

DOI 10.51558/2490-3647.2026.11.1.321

UDK 316.7:656.6
656.6:316.356.2

Primljeno: 05. 02. 2026.

Pregledni rad
Review paper

Gorana Bandalović, Kristina Siničić

NAVIGATING BETWEEN SEA AND FAMILY: SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF SEAFARERS' LIVES AND THEIR WIVES IN SPLIT

The maritime profession is widely recognised as a form of employment that profoundly shapes family organisation and intimate relationships, primarily due to long periods of physical absence and cyclical patterns of separation and reunion. Such working arrangements require continuous emotional, social, and practical adaptation from both seafarers and their family members. The aim of this paper was to explore the impact of the maritime profession on the lives of seafarers and their wives in the city of Split, as well as to analyze the dynamics of marital relationships in the context of prolonged separation. The research was conducted in 2019 using semi-structured interviews with seafarers and their wives. The results show that seafarers tend to perceive their wives as bearing a greater share of the burden, while the wives report that sacrifices are distributed equally. The main advantages of the maritime profession relate to financial stability and the possibility of spending intensive, high-quality time with the family during periods at home, whereas the key disadvantage is prolonged separation, which places greater responsibility on wives for household and family duties. Despite these challenges, both groups of participants express a high level of satisfaction with their lives and their long-distance marriages. Overall, the findings emphasise the sociocultural specificity of maritime family life.

Key words: seafarers; seafarers' wives; family; advantages; long-distance marriage

1. INTRODUCTION

Seafaring is a profession that shapes a distinct lifestyle, marked by unique challenges and the need for constant adaptation to the conditions at sea. Previous research shows that seafarers are most satisfied with aspects such as salary, job security, regular income, stability, and time off (Slišković & Penezić 2015; Oldenburg et al. 2010), especially in contracts that provide a balanced work-rest schedule, allowing for extended periods at home (Thomas 2003). This type of arrangement allows them to spend meaningful time with their families while ashore. Conversely, dissatisfaction among Croatian seafarers frequently arises from prolonged separation from their families (Slišković & Penezić 2015), particularly among those on long-term contracts (Oldenburg et al. 2010). The strain intensifies when maintaining contact with family becomes difficult or irregular (Carotenuto et al. 2012), due to, for example, limited or unstable internet access on board vessels.

Seafarers who are isolated on board and unable to communicate regularly with their families often face limited opportunities to participate in important family events. As a result, they may miss significant social and emotional milestones at home (Tang 2007a, 2007b). The demands of maritime work can therefore place substantial pressure on family life (Thomas 2003), as periodic separation creates challenges in sustaining intimate relationships. According to research conducted by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, the home-work interface is a major source of stress for seafarers, with difficulties emerging both upon returning home and when preparing to depart. Tensions commonly arise about a week before leaving, and the adjustment period typically requires several days of rest and reintegration into family life (Parker et al. 1997).

Thomas (2003) also notes that the experience of leaving for a voyage becomes more complex once children are involved. Early childhood years can be particularly challenging, as a long absence may lead seafarers to return home to children who do not recognise them or who express anxiety or fear. Parenthood therefore plays a significant role in how seafarers readjust to home life. Many describe feeling sidelined, as daily routines revolve around the children, and household responsibilities often feel unfamiliar and overwhelming. These dynamics can contribute to feelings of exclusion, since family life may appear largely unchanged whether they are present or not. Nevertheless, seafarers frequently highlight the benefits of their rest periods, which allow them to spend more uninterrupted time with their children than parents working regular schedules (Ibid.).

In addition to the challenges experienced by seafarers themselves, it is important to consider the perspective of their partners. Although seafarers' wives do not physically leave home, they also face the emotional strain of repeated separations and reunifications, requiring constant adjustment (Juranko 2018). Many feel that their lifestyle differs significantly from that of women whose partners work on land (Tang 2012), and some withdraw from social life, believing that those outside the maritime community cannot fully understand their circumstances (Thomas 2003). During long separations, partners frequently experience stress related not only to missing their spouse but also to concerns about safety and inadequate communication (Yur & Nas 2012; Tang 2010, 2006). While their partners are at sea, they assume responsibility for most aspects of family life, including childcare, household management, and maintaining social ties. This creates a distinct lifestyle during the seafarer's absence, which again shifts when the seafarer returns home. As a consequence, many partners describe living two separate lives. Although numerous women in Hagmark's study (2003) coped successfully with these demands, some expressed frustration and fatigue caused by the constant transitions between solitude and family life. In Foster and Cacioppe's research (1986), 83% of female partners reported experiencing stress when their spouse returned or departed, nearly half believed that their relationship was strained by the seafaring lifestyle, and 25% suspected the possibility of infidelity. Yet despite these challenges, reunions often bring a sense of happiness and renewed appreciation for the relationship, as temporary absences may reduce monotony and increase the value placed on shared time (Thomas 2003).

Sexual intimacy is an essential dimension of a romantic relationship. Although seafarers' partners are aware of the possibility of extramarital affairs during periods of separation, most choose to reject this option, viewing it as a threat to long-term relationship stability. The resumption of sexual intimacy following the seafarer's return often brings satisfaction; however, fatigue, jet lag, work-related stress, or the partner's own exhaustion from family duties can complicate this process and negatively affect physical closeness (Thomas 2009).

These challenges highlight the need for adaptive mechanisms to sustain relationship functioning during periods of separation. Long-distance relationships require the use of adaptive strategies to maintain intimacy and relationship satisfaction. As highlighted by Tashkeh et al. (2024), sustaining behaviors play an important role in maintaining intimacy, which may encompass emotional closeness, communication, and mutual understanding. Partners may therefore adjust their expectations regarding physical and sexual intimacy as part of maintaining relational stability.

2. METHOD

The main objective of this study is to examine how the maritime profession influences the lives of seafarers and their wives in Split. Specifically, it aims to analyze how the absence of a husband/father affects household organization, family dynamics, and overall satisfaction with everyday life. The study also seeks to assess the involvement of spouses in family responsibilities and to identify the advantages and disadvantages of maintaining a long-distance marriage. To address these aims, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews, which offered deeper insights into how families cope with prolonged separations, manage daily obligations, and sustain emotional stability and relationship satisfaction despite physical distance.

In qualitative research, the researcher's role is to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the context being studied (Gray 2022). This is achieved through well-defined and clearly articulated research questions, which guide the entire research process. Research questions play a crucial role in keeping us focused throughout the research process (Maxwell 2005). These questions are designed to uncover insights into the topic being studied, with the answers emerging during the research process itself (Creswell 2009).

In line with the study's objectives, the following research questions were posed:

1. How does choosing a maritime career influence decision regarding cohabitation?
2. Do spouses in marriages involving a seafarer experience unequal levels of personal sacrifice?
3. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of maritime work?
4. How does the father's absence due to seafaring affect his parental authority?
5. To what extent does marital fidelity become a concern in marriages involving seafarers?
6. Are seafarers and their wives satisfied with maritime employment?
7. Are seafarers and their wives satisfied with their marital relationship?

This study employed purposive sampling and included ten married couples, resulting in twenty participants (ten men and ten women). Participants were selected based on two criteria: the husband/father works as a seafarer, and the family has at least one child. The sample included both younger families and those with more extensive seafaring experience to ensure a diversity of perspectives. Most participants were in their thirties, and all resided in Split, Croatia.

Among seafarers, six held higher education degrees—four from the Faculty of Maritime Studies and two from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, and Naval Architecture. Four participants completed secondary education: two graduated from a maritime school, and two completed vocational programs in mechanics. Their seafaring experience ranged from 1 to 17 years, and contract types varied. Five worked under a 2.5–2.5 rotation (2.5 months at sea followed by 2.5 months at home), one followed an 8–4 contract, one a 6–3 contract, one a 4–2 contract, and two worked under a 3–3 rotation.

Among seafarers' wives, half (five) held higher education degrees. One completed two university programs (at the Faculty of Maritime Studies and the Faculty of Economics), while others have specialized in conservation and restoration, philosophy and pedagogy, physiotherapy, or economics. The remaining five wives had secondary school qualifications, from the Arts School, Health School, and Traffic School. At the time of the study, six were unemployed, while four were employed.

This study employed a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews. The interview guides were developed using the framework proposed by Thomas (2003), with modifications made to align with the specific aims of this study. Separate guides were prepared for seafarers and for their wives, allowing the questions to reflect the distinct perspectives and experiences of each group. The research was conducted in 2019. Participants were interviewed individually in Split, at various locations chosen according to what was most convenient for both the participants and the researcher. Most interviews were conducted either in cafés or in the participants' homes. Before each interview, participants were fully informed about the research topic, methodology, and objectives. They were assured that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without providing a reason, and that they would have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts. All participants provided written informed consent for the audio recording of their interviews and for the use of their data in subsequent analyses. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a unique code, such as S1 for Seafarer 1, S2 for Seafarer 2, SW1 for Seafarer's Wife 1, SW2 for Seafarer's Wife 2, etc. The interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile application and transcribed verbatim. After interviews with all twenty participants had been completed, data saturation was reached, as no new information emerged. The content was then examined using thematic analysis to identify emerging themes and subthemes, with each theme representing a distinct concept.

The analytical process followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data through active reading of the entire dataset prior to analyzing individual units, generating initial categories, searching and reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report.

Both deductive and inductive approaches were used in the analysis. The deductive approach focused on predefined categories derived from the research questions, such as household organization in the seafarer's absence, the distribution of family responsibilities, perceived advantages and disadvantages of maritime work, and satisfaction with marriage and employment. The inductive approach allowed new categories to emerge from the participants' narratives, particularly regarding coping strategies during separation, emotional challenges, and the effects of prolonged absence on partner relationships and parenting roles. This process led to the development of additional codes that were not part of the initial analytical framework. The final step of the analysis involved interpreting the research findings.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Reasons for Choosing the Maritime Industry

The maritime industry is a demanding profession that requires significant sacrifice but also offers unique rewards. It is distinctive in many ways and entails a particular lifestyle, which is why this study explored the reasons individuals choose a maritime career. For two participants, coming from a seafaring family was a defining factor. They explained that nearly all of their relatives worked at sea, making their own decision feel almost instinctive:

There's no one in my family who isn't a seafarer, father, brother, uncle, grandfather, everyone. In my village of Slatine, 80% of the population are seafarers. Those who aren't retired or women. The younger generation, everyone else, are seafarers too. Therefore, it felt perfectly normal to me. (S10)
Everyone in my family was a seafarer, so I didn't truly have to think twice about it. (S2)

However, choosing a maritime career often requires years of specialized education, beginning at a young age, typically accompanied by strong parental influence. Two participants noted that, with greater independence or hindsight, they might have made a different decision. As one recalled:

Well, I studied this and finished it when I was still young. I listened to my parents' advice. No one in my family had been a seafarer, although my uncle was an agent. I considered becoming a mechanic or doing something else, but I'm glad I chose this path. (S6)

Life on board represents a unique working environment that is unpredictable, dynamic, and composed of multinational crews performing a wide range of duties. Several participants were drawn to the profession by opportunities for continuous learning, career advancement, and broader employment prospects. One participant described:

As an electrician, I get to learn many new things. The ship offers a broader scope of experience than, say, working on land because everything operates together; it is a self-contained environment. (S4)

Interestingly, two participants left stable land-based jobs to join the maritime industry—one due to a lack of professional stimulation and the other because of limited career advancement and earning potential in their previous positions. Although only three of the ten participants explicitly cited financial reasons as their primary motivation, economic considerations clearly remain an important factor for some.

3.2. Development of Partner Relationships

Most couples interviewed had met before the first embarkation, and eight out of ten seafarers stated that the profession did not influence their decision to live together. However, one participant explained that his wife was initially hesitant about his career choice and had to be persuaded. She described her reasoning as follows:

Well, what could I do? I agreed because I believed it would be better for our children in the future. This is the only reason. (SW5)

From the wives' perspectives, four stated that seafaring had no effect on their shared life. Two emphasized that it was their husband's decision and that they respected it, regardless of its impact on them. For younger couples, however, the sacrifices associated with seafaring are not always fully understood early in the relationship. As one wife noted:

I knew he was training for this, that he'd completed maritime school, and that he planned to make this his career. However, if I had known what awaited me,

I'm not sure I would have gone along with it. Nevertheless, I can say that I was prepared. (SW1)

For some wives, the adjustment was more difficult:

It was like shock therapy! (laughs) You know, if I had met him and known he was a seafarer, it might have been different. However, when you're always together and then suddenly separated, it felt very strange... for both of us. It might have been easier for him... he's used to it, his whole family are seafarers. However, for me, it was completely new and strange. (SW2)

The unique demands of seafaring can become obstacles when planning a future together. One wife shared that she had once vowed never to marry a seafarer but ultimately changed her mind:

When I was younger, I always said I'd never marry a seafarer. However, never say never (laughs). I didn't want to live the life of a seafarer's wife, but when I fell in love, nothing else mattered. Before him, I briefly dated another seafarer, but when he went on a ship, I ended it. In addition, yet, here I am now, married to one (laughs). (SW6)

One wife described how her husband's career affected their family life, particularly after the birth of their first child. He did not meet the baby until two months after birth, and his prolonged absence had a profound impact on their older child, who developed anxiety and related emotional difficulties:

Our older child developed something called 'fear of loss'... increased confusion, anxiety, and a need to control everything, even things she shouldn't be involved with. It also led to a loss of self-confidence due to feeling abandoned and the absence of a father figure in her life. (SW9)

The child continues to attend psychotherapy and has been hospitalized several times due to severe anxiety. According to the mother's account, she associates the child's emotional difficulties with the father's frequent absences due to his seafaring profession, while it should be emphasized that this represents her perspective and that the causes of such difficulties may be multiple and complex.

3.3. Participation in the Household

When evaluating the distribution of sacrifices within relationships, most seafarers (six out of ten) felt that their wives carried a greater burden. The term “sacrifices” was used by the participants themselves, which justifies its use in the interpretation. Three participants believed that sacrifices were shared equally, while one described himself as making the greater sacrifice:

Me! (laughs) It's obvious! It's easier to stay at home. I've told her a hundred times, you go on the ship, and I'll stay home with the child. (S2)

His wife disagreed, explaining:

I think it's equal. He's away from us, and when he's not here, I have to take care of the child, the house, and everything else he can't do... that responsibility falls on me. Therefore, I'd say it's equal. (SW2)

Among wives, the majority (seven in total) also viewed the sacrifices as balanced. However, two believed that their husbands sacrificed more, while one saw herself as a more self-sacrificing partner. These differing perspectives are illustrated clearly in the contrasting responses of S1 and SW1:

I believe my wife's sacrifice is much greater than mine. I've been home for three months, taking care of everything. She works until 4 p.m., and then I cook, clean, iron, and prepare meals. It's all focused on him, and that's a lot of work. Therefore, I think she's had the hardest time. (S1)

His wife offered a different interpretation:

I might handle the day-to-day tasks, but when I think about his absence and the fact that he spends six months away to earn money for us, which we need, I think the sacrifice is shared 50/50 between us. I know how tough it is for him, so I can't say it's all on me. (SW1)

A similar pattern appears in the cases of S4–SW4, S5–SW5, and S9–SW9. In these couples, the husbands tended to believe their wives made greater sacrifices, whereas the wives saw them as equal:

She faces many types of external challenges every day. When communication is difficult, she must handle things on her own, no matter how tired she is. On the ship, we focus on the tasks at hand, and the question is whether we actively

contribute to the home life or just think about ourselves and the ship. (S9)

His wife explained:

The sacrifices are mutual. You can't say who has it harder. I'm overwhelmed with work and responsibilities, but he's on the other side of the world, facing his own set of challenges and responsibilities. (SW9)

Differences were also noted between S10 and SW10. S10 believed that his wife sacrificed more:

Her sacrifice is greater because raising a child is much harder than working on the ship. I work my shift or contract, and she's in a 'work relationship' 24/7. (S10)

However, his wife expressed the opposite:

I'm with the child, and I don't have to worry about bills or groceries, but there are situations at home I handle on my own. His efforts and responsibility are far greater. (SW10)

When assessing household responsibilities, seven out of ten seafarers believed that their wives are fully responsible for managing the home:

There's nothing to say about it; the wife holds down all corners of the house, and I'm fine with it, I don't complain. (S3)

Some participants, both men and women, described the wife's household work as a "substitute" for the husband's financial contribution:

The wife does all the work when I'm not around, so she doesn't have to work as long as I can provide for her and the kids. (S8)

For me, participation isn't about substitution. I handle all the responsibilities ... making important life decisions, managing finances, raising the kids through their schooling and extracurricular activities. I believe I hold all four corners of the house, not just three, as the saying goes. (SW9)

One seafarer stated that they shared household duties equally, while another quantified his contribution:

I think I actively participate in most things, 50% in finances and household chores, and for raising our child, I'd say 49%. (S7)

Among wives, only three believed that the household functioned entirely because of their efforts. Four stated that their husbands helped with everything when at home, while three believed responsibilities were shared equally. Discrepancies arose in some couples, such as between S8 and SW8, as well as between S10 and SW10. For example, S8 feels that his wife handled everything in exchange for his financial support, whereas SW8 acknowledged her husband's help when he was home. Similarly, S10 believed his wife carried the full burden, while SW10 viewed their participation as balanced.

3.4. Differences in Household Organization between Husband's Offshore and Onshore Periods

Seven out of ten wives reported noticeable differences in household organization depending on whether their husbands were at sea or at home. Two noted only minimal differences, while one observed no change. Most stated that they had more personal time when their husbands were home:

When he's home, I get more time for myself. I can go out for coffee or meet friends in the evening. When he's on the ship, I need to ask my mother-in-law to watch the kids. (SW6)

However, another wife described the opposite situation:

Honestly, I have more time for myself when he's on the ship. After I've done everything I need to, I can relax. When he's home, we share that time, but it's always busy with activities. I'd rather just sit on the couch or go for coffee with friends, but I prioritize spending time with him since we're apart so often. (SW1)

Another participant explained that the difference was connected to their family dynamics:

When he's home, he helps me with the little one, and we go somewhere, at least within Croatia. When he's at sea, I'm mostly at home with the child. (SW10)

3.5. Adaptation Process

We also examined whether seafarers require an adaptation period upon returning home in order to readjust to family life. The responses were mixed. Half of the seafarers (five in total) reported that they settled in immediately. This view was shared by most of the female participants (six in total):

On the way from the airport to home, it's like he never left. (SW4)

However, the other half of the seafarers stated that they needed a few days to “get back to themselves”. For some, this involved only physical rest, but one participant described needing time to adjust to family routines and household responsibilities:

Until I become aware that I also have responsibilities at home. (S6)

Four out of ten wives agreed with this perspective. One noted that her husband was noticeably irritable during the first few days at home, particularly in his interactions with the children. Another estimated that it takes roughly two weeks for the family to return to a sense of normality:

I'd say about two weeks before we start functioning normally because when he comes home, he needs to adjust to the rhythm that's already been established. (SW1)

3.6. Authority Over Children

Given the frequent absence associated with maritime work, we also explored whether fathers' authority over their children is affected and how their work schedule influences their father-child relationships. From the fathers' perspective, only two reported that their authority was diminished:

There is authority, but owing to the short time at home and the desire to keep things running smoothly, I sometimes undermine my authority by giving in or making the wrong decisions. (S9)

This may seem surprising, but it is important to consider that most of the children in these families are between one and four years old, a stage at which parental authority is still developing. As one father reflected:

I'm still a relatively young parent, but from talking with my colleagues, I see this (reduced authority) as a common pattern. For example, when my dad was

abroad, I still feared him even though he was miles away. I hope to have that same influence on my children. (S1)

Four other seafarers expressed similar views, emphasizing that maintenance of authority depends on continuous communication, with the wife's involvement playing a key role:

She always reminds our child about dad, like 'Dad will do this', or 'Dad will do that'. It's important for both of us to work together, and she has to remind our child that 'dad is here'. (S1)

The wives of seafarers expressed divided opinions regarding paternal authority. Four believed that the father's authority increased because of his absence, while another four thought it diminished. Two stated that the father's absence did not influence parental authority. One wife, whose child is still very young, believed that her husband's authority would increase over time:

When you don't know someone well, it's hard to say, but when he's away, you give him more attention when he's finally home. I think that relationships should be more authoritative because they are not around every day. (SW1)

Most of the other wives saw themselves as having the primary authority within the household, while the fathers tended to have a more "friendly" relationship with their children. This was often attributed to the father's long absences:

I have more authority, which is logical because I spend more time with them. (SW3)

Not at all. I set the rules, and in our family, that's how it works. When the child needs permission, they ask me first, and my words are final. (SW6)

3.7. Marital Intimacy, Fidelity, and Satisfaction

Frequent long separations between partners can significantly affect intimacy and sexuality. The separation period is challenging in multiple ways and is often accompanied by a persistent sense of longing for the partner. Because living apart is a conscious decision made by both spouses, many participants reported that they try to protect themselves from emotional strain:

When he leaves for the ship, the day I take him to the airport, I put my feelings in a mental 'closet' and don't open them until he returns. This behavioral

strategy is something I developed over the years to function normally. I don't want to burden him with my emotions, nor do I want to burden myself. I have to manage in my surroundings, at work, with our child, and this way is the easiest for me. (SW1)

A common stereotype about fidelity in seafaring marriages assumes that seafarers may use the services of prostitutes while in port, and that their wives tacitly accept such behaviour or participate in extramarital relationships themselves, either physically or emotionally. Opinions among wives in this study were divided. Half insisted that marital fidelity is non-negotiable, while the other half felt that “anything is possible”:

He says there aren't many ports where they stop, at least that's the story for me (laughs). However, I wouldn't swear on it. I trust him, but like I said, I wouldn't bet my life on it. (SW6)

Some wives indicated that even if infidelity occurred, they would prefer not to know:

That's on him. I told him everything's fine as long as I don't find out (laughs). If I did, God forbid, find out, that would be the end of it! (SW4)

I told him, if you ever cheat, don't tell me (laughs). If I find out, he won't have it good. (SW5)

I still trust him. However, I've told him, if there's any infidelity, don't tell me, because I don't know if I'd be able to live with it. (SW8)

All seafarers agreed that their fidelity was unquestionable and expressed full trust in their wives. Most denied the possibility of “wandering” while in port, with only one participant acknowledging that temptations exist but insisting that he resists them:

Honestly, there have been challenges, and that's normal on the ship, but it doesn't even cross my mind. I know what's waiting for me at home, I'm a faithful person, and it's out of the question. I never doubted her either. (S10)

These contrasting perspectives on fidelity, often differing sharply between husbands and wives, align with Jessie Bernard's (1972) concept of “his” and “her” marriage, two subjective experiences within the same relationship. The asymmetry in perceptions points to gaps in communication and, in some cases, an unspoken agreement in which wives prefer not to know the truth. These findings suggest that intimacy and perceptions of fidelity represent important dimensions of relationship

quality in seafaring marriages. Despite the challenges associated with prolonged separation, it is therefore relevant to examine how partners evaluate their overall marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction refers to the subjective sense of happiness, fulfilment, and pleasure one partner experiences in relation to the other (Hawkins 1968). When asked about their marital satisfaction, participants were largely unanimous in expressing positive evaluations:

I'm truly satisfied! (S4)

Well, I'm very satisfied. (S5)

If it wasn't good, it wouldn't have lasted this long. (laughs) (S6)

Yes, truly, everything is great. (SW2)

He's good (laughs), I'm satisfied. (SW6)

3.8. Advantages and Disadvantages of Seafaring

Participants were also asked to identify and compare the primary advantages and disadvantages of seafaring from the perspectives of both seafarers and their wives. Overall, the views were largely consistent. Financial security, particularly a high and stable income, was the most frequently cited advantage. Some participants described finances as the only benefit of the profession, while others mentioned additional positives. Nearly all highlighted the extended periods of time spent at home during off-ship rotations, which allow for meaningful family bonding:

For half the year, I have 24 hours a day to spend with my family, which is much more than if I worked on land. (S3)

When he's home, I have my husband and the father of my children for four months. He's completely dedicated to us, unlike someone who works on construction sites until 5 or 6 in the evening and comes home exhausted. (SW6)

Other advantages include opportunities to travel, meet new people, explore different cultures, and pursue career advancement. However, one seafarer cautioned that this is often idealized:

You might get to see some city landmarks if your company arranges hotels during embarkation and disembarkation, but most seafarers only see airports and the faces of agents and customs officers on their way to the ship. (S9)

The most frequently mentioned disadvantage was prolonged separation from family. Seafarers described missing important milestones, celebrations, and everyday

moments. Some also reported a sense of “losing touch” with life on land and feeling disconnected from events back home:

No matter how much access we have to the internet, we're still isolated. When we're working, we don't have time to read the news; we live in our own little world, under a glass bell, so to speak. (S4)

You have to stay healthy to keep your job, but you don't have anyone to share your stress with on the ship. You bottle up your emotions, deal with loneliness, and become detached from reality. The longer you stay at sea, the more it feels like you are living in an unreal world. (S9)

Wives commonly reported that one of the greatest challenges they face is managing all household and family responsibilities alone, especially during long contracts:

Primarily, it's the fact that I am alone. I have to do everything myself, be both the mother and the father at home. If something breaks, or if there's work to be done, I have to take care of it, along with all the 'female' tasks. (SW1)

3.9. Job Satisfaction as a Seafarer

Most seafarers (seven in total) expressed satisfaction with their profession. However, several noted that seafaring is a double-edged sword, offering both significant advantages and considerable disadvantages:

I like to explain it with one sentence...imagine the best and the worst thing in life. That's it. (S1)

I often call it a necessary evil. (S9)

Many seafarers recognized that transitioning to a land-based job would be important for their long-term future. While their wives generally supported such a transition, many seafarers expressed satisfaction with their current work but remained open to change. Still, a substantial number reported difficulty leaving the sea due to the time and financial investment already made in their careers. Much of their income goes toward immediate expenses, especially housing, leaving limited savings. For younger seafarers, these financial constraints, combined with uncertainty about shore-based employment, make transitioning away from maritime work appear unlikely and difficult to achieve:

To stop navigating, it takes time to achieve something and earn enough at home, and then it is hard to part with the sea. It still offers something, while at home, almost no one knows you anymore. I am trying to create something, hoping to set the stage for my last voyage as soon as possible. (S9)

You know how seafarers say, 'just this one more trip and I won't go back to the ship,' that's how I feel. It is what it is, the money is here. However, 'just this one more' continues dragging on. (S2)

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a clearer understanding of the everyday realities faced by families involved in seafaring and highlight the complex relationship between work obligations and family life. In line with earlier research (Slišković & Penezić 2015; Thomas 2003), financial stability and long periods of uninterrupted time spent at home continue to be viewed as important advantages of seafaring work, contributing to generally high levels of satisfaction among many couples. At the same time, the results confirm that the repeated cycles of departure and return generate emotional and organizational challenges. Participants often described the periods just before leaving and immediately after coming home as especially challenging, which corresponds with Parker et al.'s (1997) discussion of stress during transitional phases and shows how much adjustment is required within maritime families. The responsibilities assumed by partners who remain at home correspond with previous findings that seafarers' wives frequently shoulder the bulk of family duties on their own (Juranko 2018; Tang 2012), often facing social isolation and psychological strain. Given that all participants lived in Split, a larger urban setting with lower social control, the experiences reported in this study may differ from those in smaller communities, where more restrictive social norms could make the position of seafarers' wives more demanding. A notable finding of this study is the difference in how partners view sacrifice and responsibility, which aligns with Bernard's (1972) idea of "two marriages", the notion that each partner may experience the same relationship in a distinctly different way. The results also add nuance to discussions about paternal authority. Instead of showing a uniform decline, the study found that fathers' authority was sometimes weakened and sometimes strengthened, depending on the wider family context. This suggests that patterns of communication and family organization may shape how separation influences parental roles (Thomas 2003). Concerns about fidelity emerged as a sensitive emotional issue, with wives expressing more uncertainty than the seafarers themselves. This reflects Foster and Cacioppe's

(1986) observation that fear of infidelity is a common theme in long-distance relationships. The coping strategies described by wives, including emotional distancing, support Tang's (2012) and Thoma's (2009) arguments that emotional withdrawal can serve as a protective mechanism, although it may at the same time limit open communication within the relationship. A particularly important contribution of this study is the attention drawn to children's emotional well-being. One case revealed severe consequences of separation for a child, extending earlier research, which usually reports children's difficulties in milder forms.

The strengths of the study lie in the inclusion of both seafarers and their wives, which made mutual comparison possible and highlighted differences in perceptions that would likely remain hidden in a single-group study. Semi-structured interviews also allowed participants to describe their experiences in depth and in their own words. However, several limitations should be noted. The sample was small and drawn from a single geographical area, and the data relied on self-reports, which may have been shaped by social desirability, especially regarding delicate topics. The relatively short interview duration may have limited the level of detail obtained, and the study did not include direct interviews with children, despite their significant role in family life.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the maritime profession significantly shapes family life and requires constant adjustment from both seafarers and their spouses. Financial security and extended periods spent at home contribute to marital satisfaction and continue to be viewed as important advantages of this career. At the same time, prolonged separations create emotional, relational, and organizational challenges that affect partners and children in different ways. The findings reveal differences in how spouses perceive sacrifice, the difficulties involved in maintaining parental authority, and the emotional sensitivity surrounding questions of intimacy and fidelity. By including the perspectives of both seafarers and their wives, this research confirms earlier observations while also providing additional insight into the diverse experiences of maritime family life.

These findings highlight the need for stronger support structures for families of seafarers. Maritime companies could invest in more reliable communication technologies on board, as regular contact is crucial for emotional well-being and the maintenance of parental roles. Programmes that assist couples in preparing for

departures and managing reunions could help reduce transitional difficulties. Support groups for partners of seafarers may help alleviate feelings of isolation, while accessible mental health services are particularly important for families with young children facing prolonged separations. Finally, policies that provide more flexible rotation schedules and clearer pathways towards shore-based employment could contribute to greater long-term stability for seafaring families.

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IZMEĐU MORA I OBITELJI: SOCIOKULTURNE DIMENZIJE ŽIVOTA POMORACA I NJIHOVIH SUPRUGA U SPLITU

Sažetak:

Pomorska profesija prepoznaje se kao oblik rada koji snažno oblikuje obiteljsku organizaciju i intimne odnose, ponajprije zbog dugotrajnih razdoblja fizičke odsutnosti te cikličnih faza razdvajanja i ponovnih susreta. Takva organizacija rada zahtijeva stalnu emocionalnu, socijalnu i praktičnu prilagodbu kako pomoraca, tako i članova njihovih obitelji. Cilj ovog rada bio je istražiti utjecaj pomorske profesije na život pomoraca i njihovih suprugica u gradu Splitu, kao i analizirati dinamiku bračnih odnosa u kontekstu dugotrajne razdvojenosti. Istraživanje je provedeno 2019. godine korištenjem polustrukturiranih intervjua s pomorcima i njihovim suprugama. Rezultati pokazuju da pomorci imaju tendenciju percipirati svoje supruge kao one koje snose veći dio tereta u zajedničkom životu, dok supruge navode da su odricanja podjednako raspodijeljena. Glavne prednosti pomorske profesije odnose se na financijsku stabilnost i mogućnost provođenja intenzivnog, kvalitetnog vremena s obitelji tijekom razdoblja boravka kod kuće, dok je ključni nedostatak dugotrajna razdvojenost, koja suprugama nameće veću odgovornost za kućanske i obiteljske obveze. Unatoč tim izazovima, obje skupine sudionika izražavaju visoku razinu zadovoljstva svojim životom i brakovima na daljinu. Općenito, nalazi naglašavaju sociokulturnu specifičnost obiteljskog života pomoraca.

Ključne riječi: pomorci; supruge pomoraca; obitelj; prednosti; brak na daljinu

Authors' address

Adrese autorica

Gorana Bandalović

University of Split

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

gbandalo@ffst.hr

Kristina Siničić

independent researcher, Split, Croatia

k.perisic94@gmail.com

