

“FISHERY WORKERS”

NEWFOUNDLAND, 1974

Women’s Place

“I work in a fish plant on the night shift. I start work at 6 p.m. and finish at 3:30 a.m. I reach home about 4 o’clock feeling cold, miserable, and dirty. I take my boots off at the door and put them outside in the back garden to air. I then remove the rest of my clothing, wash myself, and get a cup of tea before collapsing into bed. I try to make as little noise as I possibly can because if I wake my son, who is 2, then that means I get no sleep at all that night. At 8 a.m. the next morning, or rather the same morning, I get up to start my chores, which means washing and ironing, preparing meals, bathing and dressing my son, washing dishes and floors, taking lip from my husband, and doing whatever else I can manage. This goes on until 4:30, and again it’s time for me to get into my fish plant clothes and go off to work.

“There is one thing that I’ve noticed since I’ve been working at the fish plant, and that is that the male fish plant workers never seem to be as tense and as tired as the women. From what I’ve learned from talking to both male and female plant workers, there is a very good reason for this, and that is that the men, when they go home, get more sleep and don’t have the responsibility that the women do. They don’t have to go home and dig their way out of a mountain of laundry and ironing, nor do they have to care for children. They are simply free after work.

“I find that there is a lot of tension in a fish plant or at least the ones I’ve worked in. We are given production sheets to keep a record of what work we do, and if for any reason we stop work, that must also be written in. For instance, sometimes we have to wait for block pans for 15 or more minutes. We must write this down, and then have a signature from our forelady verifying that what we have written is correct. According to the management, you have to get a 60% average, and if you go below that, then you are standing on pretty thin ice, and had better get a move on. I’d been hearing talk about a bonus to be paid you for doing so much fish, but it seems that nobody ever got a bonus except one girl. She got something like 72¢ and had it taken back from her. The first time I started work I was scanning over the production sheet when it was

given to me, and noticed the word bonus. Of course I got pretty excited because I worked in a fish plant before for about 2 years, and I knew I was very speedy when it came to packing fish, so I thought I could make extra money. I asked a female worker about this and she said that to her knowledge or anybody else's, nobody had ever received bonus money.”

Source: *Working Women in Newfoundland* (St. John's: Women's Place, 1974): 23. From *Canadian Women's Issues: Bold Visions*, Ruth Pierson and Marjorie Cohen eds., Volume II (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1995). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.