of region - deserve further attention. That a worker would launch a grievance based on these grounds is telling of some of the cultural dimensions of worker/management relations in fish plants. While it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these regional tensions affected relations between workers, it is possible to highlight how an extension of managerial authority was sometimes interpreted by workers who felt marginalized and discriminated against on the basis of their community origins.

In analysing the daily cultural patterns that characterized the workplace, management’s treatment of fish processors is also revealed by exploring the significance

of religious affiliations among workers. The cultural landscape of Newfoundland and Labrador during the period in question was homogeneously Christian. Within this broad faith, several denominations could be found to dominate smaller outposts. Goose Cove, for example, was commonly known to be one of few Catholic communities on the Great Northern Peninsula.³⁴ Because employees in fish plants typically came from a range of communities, there could be as many as five or six subsets of a broadly defined Christian faith represented in the workplace. Workers consistently maintained that religious difference did not engender conflict among their peers.³⁵ Most of the time, workers were either unaware or were forgetful of religious difference among their co-workers: "... religion's never been a problem in the plant. Even some days, I say I was a Catholic and they say, 'oh my God, I forgot it was you!' I blend in with the rest."³⁶

Strong religious ties among workers could in fact be an asset to union organizing. Commenting on the enjoyment and relative ease of organizing labour within Salvation Army communities such as Trinity Bay, Richard Cashin felt "it was part of their social gospel."³⁷ At critical periods during the union's history, religious officials would submit articles to the *Union Forum* in an effort to garner support for the struggles of fishery workers and the NFFAW.³⁸ Authoritative union texts often discussed changes in fishery policy and company directives as a violation of the 'moral obligation' they felt companies had towards workers.³⁹ Perhaps the most striking example of the strategic use of religious discourse for the purpose of worker mobilization emerged subsequent to Pope John Paul II's visit to Newfoundland in 1984. Prior to blessing a fishing fleet in Flatrock, Newfoundland, the Pope gave an empowering lecture during which he "stressed that in

the restructuring of the fishing industry human needs must be put before profits.”⁴⁰ One article in *Union Forum* strategically highlighted parts of the Pope’s gospel that corresponded with the ideological leanings and issues taken up by the union:

Relating the scourge of unemployment to the concentration of ownership in fewer and fewer hands, he warned that large industrial fishing companies run the risk of losing contact with the fishermen and their personal and family needs.

He suggested the promotion of fishermen’s co-operatives, collective agreements between workers and management and some form of joint ownership or partnership as possible solution which would give working people a voice in the decisions affecting their own lives.⁴¹

Cashin, who was President of the NFFAW at the time of the historic visit, was quoted as feeling the “Pope was always on this side of the issues.”⁴² Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the authoritative message about the importance of collective mobilization in *Union Forum*’s report of the events: “‘Keep your organization together,’ were the Holy Father’s parting words.”⁴³

Thus, the moral authority of religious officials was used effectively by the NFFAW to mobilize working-class people within the fishery. While the union’s emphasis on the value of cooperation and acceptance of peers served to quell any tendency for conflict based on religious difference among workers on the plant floor, work environments were not entirely immune to the practices of religious discrimination. Although the women I interviewed stressed that religion was insignificant and barely noticeable among daily interactions between workers, one managerial perspective indicated that those in positions of authority were very aware of religious difference:

It [religion] was very visible all the time. Some people would sing a hymn while they were working. Some people would say, ‘I don’t work on Sundays because I am saved.’ Come into the lunchroom and you’d see a sign that says ‘Jesus Saves’ or they would have all kinds of words from the bible or pictures and so on. ... We addressed it: ‘sorry, you can’t put this on the wall. If you want to stick it on the

bumper of your car, that's fine, but in here – no, we can't allow it.' ... In a lot of cases we nipped that stuff in the bud. This is a workplace.⁴⁴

The contradictions between management's and workers' perception of religious difference at work may indicate that, at least in the processes of labour organizing, workers might temporarily put their differences aside to focus on the broader interests of fishery workers. Yet, one processor, who confidently noted that religious difference had little impact on worker relations, recalled that when issues did arise in the workplace, it was often as a result of the incessant prodding of religious workers by supervisors: "some people tend to, not the workers, but our foreman if they got a chance, they would use foul language in front of them [Pentecostal employees]. They would do it then, right, just to tantalize them."⁴⁵ Consistent with my earlier discussion of the significance of region and community in the workplace, fish plant work cultures included the visibility of religious affiliation among its workers. However, while tensions based on difference were effectively discouraged among the rank-and-file, conflict periodically emerged in the plant. In these instances, it was those in managerial positions who would assert their authority and present challenges to workers to whom they knew religious affiliation was important.

The research presented thus far has revealed how some of the cultural dimensions of fishery work, such as friendships, the collective understanding of the need for social justice, and the overall acceptance of regional and religious differences among workers, influenced social relations among processors and managers in fish plants. I have also established that those in managerial positions occupied an influential position in determining how such relations might unfold at work. I turn now to a more thorough

investigation of how patterned work rituals centred on workers' negotiations of formal managerial controls. My aim is to explore how the official, authoritative discourses of the NFFAW helped in the ideological construction and maintenance of the "all powerful" fish company.⁴⁶ I also discuss how managers formally and informally attempted to exert control over the workforce and reveal how these managerial strategies were sometimes resisted by men and women, and how the oppositional actions of workers comprised a central feature of processing cultures. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how individual and collective resistance strategies were gendered, thus revealing the beginnings of a gendered class identity and solidarity among women fish processors.

* * *

Given the difficulty involved in providing a representative or uniform account of relations between managers and workers, it may be useful to examine how the union interpreted the dominance of fish companies in its institutional texts. The first issues of *Union Forum* held critical warnings of the potential for managers to exploit their powerful positions of authority in the plant. The union furthered its own legitimacy by advocating for workers' needs in the case of arbitrary management; for example, if the "foreman does not happen to like the look of your face."⁴⁷ In a similar example, the union clearly stated that an integral part of its mandate included a concerted challenge against unfair managerial controls: "[t]he most important thing here, more important than the wages is the matter of working conditions. That is that a man has no rights. If he doesn't get along with his employer he is out."⁴⁸ Beyond the gendered language used to describe this scenario, official union discourses, while appearing objective, reinforced the

importance of the union's presence by providing a threatening account of the potential of one company's unchecked dominance.

Women's own understandings and recollections of managers offered, for the most part, a more subtle account of worker-managerial relations in fish plants. They acknowledged that while problems had always existed between workers, managers, and the union, "overall, there were good relationships."⁴⁹ One worker's experience of management was notably positive: "If you couldn't get along with him [the plant manager], you couldn't get along with anybody. And he went out of his way, many times, to help people out."⁵⁰ Similarly, one worker recounted how foremen were sometimes known to "stand in the middle of the floor, y'know, just laugh, y'know, and go right to town with the workers."⁵¹ She further explains that "they were a bit strict" and "they wanted the product done ... but overall, the foremen were pretty good."⁵² This same worker later mentioned that she had been offered numerous managerial positions over her years in the plant, but had refused them because, as she explained, 'my God, I got too much union in me to ever be management.'⁵³ These comments further exemplify how, despite union discourses stressing adversarial workplace relations, workers' personal recollections reflect a somewhat more cooperative work culture.

Women also noted the changes to the work environment that transpired subsequent to shifts in plant management. For example, when Fishery Products International purchased the family-owned Port aux Basques plant, one worker recounted how once amicable relations with the one or two foremen on the floor changed after foremen were stationed in every department or area. "That was so hard to get used to."⁵⁴

For the most part, however, the women I interviewed maintained that reasonably good relations continued with managers.

While workers' evaluations of their employer were generally positive, good relations were often contingent upon the attainment of certain company-defined behavioural norms at work. Fish plant work was guided by an extensive set of plant rules that served as a managerial control on the rank-and-file while providing some degree of insurance of worker productivity. Covering such issues as attitude and behaviour, violence, accident prevention, fish contamination and other disciplinary standards, these rules can be analysed as one method by which a company could exert formal regulatory and disciplinary power in the workplace. Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose have conceptualised the nature of power within multiple government institutions, local authorities, and capitalist enterprise (in my study is examine the fish company) as manifested in the successful transference of particular objectives among its constituents, where the values and beliefs of these groups is transformed "into a matter of fact."⁵⁵ When individuals accept, according to Miller and Rose, the "values of others ... such that they provide norms and standards of their own ambitions, judgements and conduct, a network has been composed that enables rule 'at a distance.'"⁵⁶ Indeed, workers' narratives in this section demonstrate how company directives, managerial authority, and acceptable or 'moral' forms of behaviour at work, became encoded in many workers' understanding of their place within the industry and in relation to management. This often resulted in workers' accommodation and self-regulation at work. However, in some cases, where a written prescription or formal discourses could not serve to fully regulate

behaviour, managers would take more formal action to enforce the rules. In one case, this involved placing an attendant in the employee washroom to monitor the area and deter workers from loitering.⁵⁷ Moreover, taken as a whole, the plant rules can be evaluated for their ideological purposes, namely, to maintain certain class and gender hierarchies among workers. One central element of processing cultures, then, was a continual and strategic negotiation of formal managerial controls by workers.

One way in which managers earned the co-operation of workers was through the rhetoric of quality control. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the value of producing a high quality fish product rose in importance among managerial discourses and, by extension, dominant capitalist ideologies. More thorough and standardized processing practices and the introduction of quality control inspectors on the processing line marked the increased significance of mindful production. These safeguards were necessary to “*maximize productivity with high quality standards*” and thus move the “*company forward as being one of the number one seafood processors in the province* [emphasis added].”⁵⁸ But these formal controls required the support and compliance of the processors who handled the products:

Quality has to be taught for a person to recognize what it is that produces a good quality product. We wanted to take a different approach from being an inspector to being an educator, to educating employees to understand the benefits. At the end of the day, your paycheck really comes out of the good quality product you produce. ...because once you train people and you train them in the way you want them, people will understand very clearly and a certain amount of self-supervision sets in.⁵⁹

Moreover, managerial discourses capitalized on common sense arguments to promote high quality fish production. Whereas workers rarely reaped the benefits of increased profits, managers regularly heralded the personal and regional importance of producing a

top product: “You have to have a certain amount of pride in yourself and in your province and you want to see to it that you produce the best possible product.”⁶⁰ In many cases, workers accepted these official managerial discourses with little dissension:

Working in the fish plant, to me, is no different than being in Alberta, working in a meat market. Or being in Toronto working in a trout factory. It’s food that’s being processed to be put on a market worldwide, so you gotta take pride in your work and you gotta do it as well as you can.⁶¹

However, this woman later provided some critique of the demands which supervisors placed on workers in attaining minimum performance standards: “[t]hey were there for quality and quantity, but if you put one of them down there on the line, they wouldn’t even be able to do half the work.”⁶²

Yet, in the narratives of other workers, such examples of overt criticism did not match their concern for the importance of following plant rules. During the interviews I conducted, women repeatedly stressed the importance of ‘obeying the rules.’ One woman even described it as the most important characteristic of her work as a fish processor.⁶³ As she elaborated further, “[t]he first step is to pay attention – and do what you’re told to do!”⁶⁴ Another woman commented on the ability of supervisors to keep a watchful eye on worker actions. In her evaluation, managers would allow a set period of time to learn a new task, but over time, a minimum level of productivity was expected from the employee. She also noted, somewhat fearfully, that managers “knew exactly” how much fish a worker had processed, and this added pressures on the workers, in meeting a minimum quota.⁶⁵ One respondent mentioned that a handful of women were so fearful of management and their inability to meet these standards, that they refused to take a washroom break all day.⁶⁶

Moreover, for most men and women who worked in fish plants during the 1970s and 1980s, processing cultures resulted in the emergence of informal and formal strategies of worker resistance to plant rules. It is in the scope and character of these responses that men's and women's gendered experiences of fish processing work became most obvious. As the above passages indicate, women possessed very strong beliefs about the importance of obeying company rules and, thus, tended to opt for more subtle forms of workplace resistance. For example, some women attempted to ease the physical stresses associated with long hours of standing in one spot by taking unsanctioned washroom breaks. When not being directly observed by a foreman, a woman with more mobility, such as a quality control inspector, would sometimes package fish for a friend on the packing line while that woman went to sit down or have a cigarette.⁶⁷ By this method, fish packers would still be able to produce their hourly yield without becoming overly tired. Similarly, another respondent recounted how she would use her allowable washroom breaks both before and after a scheduled break-time to lengthen the amount of time she could rest. In these ways, women's strategies included more subtle attempts to bend the plant rules.

Stephen Meyer, in his study of masculinity and worker-managerial shop floor relations in American auto-manufacturing industries between 1930 and 1960, has suggested that "the restroom, the most private of human spaces, often served as a sanctuary from the inhuman rhythms of factory production" and "helped to humanize the tightly regimented and controlled workplace."⁶⁸ Indeed, within Newfoundland's fish plants, the washroom provided some respite for both women and men during the course

of a shift. Unsanctioned washroom breaks emerged as a key site of resistance, a space where workers could ease the tensions and stresses of prolonged hours and restricted mobility of processing work. The use and abuse of washroom 'privileges' emerged as a central theme within both the oral histories and labour arbitration case files analysed for this study. Women's, and also some men's, strategic use of the washroom illustrates how they created a space in which to negotiate managerial controls. Although fear of reprimand meant that not all workers used the washroom as a space of resistance, it was still very much a site of contestation among workers and management. The company's decision to monitor the washroom in effect reveals a struggle to maintain its control over the workforce. Where the presence of a company official could not deter the use of the washroom by workers, managers might impose penalty, as did Fishery Products Limited in Catalina, where 71 male and female employees were suspended for washroom infractions between June 9th and September 10th, 1982.⁶⁹

For men who worked in fish processing, a somewhat different picture emerges. Men were more likely to present overt challenges to supervisors on the shop floor, occasionally through the use of violent behaviour. Men were also more likely to engage in other banned behaviour such as alcohol consumption at work, sometimes hiding bottles in the flush boxes of toilets.⁷⁰ Meyer has made similar observations, noting how, despite the health and safety hazards of such behaviour, alcohol consumption at work might numb a worker's senses and reduce "the tedium, fatigue, and monotony" of work.⁷¹ Among the labour arbitration files I analysed for this study, an overwhelming majority of grievances in cases of disciplinary discharge involved male employees. Women, by

contrast, were more likely to appeal cases involving vacation pay or seniority rights. This may indicate further the prevalence of normalized masculine behaviour on the plant floor where, according to Meyer, men attempted to protect and foster their pre-industrial masculine identities by fostering a playful, and sometimes rough, workplace culture in the face of Taylorist and Fordist managerial strategies.⁷²

Moreover, the approaches to worker discipline in fish plants by the fish company were often gendered. Where managers were unable to instill effectively 'self-regulation' mechanisms within a worker, they would sometimes provoke aggressive behaviour in this 'problem' worker and later use formal processes of discharge against that employee. This strategy was used regularly for male employees.⁷³ As one woman explained:

I think there are a selective few in the plant that the foreman doesn't like. They could be a little louder than somebody else or whatever. ... I think sometimes you're circled out and you're not very well liked and it's just that the foreman will try to pick on this one here, and then the argument goes on from there. But it's just a selective few, not very many.⁷⁴

Managers, then, would deliberately incite violent behaviour in male workers to exert discipline where they saw fit. By contrast, when women emerged in labour arbitration cases involving unsanctioned behaviour, the company often cited examples of talking too much or abusing washroom privileges to justify their decision to suspend a worker or refuse them overtime work.⁷⁵ Thus supervisors used gendered tactics to maintain and regulate the workforce. While men might be prompted to use foul language or violence, women were closely watched for their less overt infractions of the plant rules.

However, when women engaged in behaviour that was not considered feminine, such as drinking on the job, moral commentary emerged in the labour arbitration case files. While the company passed little judgement in men's cases of alcohol consumption

at work, one case involving a woman who was found singing and dancing in the bathroom while inebriated prompted a barrage of remarks about the nature of her behaviour. For example, the language she used to respond to supervisors during this episode was described by company officials as “not becoming of woman.”⁷⁶ Her actions, the company maintained, did not constitute “normal behaviour for a 50 year old woman to exhibit.”⁷⁷ In one blatant remark, the company further appealed to the board to uphold the grievor’s suspension, stating, “it is obvious that we are not dealing with an angel.”⁷⁸ Thus, among the authoritative and ‘factual’ accounts of disciplinary infractions within fish plants, women’s actions were understood to encompass more than surface appearances. Where women deviated from commonly accepted behavioural norms, managers were known to pass moral judgment on the nature of their character. Fear of this outcome undoubtedly held some influence in women’s choices to accommodate employer demands.

Lastly, it is important to consider the significance of gender to collective resistance and action among processing workers. When men and women felt exasperated by arbitrary managerial practices in the workplace, they might sometimes engage in illegal wildcat strikes or plant walkouts to voice their concerns. While these actions were not sanctioned by the NFFAW, they were often effective in asserting workers’ immediate dissatisfaction with the company. When workers engaged in walkouts, they often did so as a collective and, thus, transcended the gendered divisions and hierarchies that existed in the plant. One St. Anthony worker recalled a situation where workers, both men and women, collectively mobilized against a manager who was one of “those kind” who

“what they said went, right? And whether he was right or whether he was wrong, you had to do it.”⁷⁹ One morning when workers arrived at work, they waited outside the plant gates for this supervisor to arrive. When he drove up in his car, he was told to stay in his vehicle. A group of workers then physically lifted his car, turned it around, and subsequently told this manager to “get off the premises and not to come back.”⁸⁰ His position was promptly filled.

In other instances, women were instrumental to the processes by which walkouts occurred. One woman recounted how women on the packing and trimming lines in the Port Aux Basques plant were, one on occasion, approached by a group of male cutters who were initiating a work stoppage: “We asked, ‘what’s your problem?’ ‘You’ll find out when you get up there.’ So then the workers started going, right?”⁸¹ Further into this process, the men decided to terminate the labour stoppage and return to work. This outraged some of the women, for whom the decision to participate in a walkout could spell disciplinary reprimand: “And I said, ‘listen! We didn’t even know what this was all about! You haul us off the line and want our support – we’re here, now you sit down! We’re staying here until this is finished! You stay! You sit down now!’”⁸² This indicates that women, although marginalized by the gendered division of labour and less overt in their personal opposition to management, were active participants in the processes of informal collective labour mobilization. Many women were quick to comply with requests for action from their male counterparts, but in the final analysis, possessed some measure of autonomy in these situations.

* * *

The daily patterns of processing work in Newfoundland fish plants during the 1970s and 1980s encompassed common understandings and appreciation for the rural character of industrial fishery work. Friendships developed among workers, and these relationships often transcended religious difference and geographical segregation, although supervisors were sometimes known to highlight these variations on the plant floor. These networks were often strengthened by formal union discourse, which stressed the need for co-operation in the face of potentially exploitative, capitalist employers. As a result of the amicable relations that developed between workers, the NFFAW was able to use effectively existing social networks to further its aims of advocating for workers rights. In actuality, workplace relations were more complex than what was implied by the union's homogenous depiction of the 'all powerful' fish company. Workers readily recounted how relations with management were, for the most part, quite acceptable. However, management consistently exerted capitalist-driven goals of reaching the highest possible profits and this was achieved by instilling self-regulation mechanisms among its workforce. Workers absorbed the rhetoric of quality control, simultaneously asserting the importance of their work and the products they made. One integral component of the culture of fish processing included workers' acceptance of plant rules, and their subsequent accommodation and resistance to these demands illustrates their struggles for autonomy and control within the workplace. For women, already occupying a marginal place in the plant, the washroom emerged as a primary space in which to temporarily escape the tightly controlled work environment. An evaluation of workers' informal and formal, individual and collective resistance strategies reveals that male and female

workers experienced the cultural dimensions of the work environment and the negotiation of managerial controls in different ways.

Though a shared but distinctly gendered work culture emerged from the gendered division of labour in fish plants, the development of a community of peers and an understanding of the labour process proved formative for the rise of women's organizing in the NFFAW. Having firmly established a class-based understanding of their position as part of the rank-and-file, women came to understand further their gendered positioning within their communities, the plant, and the union. The next chapter explores the processes by which women strategically organized within the union to address their gendered workplace concerns.

¹ Sallie Westwood, *All Day Every Day: Factory and Family in the Making of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 89. For the sources of Westwood's discussion, see Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Ritual: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Hutchison, 1976); Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971); Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds., *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

² Westwood, 89;101. For a discussion of women's strategic use of 'femininity' and sexuality to counter managerial controls, see Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

³ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1980-1940* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 228.

⁴ Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 107.

⁵ Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 66.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Pamela Sugiman, "Unionism and Feminism in the Canadian Auto Workers Union, 1961-1992," in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, eds. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 181.

⁸ Benson, 268.

⁹ Stephen Meyer, "Work, Play and Power: Masculine Culture on the Automotive Shop Floor, 1930-1960," in *Boys and Their Toys? Masculinity, Class and Technology in America*, ed. Roger Horowitz (New York: Routledge, 2001), 13.

¹⁰ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

¹¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

¹² Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.

¹³ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

¹⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

¹⁷ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

¹⁸ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

²² It is important to consider the possible influences of paternalism in small outports with locally owned fish plants. Joan Sangster, through an interrogation of worker management relations in small-town Ontario, has noted how the close geographical proximity of those who occupied different rungs of the workplace hierarchy, or even different class positions, sometimes resulted in the strategic use of paternalism by company officials. Gendered managerial strategies and, subsequently, worker accommodation, she contends further, created the "illusion of an organic community in which class and community interest were one and the same." Sangster, 163. With the data collected for this study, it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which paternalism impacted the relatively benevolent gestures which fishery workers extended to both their peers and those who occupied a better class position. For another relevant account of paternalism, industry, and rural Ontario, see Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1890–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), Chapter Two.

²³ "Burgeoning! The Second Time Around," *Union Forum* March 1971: 7.

²⁴ "Benefit Trust Fund to Catalina Worker," *Union Forum* April 1980: 20.

²⁵ John King, "Letter to Editor," *Union Forum* May 1983: 6.

²⁶ "Random Island Fishery Growing," *Union Forum* September 1979: 13.

²⁷ Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #5, September 14, 2002.

²⁸ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between Bonavista Cold Storage Co. Ltd. (Fermeuse, Newfoundland) and Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1252," Case Reference AD 615, 10 July 1978.

³¹ Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between National Sea Products Limited (St. John's, Newfoundland) and Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1252," Case Reference AD 578, 5 June 1978.

³² A portion of the workforce in the St. John's National Sea Products fish plant resided in small rural communities outside the city. These people are commonly referred to as being "from around the bay." Another prominent group of workers in the plant were residents of a St. John's working class neighbourhood, Shea Heights.

³³ "National Sea Products (St. John's) and the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1252," 6.

³⁴ Personal interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.

³⁵ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002. Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002. Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.

³⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

³⁷ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Richard Cashin, Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union Co-Founder and Past President, St. John's, July 31, 2000.

³⁸ Reverend J. Burke, "A Cause for Christian Concern," *Union Forum* August 1971: 16-17; "Bishops Statement A Boost for Labour ... But Not for Government," *Union Forum* March 1983: 18-19; "Archbishop Speaks on Fishing Industry," *Union Forum* September-October 1984: 16.

³⁹ "Insufficient Notice: Union Files Complaint Over Plant Closures," *Union Forum* March 1983: 18-19; "Archbishop Speaks on Fishing Industry," 24.

⁴⁰ "Pope Defends Workers' Rights," *Union Forum* September-October 1984: 9.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.

⁴⁵ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

⁴⁶ "Burgeio: A Union Breakthrough," *Union Forum* November 1970: 5.

⁴⁷ "Jeremy Fehar, "What Can You Buy for \$6.00?" *Union Forum* March 1971: 11.

⁴⁸ "Burgeio: A Union Breakthrough," 5.

⁴⁹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.

⁵⁰ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁵¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, "Political Power Beyond the State: Problematics of Government," *British Journal of Sociology* 43.2 (1992): 184.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between Fishery Products Ltd. (Trepassey, Newfoundland) and Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1252," Case Reference AD 827, 13 September 1979.

⁵⁸ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁶⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

⁶⁷ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁶⁸ Meyer, 22.

⁶⁹ Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between Fishery Products Ltd. (Catalina, Newfoundland) and Newfoundland,

Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1252," Case Reference AD 1246, 28 January 1983.

⁷⁰ Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between Fishery Products Ltd. (Trepassey, Newfoundland) and Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1252," Case Reference AD 1129, 14 October 1981.

⁷¹ Meyer, 22.

⁷² Meyer, 17. For a good study of Taylorist principles and the rise of technology and automation in the Newfoundland Fishery, see Fishery Research Group, *The Social Impact of Technological Change in Newfoundland's Deepsea Fishery* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1986).

⁷³ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between Bonavsita Cold Storage Co. Ltd. (Fermeuse, Newfoundland) and Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 349," Case Reference AD 556, 14 October 1977; Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between Fishery Products Ltd. (Catalina, Newfoundland) and Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1253," Case Reference AD 538, 27 March 1978.

⁷⁶ Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Labour and Manpower Library, [DLML] "Report of an Arbitration Between Fishery Products Ltd. (Trepassey, Newfoundland) and the Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers, Local 1252," Case Reference AD 1260, 23 August 1982.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #5, September 14, 2002.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

⁸² Ibid.

Chapter Four: The Rise of Women's Organizing and the Formation of the NFFAW Women's Committee

The 1970s and 1980s in Newfoundland and Labrador were characterized by significant changes in the social, economic, and political landscape of the region. Within the fishing industry, these decades were particularly tumultuous. As earlier chapters have shown, during the early years of the 1970s workers witnessed and were participants in the growth of large-scale industrial processing of fish products. Roughly one decade later, they began to experience the material effects of unsustainable harvesting technologies and, as a result, processing systems and the industry entered into a series of struggles with declining fish stocks. In August and September of 1981, it seemed the industry was transformed virtually overnight as the major companies operating throughout the province announced devastating layoffs that would reduce the total workforce by one-third.¹ For those whose livelihoods depended on fish resources, this period marked their official entry into subsequent decades of insecure employment as the industry continued to decline. As work became increasingly scarce in remote regions of the province and communities vied for reduced processing ventures, the less than decade old NFFAW was regularly challenged by a neoliberal agenda among company officials and policy makers. Among the rank-and-file, workers pushed to exercise their labour rights to the fullest possible extent. For women working in fish plants, structural changes within the industry were particularly devastating. Seasonal plants, where women comprised a majority of the workforce, were more likely to be subjected to shortened processing seasons and plant closures and, within larger plants, women's overall concentration in the lowest paid, least

valued positions placed them on the margins of this struggling workforce. Yet, in contrast to many women's growing social and economic insecurity within the industry during this period, these years were marked by an insurgence of women's labour organizing. This chapter explores how and why, despite the struggles of the union and the context of crisis and decline within the industry, women were able to initiate effectively the processes of 'feminist' labour organizing through the establishment of a provincial Women's Committee of the NFFAW in 1984. Born out of the context of common networks of understanding and work cultures which were punctuated by individual and collective forms of workplace resistance, many women came to recognize the gendered underpinnings of their marginal place within the workplace and, subsequently, challenged the union to assist them in exposing and remedying the gendered ideological assumptions which upheld labour divisions and workplace inequalities.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the importance of situating women's organizing in the NFFAW within the broader Canadian political climate of the 1970s and 1980s. During this period of social transformation, the experiences of workers in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery did not exist in isolation from the labour and women's movements that had gained considerable prominence at local and national levels. I offer a brief review of the emergence of socialist-feminist activism in Canada, highlighting the relevance of the feminist movements to women's organizing in the NFFAW. Building on my discussions of work cultures from the previous chapter, I examine the common experiences and tensions many women faced as they attempted to negotiate the demands of their paid and unpaid labour. I also discuss how these struggles

were, at times, frustrated by an historically-rooted gendered division of labour which placed little material and ideological value on women's paid labour contributions to the fishery. I reveal further how women came to draw upon the dominant discourses of the labour and women's movements to understand and articulate their marginal position within the industry. The executive ranks of the NFFAW were quite sympathetic to these concerns and, in turn, facilitated the formalization of a provincial Women's Committee within the official institutional structure of the union. The last section of this chapter presents an evaluation of the Women's Committee, including its successes and limitations in alleviating workplace inequalities for women fish plant workers, and as a strategy for facilitating women's involvement in formal union processes.

* * *

It is not coincidental that the emergence and growth of the NFFAW and women's organizing within the union paralleled larger social movements occurring elsewhere in Canada and abroad during the last half of the twentieth century. For working-class Canadians, the growth of the welfare state was experienced in tandem with the rise of the "era of free collective bargaining" and this resulted in a greater inclination toward, and indeed more opportunities for, political mobilization among workers.² According to Gordon Inglis, some important parallels existed in Newfoundland's social and cultural climate during the 1960s and 1970s:

Newfoundland had passed through thirty years of social change during which an isolated, traditional society had been exposed with increasing intensity to influences and examples of other, more affluent places. For twenty of those years, since Confederation with Canada, her people had undergone a 'revolution of rising expectations' fed by mass communication media and their own political leaders. And Newfoundland, although on the periphery, was after all a part of the

Western world. While the cumulative effects of her own recent history were reaching a peak she was also experiencing the broader social upheavals of the 1960s.³

The founding of the NFFAW in 1971 was inextricably tied to the increasing militancy of the Canadian labour movement and the overall struggles of workers in furthering rights and freedoms for labour. These years were also crucial in securing linkages and coalitions between the union and broader labour affiliates such as the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour, the Canadian Labour Congress, and the New Democratic Party.

One of the greatest achievements for organized labour during the 1960s and 1970s was the widespread unionization of public service workers. At federal, provincial and municipal levels, the 'third wave' of unionism in Canada was marked by a growing dissatisfaction with limited bargaining and striking rights among these workers and, subsequently, the rise of militant action within the civil service.⁴ The growth of unionism within this employment sector held significant implications for working women in Canada. The unionization of teachers and nurses – fields densely populated by women – meant that large numbers of women were participating in political and labour mobilization at unprecedented rates.⁵ By 1975, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), led by Grace Hartmann, had become the largest union in Canada, held the largest percentage of women within its membership, and was, as I will discuss further on, providing critical institutional support for working class women across the country.⁶

As much as nationwide labour movements provided institutional and ideological support for unionism among fishery workers, the rise of the women's movement was

similarly significant in exposing workers to feminist critiques of the class and gender structures which upheld the functioning of capital in the Canadian context. Recent feminist scholarship has made an important contribution to earlier research which has explored the dominance of white and middle-class interests within the Canadian women's movement.⁷ Although many of these women successfully used liberal and institutional approaches to achieving feminist aims within this period and racial biases existed on many levels within the movement, it remains important to consider seriously Meg Luxton's contention that, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, "working-class and socialist feminist activists developed a strong feminist presence in the labour movement and a significant working class orientation in the women's movement."⁸ The research presented in this chapter supports Luxton's critique by providing evidence which counters the view that the women's movement was largely "middle class and focussed on reforming the state."⁹

In analyzing the oral histories collected for this study, I have exercised great caution in using the term 'feminist' to describe the organized efforts of women fish plant workers. Although the Women's Committee's framework for understanding gender inequalities within the fishing industry undoubtedly encompassed feminist aims, it is important to note that not all women I interviewed would agree with such an analysis. While some women hesitantly identified their efforts as feminist, noting that the Women's Committee was not looking for "anything extra,"¹⁰ one woman laughed at my inquiry as to whether she considered her efforts as feminist. She responded,

I don't think the women there were what you'd call feminist. They were fish plant

workers, so I don't think so. I know that the movement was going on, they burned their bra and all this stuff. I don't think so. I mean, they were for women's rights and all that and they wanted to be treated like everybody else, you know? I guess there were feminists in Newfoundland, but not fish plant workers.¹¹

I believe these comments reflect how popular and sensationalized depictions of the women's movement in the mainstream media sometimes made it difficult for many Newfoundland and Labrador women to see their own struggles and issues reflected in the 'second wave' movement. A few women, however, adamantly defended their feminist stance. One woman concisely (and probably very accurately) described the question of 'feminism' within the NFFAW, stating:

For most of us, yes. Most of us, in turn, became feminists. I mean, I myself went on to more education and some of the people just phased on out with the changeover, but I'm sure that more than 70 percent of us, yes, are still feminists. And they've grown. I'm so proud of them – they've got everything down pat now and they know what they want.¹²

While not all women may have identified themselves as 'feminists,' it is imperative to recognize how the processes Luxton describe "created a space and legitimacy for union-based, working-class feminism."¹³ However, as much as these social movements were integral to informal and formal organizing among working women, it was often women's marginal position within the labour movement and within unions which prompted them to mobilize.

Although my analysis of the processes of women's organizing predominantly focuses on the institutional framework of the NFFAW, my select emphasis should not preclude women's earlier, albeit very limited, contributions to labour organizing in the fishing industry, efforts which do not fall under this category. In addition to the individual and collective examples of workplace resistance cited in the previous chapter,

other secondary literature indicates both the centrality of women's efforts in labour disputes and the gendered nature of the methods and strategies by which women became involved in these struggles.¹⁴ Prior to 1980, only a few examples of women's involvement in labour organizing within the fishing industry emerge in the *Union Forum*. The scarcity of these accounts can be explained by several factors. For example, the more radical elements of protest encompassed by strikes and picket lines, particularly during the first half of the 1970s, was quite possibly not considered an acceptable form of organizing for women. Outport communities had long been characterized by a gendered division of labour which defined the scope of women's contributions to the functioning of the familial saltfish industry. It is possible that similar divisions emerged in labour organizing. In addition, the gendered processes of industrialization, those which maintained that women's paid labour was both supplementary and temporary, excluded women from commonly held definitions of 'the worker.' Women, although a growing percentage of the workforce in fish plants, were ideologically marginal to the processes of labour organizing and were not believed to be a permanent part of the labour force. It is not surprising then that the union's early coverage of labour mobilization generally overlooked women workers, stressing instead the importance of unionism in furthering the needs of "the man in the boat" and "the man in the fish plant."¹⁵

When women's involvement was acknowledged, their labour was often depicted as peripheral to the core struggles and involved stereotypically feminine activities. In its coverage of the Burgeo strike of 1971, for example, the *Union Forum* recounted the work of a Union Women's Auxiliary, describing it as a "group formed by women of the

community to bolster the morale of the people on the picket line.”¹⁶ In addition to providing emotional support to the presumably male strikers who were probably their husbands, sons, and/or brothers, the article noted that the Auxiliary “sponsored” (and cooked?) a dinner to celebrate that workers had received their first instalment of strike pay.¹⁷

A later issue of *Union Forum* also acknowledged women’s participation in the 1978 NFFAW Convention. Although pages of this issue were dedicated to a seemingly ‘gender-neutral’ discussion of the issues and priorities of the Union, women workers were featured having a “Ladies Luncheon” with Reverend Desmond McGrath.¹⁸ The preparation of food also emerged in my interviews with plant workers, as one woman recounted how her four and six hour shifts on the picket line during a strike at the St. Anthony plant involved the making and serving of coffee and sandwiches.¹⁹

While women’s contributions to labour organizing were connected to dominant gender norms and this, ultimately, reinforced their ideological positioning as transient workers within the industry, it is critical not to devalue the importance of their work to both the processes of labour mobilization and the maintenance of solidarity within the union. As Barbara Neis has argued, common conceptions of what constitutes political action are sometimes tied to the formal institutional sphere of politics, and such narrow definitions sometimes exclude the informal and local manifestations of political organizing where women’s efforts are often found.²⁰ In her study of women’s collective actions to stop a fish plant closure in Burin, Newfoundland, she recounts how the formation of a ‘protest line’²¹ by community members emerged as a “female institution”

mainly because of the traditional sex-segregation of labour within rural fishing communities. Although the women in Neis' study were not employed at the fish plant, this example of women's contributions to labour organizing at the onset of the 1980s highlights how non-conventional political action facilitated women's entry into the processes of labour activism, where the protest line "became [women's] domain and ... a symbol of their ability to fight the company and both levels of government."²²

Moreover, Richard Cashin, in his recollections of women's roles in union formation, stressed the importance of women plant workers to the growth of the NFFAW. According to Cashin, many women who worked in fish plants were wives of fishermen and "as a consequence, women, from the early days, played a greater role in the establishment of the union and the maintenance of it, in many of these communities."²³ In seasonal fish plants, where women often comprised a majority of workers, their involvement was crucial in unionizing the workforce. As Cashin succinctly noted, "if you didn't organize women in the seasonal plants, you didn't win."²⁴ As the above examples indicate, women's roles and methods of involvement in these processes often emerged in accordance with dominant gender expectations, but women's support for the labour movement, in whatever form it took, was essential to the growth of the NFFAW.

By the end of the 1970s, industrial unionism among fishery workers had become entrenched within the political landscape of Newfoundland and Labrador. As discussed in previous chapters, the daily interactions which characterized the workplace, although rooted in gendered divisions on the plant floor, had produced a cultural framework through which women were able to identify and resist managerial strategies. In doing so,

women often drew upon their newly established knowledge of labour rights. However, not all of the tensions emerging from women's experiences of paid employment could be readily countered by the formal institutional discourses of industrial unionism. Indeed, the NFFAW offered little support as women manoeuvred the challenge of combining their paid work within the fish plant with their various obligations to their families. Central to this struggle was women's increasing awareness that the realities of paid employment could not, as Linda Briskin suggests, "be neatly compartmentalized and separated from the non-work experience of politics, family and leisure."²⁵ I now turn to a discussion of women's personal accounts of coping with household and workplace demands.

* * *

All of the women I interviewed for this study raised children while working in their respective fish plants. Throughout our conversations, women recounted the struggles of managing paid employment with childcare and other domestic work such as cooking and cleaning. As discussed in Chapter One, in many cases women's primary responsibilities for these tasks had been carried over from the traditional household divisions that characterized the pre-industrial fishery. However, with the separation of home and work after industrialization, these responsibilities remained within women's jurisdiction, even though many women had *permanently* entered the workforce. Continuing to meet caregiving and other household demands required careful planning and execution:

I was the one who got the kids up for school and then got them their breakfast,

and then I would do a little bit of work, then I'd have a nap and I'd make sure that when [my husband] got home I'd have dinner for him, or lunch, or whatever. Then in the afternoon you'd just do your work there, your grocery shopping, you'd do everything, then get ready for work.²⁶

While some women indicated that they were able to maintain a work rotation with their husbands in order to adequately meet their childcare needs, these processes were often accompanied by many frustrations. The woman quoted above explained further how she worked the night shift at the plant for many years so that her husband could work during the day. Yet, even with intricate scheduling, her system was not entirely successful:

The only thing was that I only had one son and my son had dyslexia. So it made it difficult for him in school and due to the fact that I was going to work in the evenings and [my husband] was not home, with him working those extra hours, he was starting to fall behind. I think he repeated grade two. When we discovered it, in fact, it was the year he repeated it. So then I said, I gotta go on day shift, because if I don't he's going to fail. Things like that made it difficult I suppose.²⁷

This woman's experience highlights the extent to which women accommodated their domestic work schedules and prioritized the needs of their families. This was, no doubt, challenging and stressful, though some women were reluctant to acknowledge the unequal marital relations underlying their experiences, noting that "everybody had their disagreements."²⁸

One woman from St. Anthony, whose husband owned a longliner and spent most weeks away from home, acted as a sole caregiver for many years. Her sons were 11 and 14 when she went to work in the fish plant and because "they knew right from wrong" and the plant was "just down the road" she did not bother to look for a babysitter. She further commented that if something happened that was "very drastic, it was only a matter of time and I was home."²⁹ Another respondent, a single mother, relied on her

own mother to provide childcare while she worked in the plant.³⁰ However, among the married women I interviewed the general consensus was that, despite their difficulties, their husbands were able to provide a satisfactory level of support around the home and this aided the overall functioning of the family unit. As one woman explained, “nothing happened to make me pack my bags and leave.”³¹

Although the plant workers I spoke with were generally able to meet their childcare needs in some sort of piecemeal fashion, they knew not all women were so fortunate. Indeed, in every interview, the women I spoke with recounted knowing co-workers who were in much worse positions. Although my respondents did not mention single mothers specifically, lone-parent families no doubt faced serious problems in finding adequate childcare in rural areas. Women’s recollections provide a microcosmic account of larger problems facing women in outports during the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1976 and 1986, the number of lone-parent families had grown by 46.5 percent and among these households, roughly 80 percent were headed by women.³² Moreover, rural areas of Newfoundland, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, were “virtually devoid” of formal daycare facilities.³³ And in addition to childcare, women were also sometimes responsible for the care of elderly and/or sick family members and this further limited their ability to maintain permanent employment in fish processing work.³⁴

During the early 1980s no unionized fish plants in Newfoundland offered paid maternity leave to female employees,³⁵ and certainly none had provisions for workers to take extended time off for other forms of caregiving work. At an ideological level, this reality corresponded fully with the dominant gender norms and expectations which

informed the conditions under which women entered into paid employment. In Chapter Two I discussed how married women's removal from paid employment was an integral component of fishery development policy. Yet, even where families depended upon two incomes to meet their basic needs, women's contributions were still considered secondary to those of male breadwinners. Thus, it is not surprising that the stresses of women's continual need for balancing domestic and paid work went unaddressed by company officials. These problems were no doubt constructed as household issues, irrelevant to the functioning of the workplace. Moreover, one woman explained that the end result of this gendered predicament was that a woman could potentially quit her job and later be rehired several times over the span of her career.³⁶ This common practice served to reinforce the notion that women comprised a transient workforce and, thus, posed barriers to women's actual inclusion as part of the permanent fishery labour force.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the NFFAW did little to challenge these widely held conceptions. Among the agendas and priorities that the union set for itself during this period, maternity leave and childcare support did not figure prominently, if at all.³⁷ Prior to the *Union Forum's* coverage of the efforts and priorities of the Women's Committee, the domestic needs of workers (or women's needs, more accurately) were addressed only once in the entire span of this publication. In 1979, plant workers at National Sea products, in an effort to establish a 40-hour work week, cited "more time to spend with their families" as a primary motivation for bargaining in favour of this clause.³⁸ Even with an optimistic reading of this case, the union's efforts only minimally addressed a much larger, systemic problem of the gendered structure of work within the

industry. Moreover, seniority clauses, while contributing to some semblance of security among the workforce, often functioned contrary to women's needs. As one worker explained, even if a woman had worked in the plant over a 30 year period but, "for some reason - because she was a woman" had to quit to concentrate her labour efforts within her household, she could not maintain her seniority.³⁹ Here again, the union offered little support in modifying the provision of seniority rights to meet the needs of women within its membership, such as new mothers who were urged to return to work as quickly as possible or risk losing seniority.⁴⁰

Such exclusions become even more apparent when contrasted with one case where a male employee unexpectedly found himself as a single parent. According to the Fishery Products production manager I interviewed for this study, company officials became alarmed when a man - a good worker with seven years experience - suddenly began showing up late for work and later became "saucy with the supervisor."⁴¹ When the company finally addressed this persistent problem, managers discovered that the wife of this employee had left him with two small children and, without being able to find a babysitter, he had no choice but to rely on his mother for support. By the time he had dropped his children off with her - roughly 9:00 each morning - he was one hour late for work. My respondent explained management's response to this situation:

He didn't want to tell nobody - he kept it all inside. Then he was going to be suspended. When we got him in to tell him he was going to be suspended we asked him if he wanted a shop steward and he said no. We asked him who he wanted to talk to first and he said that he wanted to talk to us first. So he sat down and talked to us. We understood what was going on and we made arrangements to accommodate him and his needs. ... That was pretty challenging.⁴²

The manager I interviewed explained how the company allowed this man to arrive at

work one hour after his scheduled shift began, and where possible, this worker was given extra overtime hours to account for his loss of one hour of work each day. In understanding this case, we should be wary of the tendency for managerial perspectives to undermine the union's efforts by depicting the company as more sympathetic to this worker's situation. Nonetheless, it is also possible that within the parameters of the collective agreement and formal grievance procedures, there was little institutional help that the union could have offered. More important, however, this narrative clearly reveals a sympathy far greater than that normally extended to the many women workers who dealt with similar situations on a regular basis.

While many women accommodated the demands of their caregiving responsibilities and strategically organized their work schedules to meet their family's needs, the material marginality of the tasks they performed in the fish plant further compounded their frustrations with paid labour. As discussed in Chapter Two, within the hierarchy of different processing lines in fish plants, women were often concentrated in the lowest paid packing, weighing and trimming jobs and men occupied 'elite' positions such as filleting. These divisions were accompanied by varying levels of pay, where women consistently made less than men. Without full access to collective agreements from the 1970s, it is difficult to evaluate the exact level of disparity between these positions, although some women made reference to separate men's and women's rates during the interviews. However, among a sample of contracts negotiated after 1980, it is clear that wage differentials did indeed exist, if only by ten or twenty cents per hour (See Tables 1-1 and 1-2 in Chapter Two). In some collective agreements, the schedule of job

classifications and wage rates did not even name most of the tasks performed by women. While higher paid classifications included positions such as cutters, cold storage, machine feeder, and clean up, the jobs where women were often found in large numbers were simply referred to as “all jobs not classified below.”⁴³ The union’s decision not to name these positions reveals further that women’s work in fish plants was less valued than that of their male counterparts. Such conditions are particularly problematic given that the rhetoric in favour of using fishery unionism to further the material conditions of women has commonly been justified by comparing the wage rates of unionised and non-unionised fish plant workers.⁴⁴ In addition, the separation of ‘women’s jobs’ and ‘men’s jobs,’ also discussed in Chapter Two, further hindered women’s ability to move into higher paying jobs.

Issues of pregnancy and maternity leave, unequal wages and lack of job mobility were the fundamental issues which women fish plant workers attempted to address through strategies of separate organizing. As one woman explained:

We were trying to fight for some kind of – for people that had children that needed babysitters – we were trying to fight for that. To see if there was some way that they could get some help. And for women with a new baby - to see if we could get some time off for women with new babies. ... Back then, you didn’t have any amount of time before you go back to work. There was no extra time. At that time, whenever they was well enough to work, they had to go, or else lose their seniority.⁴⁵

Similarly, one worker explained how women simply wanted to earn more money and this might be best achieved through better wages for packing jobs in addition to increased access to a wider range of work within the plant.⁴⁶ Within the interviews, the struggle for equality with male workers, particularly in reference to wage disparities, also emerged as

a motivating factor behind women's active organizing in the union:

The women wasn't getting equal rights. Like [she] was saying, equal pay for equal work. And at that time, there was no equal pay. Men was getting more than women! A lot of the concern of the Women's Committee ... was to fight for women's rights - to get equal pay for equal work and we certainly wasn't getting equal pay!⁴⁷

Having realized that the agendas and priorities of the NFFAW, during its first decade in existence, had not facilitated public discussion or action surrounding these needs, women gradually began to seek other methods by which to address their gendered - and unequal - experiences of fish plant work.

Moreover, the adamance with which the woman quoted above reiterated the importance of 'equal rights' and 'equal pay' indicates that more than women's workplace experiences were critical to the development of a gendered consciousness among women fish plant workers. While women's understandings of their marginal position in the workforce emerged from their daily interactions with company officials and male co-workers who were sometimes brothers and husbands, they used the language and framework offered by the women's movement and existing feminist structures within the labour movement to interpret their experiences. From a manager's perspective,

[t]he women's movement had a tremendous impact because a lot of the women began to gain self-confidence and exposure ... so it was easier for a woman to go forward and say, 'it's not just me.' Even though we live in Newfoundland and it was only the beginning of TVs and radios ... it was news and so, you could see it. Isolation, slowly being wiped away.⁴⁸

Gradually, women also began to use the formal structures available through these movements to address their concerns, simultaneously raising awareness both at the level of the rank-and-file and among the union executive.

The NFFAW Convention of 1982, for example, was a pivotal event in the growth of women's understandings of workplace inequalities within fish plants. The union invited Nancy Riche, information officer with the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees (NAPE), to address a delegation of plant workers' representatives within the union's industrial division.⁴⁹ In the years prior to this Convention, Riche had played an integral role in encouraging women in NAPE to become more active in union politics.⁵⁰ She was also well known for her participation in Newfoundland and Labrador's newly established Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women.⁵¹ Described by Richard Cashin as "somewhat of a guru to women," Riche seemed an excellent candidate to speak at the Convention.⁵² Her talk focussed on women's workplace problems such as harassment and economic discrimination. According to the *Union Forum*, she explained to workers that "the goal of equal pay for equal work should be a top priority for the labour movement."⁵³ Riche also addressed the need for more day care facilities across the province, pointing to a lack of initiative on the part of the provincial government in this respect. Her call for 'free, non-profit, day care' was undoubtedly welcomed by many women workers. In fact, her presentation was so successful that delegates "broke into spontaneous applause" during the screening of a film about women and work across Canada.⁵⁴

Less than six months after this event, in May of 1983, women fish plant workers, with the assistance of the Women's Involvement Committee (WIN) of Upper Trinity South (a subcommittee of the Upper Trinity South Regional Development Association [UTSRDA]), organized a one-day conference at the Blue Whale Club in South Dildo to

“discuss important issues relating to women’s work in the area’s fish plants.”⁵⁵

Widespread fish plant closures had left large numbers of women in the Trinity Bay region unemployed and this led to the formation of WIN. The committee was established in 1982 by UTSDRA. Its primary task was to address issues of job scarcity facing women in rural communities.⁵⁶ Led by an executive committee of seven workers, this group held monthly community forums, and provided area residents with information and resources to help them obtain stable employment.⁵⁷ After a series of community meetings, the executive of WIN decided to hold a one-day forum entitled ‘Women and Fish Plant Labour’ to discuss issues pertinent to women working in fish processing jobs.⁵⁸

Two hundred women from both unionized and non-unionized plants in the region attended this event. Jim Morgan, the provincial Minister of Fisheries, also attended the forum, as did federal fisheries representatives, local fish plant owners, and representatives from the NFFAW.⁵⁹ In a workshop sponsored by the union, NFFAW Secretary-Treasurer Earle McCurdy answered questions from plant workers who were concerned about how the union was working to address the workplace concerns of its female membership. In conjunction with a general discussion of work shortages in the region, female workers were particularly concerned with the question of “whether women could take jobs as filleters,”⁶⁰ who typically made about twenty cents more per hour than those on the packing line (See Table 1-1 in Chapter Two). At the time of the conference, there were no women cutters in the Trinity Bay area and the women who had attempted to apply for these positions were met with responses which ranged from “men cutters only” to “because you are a woman.”⁶¹ Another woman who applied for this

position was told “women are too fat, not strong enough around the shoulders, and their childbearing years weaken them down so they cannot stand too long in one place.”⁶²

McCurdy’s response to these concerns - that there was “no reason why [women] should be excluded from this type of work”- made an important contribution to women’s confidence in their efforts and created the motivation and space for the union, and women in the union, to begin formally addressing these issues.⁶³ The *Union Forum’s* coverage of the forum noted that, “[t]he consensus seemed to be that the conference was an important first step towards getting women more actively involved in fish plant labour issues.”⁶⁴ Many women participants felt the discussions and question periods were both helpful and successful. This is evidenced by one plant worker’s reflections on the future implications of the day’s events: “It won’t end there ... They’ve got committees set up now to look into different issues that were brought up, and they’ll keep on going until they get some results.”⁶⁵

* * *

Roughly one year after the Trinity Bay conference, in April of 1983, the union, in response to women’s growing concerns, appointed five women to sit on a provincial Women’s Committee, although the committee was not formally integrated into the executive structure of the union’s industrial division until the NFFAW’s next convention in 1984. None of my respondents mentioned any major resistance to the Women’s Committee from male executive members, but since its members were appointed and not elected, it is possible that the NFFAW executive’s power to select certain women (particularly those with a long history of promoting union solidarity) over others made

them more accommodating to women's demands. The goals of the committee were twofold: to address the needs of women by establishing local women's committees within each fish plant⁶⁶ and to encourage women to become involved with the union at leadership levels.⁶⁷ The women who sat on the first committee were chosen because they had expressed interest in women's issues and had previous involvement in union activity as shop stewards, and because they represented an essential cross-section of various regions of Newfoundland. Its first members included Linda Lander from Catalina/Port Union (Bonavista Peninsula), Barb Parsons from Shearstown (Avalon Peninsula), Kay Riggs from Burin (Burin Peninsula), Margaret Rose from St. Anthony (Great Northern Peninsula), and Julie Lawrence from Isle aux Morts (southwest region near Port aux Basques).⁶⁸ The executive ranks of the NFFAW, then, were both sympathetic to and supportive of women's push to have their interests and needs represented and vocalized at an institutional level. As Richard Cashin remembers, the union executive felt "[it] was something we should do. It was one of a number of initiatives to make the union more vibrant, so that we could have more active participation from the membership."⁶⁹ The Committee, although critical of the union's past neglect of women's issues, reinforced the importance of solidarity among its membership. They formally adopted the slogan, "30 Percent Women, 100 Percent Committed," and buttons bearing this slogan were worn by both women and men delegates at the NFFAW's 1984 Convention.⁷⁰

Subsequent to the formation of the Women's Committee, its members participated in a wide range of activities which assisted in coalition building between the NFFAW and other labour organizations, such as the Newfoundland and Labrador

Federation of Labour, the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress, and these networks were instrumental in providing the Women's Committee with sufficient knowledge and resources to begin addressing systemic gender discrimination at the local level. In some instances, the committee was integral to establishing even broader links. In 1984, the NFFAW and the Women's Committee joined forces with other unions and community groups to establish the Coalition for Equality, an informal organization aimed at raising awareness about some key labour disputes occurring in Newfoundland at the time. Here the NFFAW formed links with the National Anti-Poverty Organization, Oxfam, and the Catholic Social Action Committee.⁷¹

Within the union, the Women's Committee served the broader membership by integrating a discussion of women's concerns into the union's agenda at conventions. In 1986, one workshop was even assisted by the Secretary of State Department in Ottawa, which may indicate some effort by the federal government to shape the character of organized feminist action across Canada.⁷² In this respect, the Committee was and continues to be a permanent component of fishery unionism in Newfoundland and Labrador. However, in evaluating the successes of this first group of plant workers, the actual processes by which the Committee functioned emerged as particularly groundbreaking. Not only did Committee members highlight the sorts of changes needed to facilitate women's greater participation in the union, they fought to ensure that the Women's Committee itself adhered to these practices. For example, the Committee was dedicated to the task of increasing attendance of rank-and-file members at conventions,

appealing to women who may not have been part of a unit executive committee at the local level. This was not a simple task. As one woman explained, male domination at conventions discouraged women from participating:

We used to have conventions every two years – our provincial biennial convention – and from the women’s committees, from our group of women, we used to get at least one woman into that convention. That was one of our objectives, to do that. It wasn’t really very easy to get women to go to the conventions then because, you know, it was a very male thing, and unless you were on the executive, you weren’t open to it ... nobody would think that [you’d] want to go.⁷³

In addition, potentially interested women may also have received some resistance from within their family: “... and, of course, there again was the old [stigma] of ‘what the hell do you want to go to the convention for?’ from the other half of your household!”⁷⁴ To alleviate these and other pressures, the Women’s Committee fought to have childcare expenses covered by the union, both for delegates at conventions and for Committee members at their quarterly meetings: “we made them understand that if they wanted the Women’s Committee, they’d have to pay for childcare.” “Of course we got it,” she added.⁷⁵ The Committee also negotiated lost time for its five members, to ensure that they would have no difficulty attending meetings.⁷⁶

Creating opportunities for female members of the rank-and-file to attend union workshops and conventions was essential to the Women’s Committee’s goal of increased participation among women plant workers. Having achieved this goal, the Committee could then begin the processes of raising awareness of the gendered experiences of fishery workers and facilitating a crucial identification of women’s needs. Nancy Fraser has suggested that such processes should involve the identification and defence of a

broadened definition of women's needs, so that the multiple experiences of women's paid employment and family lives can be adequately examined and reflected upon.⁷⁷

Consciousness-raising, particularly around issues of violence against women, formed a critical component of women's organizing within the NFFAW:

Abuse -- when we were talking about childcare and women getting out to meetings and opening up -- well that was one of the things. We talked about that, not in our union meeting, but in our groups of women, our committees and stuff like that. We always shared our stories -- if somebody came to us, and stuff like that. It was a good eye-opener there for other women who might have been in that predicament. We helped quite a few people get out of that predicament.⁷⁸

The issues facing women transcended the formal work environment. In discussing their workplace needs, women came to understand how their family and employment issues often intersected. Moreover, as feminist scholars have described the processes of women's organizing, "[w]omen's struggles for workplace gains thus becomes a struggle for the rights of women and workers."⁷⁹ By providing the pressure and resources necessary for women to become active in union activities, the Women's Committee was able to take its first steps in addressing the concerns of women.

At the local level, however, the successes of the Committee were not as straightforward. The local women's committees set up in individual fish plants helped to address women's needs by various methods. At the most basic level,

If a woman had a problem in the plant and she didn't feel comfortable going to the [unit] executive, she would go to the women's committee who would act as the union executive and get the problem dealt with. [The women's committee] would meet probably once a month and discuss some of the things they could do to help the women out in the workplace. Just little things. Getting extra machines in the bathroom, you know. And it worked well.⁸⁰

In addition to these "little" issues facing women working in fish plants, the local

women's committees often took on larger, more systemic problems in the industry, such as job mobility and unequal distribution of jobs assignments. One worker in the Catalina plant recounted how she challenged the rigid gendering of work by grieving her exclusion from a higher paying 'male job':

It's called the watchman. The name says it all. FPI had never, in those days, had a woman in the position of watchman. What it was, was security and what the job required was that every hour – and there wasn't anybody working in the plant sometimes and it was an awfully big plant – you had to visit all the stations -- two, three, and four and every hour – and for some reason, they didn't think a woman could do the job. I did challenge it and I put my name in as soon as the job came up and it meant that I would be getting about \$20 from twelve in the night until late in the morning, and that was big money at the time. So I applied for it and didn't get it. And I had, at the time, something like 15 years seniority and somebody else had something like five. They gave it to this man. So we challenged it. And we did win it. I owned that position right up until the plant closed down in 1992 and it opened the way for other women. That will never be a question in my plant again. ... So that was the purpose of the women's committee, like little hurdles that we had over the years. To try and smooth them out for someone else that's come along. And so far, it's been successful.⁸¹

The process of 'challenging' discrimination involved filing a formal grievance against the company. The local women's committees in fish plants often relied upon these formal union procedures to address women's workplace concerns. But grievances could sometimes cause tensions among the rank-and-file, both between and among women and men. As the woman involved in the above grievance explained, "one member lost a job and another got it. So they're in conflict right away. If we win an arbitration, somebody is going to be put out of a job. You can't please everybody."⁸² Another woman from St. Anthony remembered the importance of gendered job classifications in securing women's positions:

I know we had an instance one time where nine women came to me. The men was called in to pack the herring. They got just about a full day's work, down there packing herring, which wasn't a men's job. Men wasn't supposed to do that at all.

That was supposed to be for the packers inside. ... I had to go to the office with those nine grievances because those women were supposed to get the work. The men's jobs were outside. I won the battle. They got their pay because they were supposed to get their pay.

I guess [the men] figured that the women wouldn't bother putting in a grievance about it or nothing like that. That's how it was. They went to work and figured they were going to do it to get those many hours of work. Now those women, they don't like to bother nothing, but the women did bother about it because they were supposed to get the work! Not the men! Like I said, we had a real battle, but we won that battle.⁸³

Interestingly, where the earlier anecdote reveals how women tried to gain access to 'men's jobs' both on the processing line and outside the plant, the latter indicates that local women's committees also worked to protect 'women's jobs' from male intrusion, particularly as the availability of work declined over the 1980s. While these stories mark pivotal events in the efforts of the provincial Women's Committee to eradicate women's workplace inequalities, tackling women's issues on a local scale did not necessarily translate into gains for all rank-and-file members with similar problems. As highlighted earlier, many women, because of their commitments to caregiving and other gender expectations, experienced much difficulty in maintaining seniority throughout their years in the plant. While using seniority rights to challenge the unequal accessibility and distribution of work assignments may have proven beneficial to this one worker, a shop steward who was also familiar with grievance procedures, it may have been a less suitable strategy for other women to use.

Gillian Creese has argued that "treating equality as an individual phenomenon" places the onus on individuals to show they were treated unfairly and that, subsequently, "[c]onditions that might affect whole groups on the basis of gender or other criteria, and

the remedies that might require more systemic solutions” sometimes remain on the margins of a union’s agenda.⁸⁴ Using formal grievance procedures to address cases of gender inequality in the plant became a fundamental strategy of the local women’s committees. While this brought some semblance of change to women’s gendered experiences of fish plant work, at least on a case-by-case basis, some larger, more systemic issues went unaddressed by union officials. For example, while babysitting services were offered to women who were involved in official union business, the union’s first provincial Women’s Committee made virtually no gains in addressing issues of childcare for rank-and-file members within collective agreements. According to Cashin, who was president of the NFFAW during these years, childcare did not figure prominently among the issues facing outport communities as workers could always rely on grandmothers and similar informal networks for support.⁸⁵ When asked about the union’s progress on daycare, Cashin explained,

...it’s a top-down issue and what we discovered was that we didn’t get a lot of support. And some of that - I know my wife – in the outports there was already built in daycare. You know, it’s not the same as an urban issue. Grandmothers around and things like that. I know that daycare came on their agenda – now they were also intermingling with committees from Toronto and Vancouver and that was an issue in the 1980s. I do remember that they were making progress on daycare but they seemed to run into some – some of it was not that much support on the ground. Whether it was not overstated as an issue, I don’t know. But I do know that something between ‘84 and ‘87 went on about daycare.⁸⁶

While grandmothers could be relied on in some cases, the research presented earlier reveals the tensions and stresses associated with using informal, haphazard methods of childcare. While the Women’s Committee tirelessly maintained the importance of daycare for working women, they were not successful in integrating this issue into the

NFFAW's bargaining agenda.⁸⁷

During its first three years in existence, the provincial Women's Committee made important strides in creating the space for many women's needs and workplace concerns to be addressed formally at NFFAW conventions. Providing childcare facilities, free of charge, allowed women who would not ordinarily have been able to attend formal union functions to participate for the first time. Through workshops on issues such as daycare, sexual harassment, affirmative action, equal opportunity, and equal pay for work of equal value, many plant workers were able to share their gendered workplace and household concerns and vocalize the struggles they faced as they managed the demands of home and work. While sexual harassment, wage rates, and affirmative action within the NFFAW could be dealt with relatively easily in collective bargaining, issues that required more systemic and ideological change by challenging long-held assumptions about women's place in the fishery, such as daycare and maternity leave, remained unresolved. By the late 1980s, however, the Women's Committee had been successful at mobilizing groups of women plant workers and facilitating their entry, even if in small numbers, into the realm of union politics.

Overall, however, the provincial Women's Committee, between 1984 and 1987, experienced great difficulty in establishing local women's committees in each plant. Roughly six local committees were formed in total, and some of these were headed by the five provincial representatives.⁸⁸ Although these local committees were integral to the processes by which women were able to use formal grievance procedures to address gender discrimination in the plant, no substantive changes were made for women,

particularly in the realm of collective bargaining. Their successes and shortcomings echo Linda Briskin's warning that "organizing 'separately' is not itself enough to guarantee success; the location of the separate organizing in the structural web of the institution is critical."⁸⁹ Briskin further elaborates how the potential of separate organizing, as a feminist strategy, rests on the degree to which Women's Committees and similar endeavours can maintain "a balance between the degree of autonomy from the structures and practices of the labour movement on the one hand, and the degree of integration into those structures, on the other."⁹⁰ In the case of the NFFAW, workshops which effectively explored the gender dimensions of fishery work were unable to transform fundamentally the gendered structure of work within the industry, at least during the first few years of the Committee's existence. Nevertheless, if we analyze the emergence and organizing efforts of the Women's Committee of the NFFAW within the context of a rapidly declining industry, where the union priorities were in constant flux, their successes appear particularly remarkable.

¹ "The Crisis Continues, But ... Plants Reopened in Three Centres," *Union Forum* December 1981: 7.

² Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Consent to Coercion* (Toronto: Garamond, 1993), 19.

³ Gordon Inglis, *More Than Just a Union: The Story of the NFFAW* (St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1985), 286.

⁴ Julie White, *Sisters and Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., 1993), 51.

⁵ White, 52-56.

⁶ White, 53.

⁷ For accounts of the racial biases in the Canadian women's movement see Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989); Vijay Agnew, *Resisting Discrimination: Women from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and the Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Janine Brodie, *Politics on the Margins: Restructuring and the Canadian Women's Movement* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995).

⁸ Meg Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act: Working Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail* 48 (2001): 64.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

¹¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

¹² Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #6, May 7, 2003.

¹³ Luxton, 66. Also see Heather Jon Maroney, "Feminism at Work," in *Feminism and Political Economy: Women's Work, Women's Struggles*, eds. Meg Luxton and Heather Jon Maroney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 86-87.

¹⁴ Linda Cullum, "Fashioning Selves and Identities: Disputed Narratives, Contested Subjects" (Ph. D. diss., University of Toronto/OISE, 2001); Barbara Neis, "Doin' Time on the Protest Line: Women's Political Culture, Politics and Collective Action in Outport Newfoundland," in *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador, A Collage*, eds. Carmelita McGraw, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter (St. John's: Killick Press, 1995); Marilyn Porter, "The Tangly Bunch: Outport Women of the Avalon Peninsula," *Newfoundland Studies* 1.1 (Spring 1985): 77-90.

¹⁵ "Union Presents Brief to AIB: Controls Increase Wage Gap," *Union Forum* July 1977: 10.

¹⁶ "Burgeo! The Second Time Around," *Union Forum* July 1977: 10.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "The 1978 Union Convention," *Union Forum* January-February 1979: 15.

¹⁹ Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #5, September 14, 2002.

²⁰ Neis, 296.

²¹ In Burin, a lineup of female community members formed outside the fish plant gates. Unlike picket lines which prevent scab labour from allowing the plant to function, the protest line provided employees with a legitimate reason for not entering the plant and, thus, effectively disrupted the industry. Because workers were not on strike, they remained eligible for Unemployment Insurance benefits. Neis, 298.

²² Neis, 307.

²³ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Richard Cashin, Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union Co-Founder and Past President, St. John's, July 31, 2002.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Linda Briskin, "Women's Challenge to Organized Labour," in *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement*, eds. Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1983), 259.

²⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #4, Port aux Basques, August 10, 2002.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.

³¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #2, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

³² Women's Policy Office, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, "Women and Newfoundland fact Sheet Series," (St. John's: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1987), 2.

³³ *Not for Nothing! Women, Work and Unemployment in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Women's Unemployment Group, 1983), 13.

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- ³⁴ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.
- ³⁵ *Not for Nothing! Women, Work and Unemployment in Newfoundland and Labrador*, 13.
- ³⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.
- ³⁷ Pregnant women, however, were encouraged to stop working in the plant after their first trimester. This was mainly due to health and safety concerns among company officials.
- ³⁸ "One year deal at National Sea," *Union Forum* May 1979: 9.
- ³⁹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.
- ⁴⁰ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.
- ⁴¹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Collective Agreement By and Between National Sea Products Limited, St. John's, Newfoundland, and Local 1252, Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers. Effective January 1, 1980 to September 15, 1982. 25.
- ⁴⁴ *Not for Nothing! Women, Work and Unemployment in Newfoundland and Labrador*, 8.
- ⁴⁵ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.
- ⁴⁶ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.
- ⁴⁷ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.
- ⁴⁸ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Former Fishery Products International Production Manager, St. John's, August 6, 2002.
- ⁴⁹ "Day Care Needed, Says CUPE Speaker," *Union Forum* January 1983: 24.
- ⁵⁰ Jane Burnham and Sharon Gray Pope, "Change Within and Without: The Modern Women's Movement in Newfoundland and Labrador," in *Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives of Women in Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Linda Kealey (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1993), 195.
- ⁵¹ Burnham and Gray Pope, 210.
- ⁵² Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Richard Cashin, Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union Co-Founder and Past President, St. John's, July 31, 2000.

⁵³ "Day Care Needed, Says CUPE Speaker," 24.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "Women Plant Workers Meet in Trinity Bay," *Union Forum* May 1983: 19. Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) Extension Service, with the co-operation of Women's Involvement Committee (WIN) of Upper Trinity South and the Upper Trinity South Regional Development Association, *Trinity Bay South Women On the Move: Women Working for Women* (St. John's: MUN Extension Service, n.d.), 4.

⁵⁶ *Trinity Bay South Women On the Move*, 1.

⁵⁷ *Trinity Bay South Women On the Move*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Trinity Bay South Women On the Move*, 3. Seven key issues emerged from WIN's monthly community meetings. These included: improving quality control within fish plants; favouritism at work; training and equal opportunity for women plant workers; hours of work; worksharing; trucking fish to other plants; and the development of new products and markets. 5-6.

⁵⁹ *Trinity Bay South Women On the Move*, 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Report of the Reactions of Plant Workers, Fishermen, Plant Managers and Owners to a Survey on Concerns About the Fisheries and Work: Past, Present and Future." (Upper Trinity South: Women's Involvement Committee, 1984), 9.

⁶² *Trinity Bay South Women On the Move*, 5.

⁶³ "Women Plant Workers Meet in Trinity Bay," 19.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #6, May 7, 2003.

⁶⁷ "Women Becoming More Involved in Their Union," *Union Forum* November-December 1984: 17.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Richard Cashin, Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union Co-Founder and Past President, St. John's, July 31, 2000.

⁷⁰ "Women Becoming More Involved in Their Union," 17.

⁷¹ "Coalition for Equality to Fight Injustice," *Union Forum* September-October 1984: 11.

⁷² "50 Delegates at Women's Conference," *Union Update* Fall 1986: 4.

⁷³ Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #6, May 7, 2003.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 153.

⁷⁸ Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #6, May 7, 2003.

⁷⁹ Briskin, 259.

⁸⁰ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #3, Catalina, August 8, 2002.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #1, St. Anthony, July 25, 2002.

⁸⁴ Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Race in a White Collar Union, 1944-1994* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999), 141.

⁸⁵ Personal Interview by S. Ignagni, Richard Cashin, Newfoundland, Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union Co-Founder and Past President, St. John's, July 31, 2000.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #6, May 7, 2003.

⁸⁸ The women I interviewed were unable to offer precise details regarding the local committees. One respondent, however, confirmed that Marystown and St. John's (both year-round plants) formed local women's committees. Telephone Interview by S. Ignagni, Fish Plant Worker #6, May 7, 2003.

⁸⁹ Linda Briskin, "Union Women and Separate Organizing," in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, eds. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 102.

⁹⁰ Ibid. Also see Rosemary Warskett, "Feminism's Challenge to Unions in the North: Possibilities and Contradictions," *Socialist Register* (2001): 329-342.

Conclusion: Processing Discontent, Some Final Thoughts

In discussing the 'problematic of the everyday world,' sociologist Dorothy E. Smith has argued that actual and daily

social organization is only partially discoverable within its scope and the scope of the individual's daily activities. Its local organization is determined by the social relations of an immensely complex division of labour knitting local lives and local settings to national and international social, economic, and political processes.¹

This study relied heavily on the oral narratives of six women fish plant workers, one union co-founder and a fish plant manager to provide a detailed account of the organization of waged labour and union process in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. Their histories and personal testimonies were compared and contrasted in an effort to locate the meanings and understandings of paid work and labour organizing from various class and gender positions. Central to my account were women's own experiences. These revealed the tensions they faced as they attempted to secure employment in an increasingly depressed region while balancing the demands of domestic work, too often unproblematically understood as women's responsibility. Their narratives also demonstrate how many women, while maintaining some personal satisfaction with their paid employment and the vision of the NFFAW, were also able to articulate how their gendered interests, needs, and concerns as working women did not figure prominently within the official agenda of the union. Such personal observations were echoed by an institutional analysis of the authoritative discourses that emerge in the *Union Forum*, where the importance of organizing across regional and religious boundaries, for example, overlooked the gendered subtexts of paid employment.

This thesis is primarily a study of how women working in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery came to vocalize their discontent with the gendered processes and practices of the NFFAW during the 1970s and 1980s. It is an examination of the historical development of a gendered consciousness among fish processors, where women's subjective identities as women, workers, and union members were shaped by the various ideologies governing the workplace, the fishing industry, organized labour, outport communities, and the political and economic structure of Canada's Atlantic region. To explore the roots and gender dimensions of women's labour organizing I conceptualized both the workplace and union as organizations that produced "regimes of inequality."² Developed by Joan Acker, this framework maintains that even the most progressive organizations include inequality regimes, although

[t]he precise patterns of inequality vary widely along a number of dimensions, including the bases for inequality, the visibility and legitimacy of inequalities, the degree of hierarchy and participation, the ideologies supporting and challenging inequalities, the interests of different groups in maintaining and/or diminishing inequality, the organizing mechanisms that maintain and reproduce inequalities, the types of controls and subversions of control, and interaction patterns and identities of participants.³

The Newfoundland and Labrador fishing industry has, since pre-industrial times, been structured systematically by class and gender divisions, although women generally performed at least half of the work necessary for outport survival.⁴ In this thesis, the largely rural class of fishery workers, historically tied to a merchant or fish company for survival in a region with few opportunities for self-sufficiency, was juxtaposed with a long-standing gendered division of labour to reveal the multiple layers of dependency that characterized outport life in Newfoundland. To the detriment of many women, class and

gender inequalities in the formal organization of work in fish plants were replicated in the processes of labour organizing, where idealized notions of femininity, masculinity, and the family unit served to limit women's participation in the informal and formal realms of union processes. Women's exclusion from the common conception of 'the worker' meant that the material devaluation of their waged labour was disregarded in the planning and implementation of the union's official agenda. Thus, my evaluation of women's ability to better their social and economic position through the channels of organized labour necessitated a thorough investigation of how a gendered hierarchy of needs emerged among fish processors and why the struggles to resist such conditions transpired in gendered ways.

To fully understand the historical roots of gender and class divisions in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery, I began this study with an examination of the ideological dimensions of fishery policy during the period of industrialization in the industry. Over the course of the twentieth century, Newfoundland's economic and political landscape changed dramatically as the colony underwent persistent periods of economic depression and political crisis that resulted in its Confederation with Canada in 1949. Political officials and policy makers frequently blamed the precarious nature of the merchant-fisher relationship for the widespread poverty in Newfoundland and the solution proposed was to transform the fishery into a modern and efficient capitalist enterprise.

Development policies in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery were also infused with gender ideologies that attempted to define and limit appropriate forms of

employment for women. Authoritative and bureaucratic discourses stressed that in a modern economy women (and also children) would be freed from the tiring labour of shore work, where they could concentrate their labour efforts on maintaining proper respectable homes "in an atmosphere of human dignity as wives and mothers."⁵ Central to this prescription of capitalist progress was the gendered ideal of the family wage, or the systematic distribution of resources from male breadwinners to dependent wives and children. Acker has argued that processes of production and distribution are fundamental to the implementation of the family wage in capitalist economic systems and that such processes are inherently gendered.⁶ The widespread exclusion of women from systems of production and/or the restricted terms upon which they entered into a waged-labour contract had far-reaching implications for their social and economic security and autonomy. My conclusions support those of Acker, who has argued that within the workforce, the male breadwinner ideal can result in both a gendered wage gap and sex-segregation in the workplace.⁷

This study has shown how the ideological significance of the ideal of the family wage and its corollary gender norms emerged in the industrialized Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. While the family wage as a system of distribution was virtually unattainable in rural outport communities, it remained influential in defining the structure and condition of women's paid employment. Even though women comprised a majority of workers in fish plants, a rigid gender division of labour rendered their work less valued than their male counterparts. Women were concentrated in the lowest paid and least secure positions in the plant, often as fish packers. The presence of women in trimming

positions, which paid slightly higher wages, was dependent upon the seasonality of the plant. In year-round fish plants, women were less likely to occupy such positions, and this reveals the common belief that 'permanent' work should be reserved for men, who were presumed to be breadwinners. Women thus found it difficult to challenge workplace hierarchies and the male job preserve of certain processing positions such as filleting. Moreover, the assumption that women comprised a transient or temporary segment of the fishery workforce resulted in their ideological exclusion from the widely held definition of 'the worker' and this was compounded further by inequalities in the distribution of social welfare benefits and women's limited opportunities for skilled training in colleges. Although generally unacknowledged among government officials and policy makers, women's work, consistent with the pre-industrial character of the industry, remained a fixed component of the 'modern' fishery.

Women, however, did not wholly accept their marginal position in the workplace hierarchy. An evaluation of women's narratives and the institutional discourses of the NFFAW in the *Union Forum* reveal how interactions among workers and management were characterized by an ongoing struggle to ease the tiring demands of processing work. In Chapter Three, I explored the emergence of work cultures in fish plants to explain how both women and men strategically accommodated and resisted managerial discourses and demands in both formal and informal ways. According to Susan Porter Benson, work cultures mediate "the formal authority structure of the workplace" and are "created as workers confront the limitations and exploit the possibilities of their jobs."⁸ She further elaborates this concept, explaining how a

[w]ork culture is very much an in-between ground: it is neither a rubber-stamp version of management policy nor is it a direct outcome of the personal – class, sex, ethnic, race, age – characteristics of the workers. It is the product of these forces as they interact in the workplace and result in collectively formed assumptions and behaviours.⁹

In newly-industrialized Newfoundland and Labrador fish plants, women's concentration in the lowest-paid, least valued positions did not limit fully their capacity and to engage in a culture of resistance.

Work cultures were predicated on the importance of establishing a community of workers and comrades. The friendships that developed among fish processors, exemplified by women's narratives that stressed tolerance for religious and regional difference among workers, were central to their belief and support for a class-based cohesion in the workforce. Although some conflicts and tensions did exist between workers (for example, an urban-rural divide emerged in the St. John's fish plant) it did not override a widespread understanding of the economic climate of regional disparity in rural outports and the necessity of personal and institutional support for the well-being of all community members. Indeed, these sentiments were reinforced by the NFFAW's use of strategic discourses that presented an authoritative account of the significance of solidarity among workers.

My analysis of work cultures also demonstrated how workers accommodated managerial controls. Using company-defined discourses of quality control and the organization of plant rules as a point of departure, I discussed how managers attempted to initiate processes of self-regulation among workers, thus creating some harmony between its capitalist aims and workers' subjective understandings of their roles within the

industry. The strategic response of workers was to accept the more positive aspects of managerial discourses. Many women reaffirmed the pride they felt in producing a top-quality product and reiterated that their hard work and observance of plant rules was part of an ongoing process of making a valuable contribution to Newfoundland's economy. Yet, men and women simultaneously engaged in a culture of resistance, where they effectively challenged managerial authority in individual and collective ways. Among women's narratives and labour arbitration cases, the washroom emerged as a primary site of resistance, where women found some respite from the daily pressures of processing work. Subsequently, the washroom became a site of contestation among workers and company officials, as managers attempted to monitor washroom breaks and often threatened workers with reprimand. In other cases, workers were able to circumvent managerial controls and organize work stoppages and wildcat strikes in order to further their workplace needs and demands.

I argued further that these instances of individual and collective resistance incorporated distinctly gendered behaviour, where what was suitable for men was not necessarily acceptable for women. Women were less likely to use violent actions against managers, or other acts of resistance that might overtly defy the conventional norms of femininity. In rare instances when women did so, such as the consumption of alcohol at work, they were subject to moral scrutiny from supervisors. In addition, collective resistance often transcended workplace divisions, where men and women jointly confronted management and where men on the cutting line relied on the support of women packers during work stoppages. However, these instances revealed further that

women exercised some autonomy from their male co-workers as they evaluated the relevance of these struggles to their classed and gendered position in the industry. Women thus strategically maneuvered the ideological dimensions of their work in the fishery to create a space for collective gender identity among fish processors. Such acts of resistance were crucial to women's initiation into processes of labour organizing in the fishery.

Moreover, by the 1980s, the NFFAW had solidified a permanent political presence in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery, and one important feature of this was the growth in many women's understandings of their formal labour rights as workers in the industry. This realization was aided by a multitude of social movements that had begun to infiltrate rural areas of the province by the 1980s. In particular, the prominence of the Canadian women's movement meant that feminist leaders in Newfoundland saw in fish plant workers the potential for an effective mobilization of working class women.

As the industry underwent a severe period of crisis and decline in the early 1980s, many women found their positions of employment increasingly insecure. When looking to the union for support, they became conscious of the union's neglect of the gender dimensions of fish processing work. In particular, women's oral histories revealed their complex experiences of balancing effectively the demands of home and work. By failing to address the terms upon which women entered into waged labour positions and their struggles to combine productive and reproductive tasks, the union had neglected the needs of a significant portion of its membership. Throughout the 1980s, women slowly

began to question their concentration on the lowest rungs of the processing hierarchy and the gendered arguments used to sustain workplace divisions of labour.

Women's organized response to their marginality in the workplace and among the union's priorities was to use and transform available union structures to achieve parity with male co-workers. In Chapter Four, I detailed the processes by which women began to challenge formally the NFFAW to address and meet their needs as working women. Such developments included women's conscious understanding of the intersection of class and gender inequalities in the organization of the workforce and of union practice. Although the processes of women's organizing were initially slow and few gains were made through the formation of local committees and collective bargaining, critical consciousness-raising activities and the formal insertion of a provincial Women's Committee into the union's executive structure in 1984 created a fundamental basis for future mobilization. It thus gave many women fish processors the institutional support to actively seek changes in the gendered structure of the industry.

Thus, women's limited success in making substantive changes within the NFFAW should not obscure some of the clear benefits of organizing separately in industrial unions. As Linda Briskin has optimistically asserted, many unions

have come to see that gender-specific organizing, far from dividing the union, has made the union movement stronger. How deeply embedded these changes in consciousness are is difficult to gauge, but it can be argued that women's separate organizing has changed the way unions organize and educate the rank-and-file; it has expanded the understanding of 'union' issues, thereby supporting the current of social unionism which is critical to the long-term health of the union movement.¹⁰

We should, however, remain wary of seeing the goal of separate organizing as an end-point to women's activism. Rather, women's struggles to establish a provincial Women's Committee must be regarded as an essential first step in the transformation of gender and class structures in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishing industry. In addition, it is imperative to understand how the context of region and regional isolation among Newfoundland's outports made organizing along gender lines a particularly remarkable feat.

At a fundamental level, women's articulation of their work experiences and their gendered organizing efforts in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery have been a concerted challenge to and reinterpretation of the needs of workers. These struggles transpired on gendered terrain as women confronted a host of ideological and material barriers in a male-dominated industry. Nancy Fraser has argued that such processes and politics of needs interpretation can expose how women and women's individual and collective experiences are constructed "according to certain specific – and, in principle, contestable interpretations, even as they lend those interpretations an aura of facticity that discourages contestation."¹¹ Moreover, as the industry continues to be subject to the destructive and demoralizing effects of economic and labour restructuring and the dominance of neoliberal ideologies among policy makers, we should be ever cognizant of the ways in which women's separate organizing has provided critical spaces for women to understand better the gendered implications of crisis and decline in the fishery. This thesis has provided the necessary historical context to

evaluate the gendered impacts of recent changes in the industry and future research must evaluate whether the gains made by early feminist organizing initiatives among fish processors have either withstood or been eroded by widespread employment insecurity. Such questions are essential to building our knowledge of the gendered subtexts of union organizing within the current climate of economic and political reorganization in Canada.

¹ Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 154.

² Acker, 205.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hilda Chaulk Murray, *More Than Fifty Percent: Woman's Life in a Newfoundland Outport 1900-1950* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1979).

⁵ Canada and Newfoundland, Newfoundland Fisheries Develop Committee Report (St. John's, 1953). Quoted in Miriam Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times: The State and the Industrialization of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1934-1968* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.

⁶ Acker, 480-483.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 228.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Linda Briskin, "Union Women and Separate Organizing," *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, eds. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 92.

¹¹ Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 146.

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