



## INTERMITTENT PARTNER ABSENCE AND QUALITY OF COUPLE SATISFACTION - A STUDY OF MERCHANT SEAFARERS

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### **Abstract**

*Seafarers are the lifeblood of the global maritime and fishing industries. Without them, the industry fails. It is therefore essential that all seafarers, whatever their nationality, gender, religion they belong to and whatever vessel they work on are safe, secure and satisfied. . India is one of the significant maritime labor supply nations next to Philippines. India was in fact the home to the second largest number of seafarers after the Philippines. However in the recent years there has been a sharp decline in the supply of seafarers especially ratings as depicted in the following table. The current trend shows that India is slowly losing its sheen as a big supplier of quality manpower to the global shipping industry, with China and the Philippines surging ahead. Studies have indicated that family problems and the inability to cope with them are the major causes for seafarers to quit their job. Considering the above reasons the researcher has proposed to undertake this study which focused on the seafarers' couple satisfaction.*

### **Introduction**

The world's seafarers can be seen as one of the first truly international and global workforces, comprising of individuals from regions as geographically and culturally disparate as Western Europe, Russia, India, South America and the Philippines. Such seafarers work on a range of different vessels, operating different trades, with a diverse range of work conditions. 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.

However, one thing that these individuals have in common is that their work necessitates prolonged separation from their home and families, separations that are often characterized by infrequent opportunities for communication. As such, seafaring may be seen as more than an occupation, rather a lifestyle—a lifestyle that involves a constant series of partings and reunions with associated transitions from shore-based life to the unique work environment of the ship. Inevitably, it is a lifestyle that will impact dramatically on both seafarers and their families.

Intermittent partner absence not only affects the partners psychologically but also has considerable impact especially on the quality of couple relationship and marital satisfaction. Another important problem that emerges as a result of intermittent absence is 'role displacement'. Role displacement refers to the sense of redundancy seafarers often felt upon their return home. The seafarers who toil and earn for the family return home with a expectation of being treated specially but they usually returned home to a wife who was used to being in sole charge of the family and household and the adjustment to this transition requires much effort and could often cause tension and conflict for both partners. Seafarers attempt to assert their authority upon their return home, for example, through re-establishing control of finances, being overly disciplinarian with children and attempting to make changes to household routines established in their absence.



**Review of literature**

Thomas and Bailey (2006) examined the impact of intermittent partner absence on couple relationships and family life. The article concludes that as a result of intermittent absence, the seafaring families experience role displacement and seafarers often feel redundant, unnecessary and essentially ‘outsiders’ in relation to their families. The study also revealed that the leave periods were not as anticipated for the seafarers and they did not cherish it much. Sampson, H. (2005) Drawing on fieldwork conducted in India, this article explores the lives of women married to seafarers from Mumbai and Goa, charting the changes in attitudes, values and daily life that can be seen as resulting from their husbands’ occupations. Using their own words and accounts and working through their own grounded experiences and changed circumstances, the article describes how despite, and sometimes because of, the isolation imposed upon seafarers’ wives, many have developed an independence that is recognized and often celebrated by family members but is also regarded as unusual within their local contexts. Additionally, access to higher incomes allows many seafarers and their partners to make significant choices about their domestic living arrangements which are not available to others working in the local economy. ILO (2004) has suggested that seafaring work patterns and the associated intermittent absences of the seafarers from their families have detrimental consequences on their health and safety. Similarly the rates of depression and anxiety on seafarers partners were found to be higher than that of the general population. Brown-Decker (1978) studies that lack of companionship and loneliness were found to be the two major problems faced by seafarers’ wives. These problems according to the spouses of seafarers manifested themselves more severely during the night and on weekends because these times are usually reserved for family life which disturbed them emotionally.

**Objectives**

1. To study the demographic profile the seafarers.
2. To examine the quality of couple relationship of the seafarers.
3. To study the difference in quality of couple relationship based on demographic variables.

**Methodology**

This research study was descriptive in nature. The objective of the study was to examine how periodic absences from home influence the couple satisfaction of the seafarers. The universe of the study was married seafarers who were registered in National Union of Seafarers in India (Tuticorin). The sample for the study 181 seafarers selected through convenience sampling technique. Demographic details of respondents were collected by means of a short self-structured questionnaire and couple satisfaction Index developed by Funk, J. L. & Rogge, R. D. (2007) was used to assess the couple satisfaction of the respondents. Data was collected using interview method.

**Results**

The study findings reveals that, of the total 181 seafarers more than half (52.5 percent) of them were below 35 years of age, 47.5 percent of the respondents had years of experience below 5 years, majority of the respondents (70.2 percent) don’t have any career break and 29.8 percent of the respondents had career breaks, Out of the 54 seafarers who have career breaks and 12.7 percent of them have stated that the reason for their career break is personal and family problems. The duration of duty of seafarers was found to be nine months among 45.3 percent, 49.2 percent of the seafarers had leave duration of two months, 55.2 percent of the seafarers duration of marriage was found to be below 5 years and 45.3 percent were earning an monthly income between 60001-70000.

**Table 1: Level of Couples Satisfaction of Seafarers Spouse**

S.No	Couples Satisfaction	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Very High (63-92)	30	16.6
2	High (56-62)	56	30.9
3	Low (48-55)	59	32.6
4	Very Low (25-47)	36	19.9
	Total	181	100.0



The study results reveals that 32.6 percent of the spouses of seafarers had low couple satisfaction, 30.9 percent of the spouses had high couple satisfaction, 19.9 percent of the spouses had very low couple satisfaction and 16.6 percent of the spouses had very high couple satisfaction. The loss of love, affection and intimacy due to their husbands' nature of work influences their couple satisfaction. But when compared to their husbands, they tend to have better couple satisfaction due to their children and family members. The spouses were able to manage their emotions by means of focusing on their children and getting support from their family members.

**Table 2: Difference in Couple Satisfaction based on Demographic Profile**

Variable	Test	Sig.	Result
Age	3.399	P<0.05	Significant
Duration of duty	2.331	P<0.05	Significant
Duration of leave	6.253	P<0.01	Significant
Duration of marriage	2.812	P<0.05	Significant

The ANOVA value ( $F=3.051$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) reveals that there is a significant difference in the couple satisfaction of the seafarers based on their age group. The mean value ( $X=56.6$ ) depicts that the couple satisfaction was found to be high among the seafarers whose age was between 41-45 years.

The ANOVA value ( $F=2.331$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) reveals that there is a significant difference in the couple satisfaction of the seafarers based on their duration of duty. The mean value ( $X=57.4$ ) depicts that the couple satisfaction was found to be high among the seafarers whose duration of work was one month.

The ANOVA value ( $F=6.253$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) reveals that there is a significant difference in the couple satisfaction of the seafarers based on their duration of leave. The mean value ( $X=58$ ) depicts that the couple satisfaction was found to be high among the seafarers whose duration of leave was five month.

The ANOVA value ( $F=2.812$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) reveals that there is a significant difference in the couple satisfaction of the seafarers based on their duration of marriage. The mean value ( $X=51.4$ ) depicts that the couple satisfaction was found to be high among the seafarers whose duration of marriage was above 16 years.

### Suggestions

1. Counseling services should be made available to handle the pressure of couple dissatisfaction.
2. Recreation activities should be provided which diverts the thoughts influence the dissatisfaction.
3. Free and unlimited communication facilities should be made available to all seafarers which will increase the couple satisfaction to some extent.
4. Shore leave should be extended which will increase the couple satisfaction when they are at work.
5. The youngsters who are recently married are to be given frequent shore leave to manage their early married life.

### Conclusion

Seafaring is one such occupation which demands the seafarers to stay away from their family for long periods. This phenomenon has adverse effects on the seafarers and their spouses as well. This recurring cycle of separation and reunion includes tension and tearfulness on a partner's absence, return to normal, anger and recrimination towards the partner during reunion followed by feelings of depression, anxiety, sadness when partners depart. Intermittent partner absence not only affects the partners psychologically but also has considerable impact especially on the quality of couple relationship and marital satisfaction. The present study concludes that low level of couple satisfaction was found in seafarers and the work related aspects like age, duration of duty, duration of leave and duration of marriage had a significant influence over the couple satisfaction level of the seafarers.



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