

# **Trawling Deeper Seas: the gendered production of seafood in Western Australia.**

**Leonie C. STELLA B.A. (Hons.)**

This thesis is presented for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 1998.

# Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Leonie Stella.

## **Dedication**

**For my three wise and bold daughters who  
go everywhere and do everything.**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the sexual division of labour in three worksites associated with the Western Australian fishing industry: fishers' households, a seafood processing company, and fishing vessels. There has been no previous substantial study of the labour of women in Australian fishing industries.

My research has been undertaken primarily through interviewing women and men who work in the Western Australian fishing industry, and my findings are presented through a comparison with overseas literature relative to each site. As I found, in the households of fishermen, women do unpaid and undervalued labour which includes servicing men and children; managing household finances and operating fishing enterprises. In seafood processing companies women are allocated the lowest paid and least rewarding work which is regarded as "women's work". On the factory floor issues of class, race/ethnicity and gender intersect so that the majority of women employed in hands-on processing work are migrant women from a non-English speaking background. The majority of women who work at sea are cook/deckhands who are confronted by a rigid sexual division of labour, and work in a hyper-masculine workplace. The few other women who have found a niche which enables them to enjoy an outdoor lifestyle while they earn their own living, are those who work as autonomous independent small boat fishers.

In each site there is evidence that women - individually and collectively - exercise some power in determining how and where they work, but they remain marginalised from the more lucrative sites of the industry, and have limited access to economic and social power.

The findings suggest that the masculine domination of the fishing industry symbolically and structurally maintains a conventional sexual division of labour. In this the industry follows general Australian trends: Australian historical and sociological literature confirms women's constant battle with a rigid sexual division of labour in both the so-called public and private spheres of their lives. Australia also has a peculiarly masculinist culture which supports and maintains sex-segregation. At the same time, the fishing industry has unique features which are not replicated throughout the whole of Australia. These include the extensive responsibilities carried by women during lengthy absences at sea of their men; and the possibility for women to be "tough", to push "confining notions of femininity" through involvement in this industry. The thesis tries to make sense of such findings.

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