

**INTERMITTENT PARTNER ABSENCE AND PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT- A
STUDY OF MERCHANT SEAFARERS AND THEIR SPOUSES**

Minor Research Project

Submitted to



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Executive Summary

The Shipping industry is one of the most ancient industries in the world and seafaring one of the oldest occupations dating back to centuries. It also governs the global economy to a large extent and could be rightly called the lifeblood of global economy. Shipping is the backbone of global trade and commerce by enabling large scale export and import of goods not possible through other means of transport. It plays a pivotal role in international trade by carrying almost 90% of the commodities across the globe. It has made raw materials from various parts of the world to reach the production units and has also enabled the transport of finished goods to their markets. Globalization and global trade are the two most significant features of the current era and both of which could not be attained sans shipping. Development of technology has made shipping more efficient and swift mode of transport. Shipping has not only helped global trade but also has increased global interdependence.

Seafaring work patterns vary based on a number of factors such as nationality and rank of seafarer, employers' policies, type of trade and routes sailed. A typical length of contract for an Indian officer is three months offshore and three months leave back to back whereas that of an Indian rating is 9 - 12 months with approximately two months leave on completion of the contract. Employment contracts may differ ranging from permanent employment with paid leave and other associated benefits to single contracts with no income during the leave period and no assurance of employment when the seafarer wishes to return to sea. Seafaring schedules, whether involving trips of weeks, months or even years, will involve a constant process of change, readjustment and transition for both seafarers and their families. For seafarers, they must adapt from the

drastically different environments of the ship to home life and vice versa, and for their partners, being married to a seafarer results in changes and upheaval as they adjust to sharing a life with a partner and then being alone again.

A small body of literature examining the effect on relationships of occupations requiring prolonged periods away from home suggests that such a lifestyle can be problematic both for the absent partner and those left at home (Thomas, 2003; Thomas et al., 2003). The two phases of being away and at home recur on a regular basis and involve a constant process of change, readjustment and transition for both seafarers and their families especially their wives (M.Thomas, N.Bailey, 2006.) The proposed research seeks to explore the experience of seafarers and their spouses with specific attention given to the impact of work patterns that incorporate extended leave periods, and routine extended absences from their home leading to a sharp decline in the supply of seafarers especially ratings in the recent years.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the nature of seafaring occupations will have some impact on family life as seafarers and their families face constant separations and reunions and prolonged absences of one partner. Prior researches on seafarers in India have focused more on the HR and psychological aspects. Very few international studies have focused on the problems faced by the seafarer's family members due to their intermittent absence. The present study aims to bring to light the impact of intermittent partner absence on the seafarers themselves and their spouses.

The present study was one of the many studies carries out to explore the impact of seafaring work patterns on the lives of seafarers and their spouses. Though there is literature in the area of the study the studies that throw light specifically on the lives of Indian seafarers and their spouses are scarce. The findings of the study demonstrate the

difficulties faced by both the seafarers and their spouses caused due to the intermittent absences of the seafarers. Home and away occupation include many other occupations like mining, air transport, jobs in offshore rigs, military etc, yet the marine sector is unique among these occupation in its long term absences from home coupled with the inadequacy of communication between the seafarers and their spouses. The partings and reunions are a cyclical process which demands both the seafarers and their spouses to make certain adjustments. This process can be gruesome and demanding resulting in psycho-social problems which the researcher has focused in this study. The key variables of the study were the Psychological wellbeing, couple satisfaction, and social support, role displacement faced by the seafarers and their spouses as a result of work patterns and their strategies to cope with them. Results revealed that both seafarers and their spouses have low or very low psychological wellbeing and couple satisfaction. However it is evident that the low scores are common among seafarers and spouses of age below 35 years. Most of them who have just began their family life. The results clearly point out that psychological wellbeing and couple satisfaction are higher among seafarers and spouses above 41 years. This helps us understand that as individuals mature they have a more mature relationship not characterized by a need for physical proximity but a one that focuses more on meeting family needs. Moreover in addition to becoming mature with age, the couples have also formulated individual specific coping mechanisms to maintain their wellbeing and be satisfied with their relationship. The study also revealed that there was not much issues with social support for the spouses of seafarers though the seafarers had difficulties in social support onboard. This can be attributed to the strong family bonds in our country. The study has revealed that both the seafarers and their spouses had difficulties with changing roles and in transition of

roles. However the qualitative data substantiates that they took steps to overcome the impact of role displacement and focus more on being happy in the reunions.