Vidas de las mujeres en tiempos cambiantes
Women’s Lives in Changing Times

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Women's role in the development of Czech punk subculture.

Jana Rimanova  
(Czech Republic):

Resumen: El rol de las mujeres en la subcultura punk Checa no fue descrita adecuadamente. En la literatura contemporánea el rol de la mujer es significativamente minimizado. A pesar del hecho de que el movimiento punk checo fue más o menos equitativo en términos de participación de ambos géneros las interrogantes sobre la influencia femenina en el movimiento están ausentes en los trabajos contemporáneos sobre esta materia. El problema es que el punto central de la influencia femenina fue usualmente dirigido hacia su participación dentro de la escena punk checa en términos de su integración en las bandas. Es bien sabido que las bandas punk checas son predominantemente masculinas y el rol femenino podría ser más de apoyo. Este hecho, sin embargo, no significa que las mujeres no fueran importantes para el desarrollo de esta subcultura en particular.

El documento reúne el actual progreso de la investigación enfocada en el rol de la mujer en la historia de la subcultura punk checa presentada como una tesis para maestría en la Universidad Charles de Praga.

Abstract: The role of women in the Czech punk subculture wasn’t adequately described. In the contemporary literature is the role of women significantly diminished. Despite the fact that the Czech punk movement was more or less equal in terms of participation of both genders the question of female influence on the movement is absent from contemporary works on this subject. The problem is that the focus on female influence was usually directed on participation on Czech punk scene in terms of membership in bands. Well-known Czech punk bands were predominantly male and the female role could be more supportive. This fact, however, does not mean that women were not important for development of this particular subculture.

Paper summarizes the current progress of the research focused on the role of women in the history of Czech punk subculture processed as a master thesis at Charles University in Prague.
REASONS FOR RESEARCH

The Sex Pistols led me to The Clash and Generation X, and to the seminal American scene with The New York Dolls, Television, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, The Ramones, The Stooges, and forward to the bands making music in my own backyard: Black Flag, The Dead Kennedys, The Germs, and countless others. But all these bands were made up primarily of men, men, and more punk men. Undoubtedly these men were beautiful and angry, smart and troubled; I liked the way they looked and sounded and deeply wished one would materialize in my living room and ask me to be their girlfriend. I was inspired by the guys, but I also wondered where the girls were.”, wrote Sharon Becker in Editor’s Note of Women’s Studies in a special issue devoted to women of punk music. ([BECKER 2012]

This was exactly my situation. As an adolescent who discovered raw punk music I was dependent on borrowed cassettes or later CDs passed on from friend to friend. Internet access was not something that you could find in every household. Information was spread by word of mouth and through printed samizdat zines.

In the article, The Year the Punk Book Broke, Sam Sutherland, author of the important book on Canadian punk, states: “There’s this hole...there’s a natural inclination to fill in that knowledge for yourself and then it can become a bigger project that you want to share.” ([The year the Punk Book broke 2013]

In the same way, I started to collect information about women who can inspire teenage girls and eventually became obsessive about the female singers and female music groups.

After many years of my own search, I discovered oral history and began to formulate the topic as the basis of my thesis.

In the existing literature on the history of Czech punk subculture, women are almost entirely dismissed. The percentage of women in music groups of this subculture is at first glance lower. One of my hypotheses is that the role of women in the history of the subculture was not grounded solely in the music groups but, was most often found in supporting roles, such as, managers, female creators of DIY punk clothing and, of course, in the more passive role of groupies.

Similar to how the British punk is essential the character of fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, who dressed Sex Pistols in a provocative torn clothes, inspired by the fetish and BDSM aesthetics, Soo Catwoman is an inspiration to the London punk subculture with her unforgettable hairstyle, absolutely outrageous style of dress and wild makeup. Although Soo has never been a musician, she appeared in many documentaries, music films or on the front pages of the media. She has still active fan club and became a true punk icon.

I was sure that it should be possible to find similar personalities in Czech punk scene.

PUNK SUBCULTURE

Musical subcultures are a specific phenomenon that appeared in the second half of the 20th century. In the Czech Republic, their appearance began to be noted later in the 70s.

An important connecting element is something that can be called a subcultural ideology or anthropological language worldview. It is a set of specific values, norms and attitudes. Subcultural ideology is formed in relation to the mainstream ideology. In many cases, defining itself as a negation of it.

In the book, Folklor atomového věku (Folklore of the Atomic Age), the authors write: A typical example of subcultural ideology can be punk. Contrasting emphasis on individual performance and career progression and nihilistic punk slogan “No Future”, as well as the situation when major society appreciates consumer, consumption or branded products, the punk aesthetic appreciates DIY [Do it yourself] approach. ([Novotná 2011]
Punk as a musical subculture constructs its identity primarily on the shared interests of music. Punk music is fast, simple and in a way democratic because almost everyone can pick up a guitar and write a punk rock song.

At a time when punk in Western countries quite clearly defined the difference from other subcultures, young people in Bohemia were only receiving fragmentary information. At the beginning, the styles and visual elements often mixed up.

Punk fashion has the purpose to frighten, disgust and scare. Partly based on the legacy Vivienne Westwood and BDSM aesthetics connected with intellectual quotes, resulting from the interest of her husband and manager Malcolm McLaren in French situationism. Punk fashion inherently belongs to leather jackets, torn clothes, nails, studded belts, razor blades and safety pins used as jewelry, leopard pattern, strips, cubes, colored hair, wild make-up and tattoos and body modification.

We can find many kinds of punk music that is slightly different in ideology and aesthetics. Most classic punk style ’77 is more melodious and also includes spiky short-cut hair, narrow jeans and leather jackets. Topics of songs tend to be frivolous, sometimes ironic up to humorous.

Punks with long cherokees usually belongs to the style of chaos punk. The visual style is colorful hair, more studded leather jackets, many hand-made signs and tattoos. The music is harder with screaming vocals and more serious lyrics.

Hardcore scene does not attach so much importance to personal styling. Some groups even despise it. The lyrics are usually more engaged and activist.

These are only selected examples, because many different sub-genres of punk can be found.

**PUNK HISTORY**

Although it is widely claimed that punk was the product of the revolt and rage on poor social situation, it was in fact the start of a great marketing idea. In the beginning was the British punk fashion of students from elite schools of art. The original idea of entrepreneur and artist Malcolm McLaren and fashion designer Vivienne Westwood to propagate their overpriced London boutique went out of control. The anarchist fashion style not only overcame all postwar stylish rebellion but its extraordinary extreme visualization has ranked itself among the elite of London street iconography.

For punk, as well as for many other youth pop-cult, this statement is certainly true: Invented in the USA, popularized in Britain. Music and visual foundations are originated in America. “But if it was not developed by sarcastic and style indicating British, “punk” would probably not exist”, gloss the article on StyleSurfin.cz (Mýty a styl punku 2014).

**PUNK HISTORY IN THE TERRITORY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

Lük Haas wrote in the book Discography of Eastern European Punk Music 1977-1999: “Most of the Eastern European countries have a punk history which is almost as old as those from the “Western Democracies”. Nevertheless, their realisations and development underwent very different paths than ours. One factor was isolation. Some of these countries were really cut off from the rest of the world. This led to very specific and original scenes. Another factor was that due to the lack of freedom of expression, being punk there meant usually a daily fight against the different kinds of police forces.” (Haas 2001).
Lük Haas visited Czechoslovakia several times and wrote reports about the Czechoslovak punk rock scene for *Maximum rocknroll*, one of the most important punk zines based in San Francisco, published from 1982. The first punks in the Czechoslovakia were isolated from information about the development of western music scene.

The first punk recordings were smuggled through the borders in 1976-1977 by people connected to two important movements in Czechoslovakia. The first bands were from Prague and operated around the Jazz section organization. This strange connection was a result of the connection to the “alternative rock scene” and to the organization Jazz Section, which was partly tolerated by the regime and was extremely open and daring in supporting bands. With this connection, the very first punk concerts in the Czech Republic took place at Prague Jazz Days Festival in 1979 (Fuchs 2002).

The punk subculture was, until 1989, under police repression. Almost every punk concert, whether approved or totally illegal, ended with police intervention. Witnesses described the frequent cases of police violence. Also, this may be the reason why the pre-revolutionary punk scene was not a good place for most of girls.

All officially existing bands had to pass a censor system that controlled both “artistic quality” and harmlessness of the songs. Many punk bands completely gave up on trying to operate officially and decided to remain illegal.

**RESEARCH SPECIFICS**

Generally, what we know about the status of the pre-revolutionary punks in Czechoslovakia was that they were beyond the understanding and control of the Communist Party. While fans of other musical genres tried to pass through the system, controlling music production and obtaining permits for various events, punk events often took place entirely undeclared, usually in someone’s home and official permission was not even attempted. For this reason, many archival materials cannot be traced. Interviews are therefore, in this case, the most appropriate method of data collection.

One of the possible written types of resources available for this research are based on the underground periodicals called zines. The problem with processing this type of resources is that they are unpublished literature and they have never been systematically collected and archived. In most of the cases, it is possible to get these texts only through the personal archives of people who actively lived in the subculture. These information sources are often incomplete but they still play an irreplaceable role.

A famous samizdat magazine called *Vokno* (The Window) started in the eighties. *Vokno* was generally more underground oriented but in several issues are referenced to punk. After the revolution, *Vokno* was converted to *A–kontra*, one of the most important anarchist periodicals, which is still active. In the later years, the samizdat *Voknoviny*, is mentioned more often. Both prints are now available in digitalised form on the Internet.

The first pure punk zine in Bohemia was called *Punk Maglajz*. It was published by the members of the legendary band *H.N.F.* [The Heroes of a New Front] led by their leader, Peter “Biafra” Štěpán. The zine was active between the years 1985 and 1987. Five issues were published. Then, the zine was replaced with the new one called *Schrott*, which only released two issues.

In 1987, *Attack* appeared in Prague, a zine on a much higher level compared to the previous ones. The first issue was published in 1987 under the title, *THE 10 YEARS FLEXI-DISC* and it was a translation of the British fanzine. *Kde se MLUVILO o . . . PUNKU?* n. d. The other two issues were original and have brought a lot of information about domestic punk and HC. Authors of the zine were later detected and no other release was published.
In Moravia, we can also find a few zines. One of the important ones was called *Sračka* (The Shit). In Lipné nad Bečvou, a zine called *Oslí uši* (Donkey ears) was published which is still considered the best Czech fanzine. One issue has about 150 -200 pages. In Brno, we can find a zine called Šot, which not only focused on the punk scene but also placed a significant part on the content. [Lukáš 2011]

The punk scene in Czechoslovakia is partially described in the book *Excentrici v přízemí* (Eccentrics on the ground floor) by the authors Aleš Opekár and Josef Viček published in 1989 ([Opekár 1989]). The punk scene is the main focus in the book *Punk not dead* written by Eduard Svítivý ([Svítivý 1991]). Perhaps the most essential book on pre-revolutionary Czechoslovak punk and HC is called „Kytary a řev aneb Co bylo za zdí“ (Guitars and Scream; What Was Behind the Wall) by Filip Fuchs and photographer Štěpán Stejskal. The book was published anonymously close to a samizdat approach by the publisher of punk music *Papagájův hlasatel* in 2002. The book describes in great detail the HC/punk life in the bolshevik Czechoslovakia, the bands of punk genre, punk demos and samizdat zines. It also contains several separate short profiles of major domestic punk and HC bands ([Fuchs 2002]).

A twelve-part series about Czech punk was created by Dan Folprecht and published in the Report magazine in 2007. Independent and underground publisher Tarantino a Čert released in 2007–2009 three tiny punk publications („Smradi, kterým všechno vadí”, „Asi jsme byli z jiného těsta”, „Vy jste to nevěděli?”). The books were compilations of memories, poetry and prose.

Social, cultural and political insight into Czech HC and punk movement can be found in the book by Miroslav Vaněk called *Byl to jenom rock´n´roll?* (Was just a rock’n’roll?) which is partly focused on conflicts between punks and totalitarian power ([Vaněk 2010]).

In 2012 was published text by POP Museum prepared for the exhibition KRISTOVA LÉTA ČESKÉHO PUNKU - 33 LET PRŮŠVIHů I VÝHER TÚZEMSKÉHO PUNK ROCKU - 33 LET OD PRVNÍHO PUNKOVÉHO KONCERTU V PRAZE [Christ age of the Bohemian punk - 33 YEARS of trouble and wins of domestic PUNK ROCK - 33 years since the first punk concert in Prague.] ([Hrabalík 2012]). But in all the mentioned literature, the role of women was significantly diminished. The problem is that the focus was usually directed on the participation in the Czech punk scene in terms of membership in bands. Well-known Czech punk bands were predominantly male and the female role was more supportive. This fact, however, does not mean that women were not important for the development of this particular subculture.

A new era of discovering punk history for ordinary people started with the appearance of the Internet and especially blogging, focusing on hard-to-reach old punk recordings. A lot of forgotten written documents and music recordings were suddenly accessible.

This information source works well for the English-speaking part of the music scene. But, it is still dependent on the personal activity of individuals. Significant information about punk events or electronically based zines were irretrievably lost due to the expiration of website hosting or because the author stopped caring about it.

Nevertheless, internet and new media played an important role in my research.

The punk scene in Czechoslovakia operated underground until 1989 and even today, not all the activities associated with the community are legal. It may be an anarchist activism, anti-racist activism, environmental activism and the struggle for animal rights. People who are still active in these movements do not want to reveal their identity.
For this reason, we find many anonymous documents, nicknames and aliases in the punk subculture. Getting contacts then becomes detective work.

In the current social setting, communication places social media in an irreplaceable role and is also used by people from the punk community.

An important help for obtaining narrators from the sphere of social networks is Facebook. The option of name search became the modern “telephone directory” and the function of tagging photographs led to many new contacts. If I managed to get to the old punk pictures, it was sometimes possible to find and reach out to the other people in the photo although they sometimes used a hidden identity. Sometimes these photographs brought me to the names of women who were not mentioned in any book or other information source.

This approach is necessarily based on mutual trust. My personal relationship to the processed topic is that there is a significant advantage.

A specific feature of this research are relatively young narrators. The oldest of them was a teenager in the early 80s. This has a significant effect on the form of interviews. Narrators often reject sharing their whole life stories. They do not see their lives as a finished story. Interviews consequently mainly follow the story line tied to the life within the punk subculture. The topic of professional life is often absent. The theme for the interpretation is the degree of influence of the basically anti-social nature of this subculture.

Much easier to find were the male narrators. They acted as gatekeepers but gradually began helping me with the search for new contacts. Some of them are still participating in the subculture. Almost all of these early interviews began with claiming that at the time before 1989 there were nearly no punk women. And almost every one of these interviews I was leaving with a number of names, nicknames and images of women who can remember the beginnings of the Czech punk subculture.

WOMEN IN PUNK
If we are looking for a female track at this time, it can be found in the personality of singer Ilma Maršíčková in the band F.P.B. from Teplice, singer and saxophone player Ema in the band Znouzectnost from Pilsen or singer of one of the first hardcore bands Radegast and later Masomlejn from Havířov - Dana Kalousová.

Special line is a purely girl band Plyn (Gas), later Dybbuk. The band was founded by classmates Pavla Fediuková and Hana Kubičková and then Marie Horáková joined them. Concert premiere of Plyn was in the spring 1982. When the Plyn band was blacklisted, the girls decided to change the name to Dybbuk. The band was playing officially yet orthodox punks did not perceive them as part of the punk scene. Marka Miková in Czech TV documentary Bigbít says: “We never wanted to be punk or new wave. But in general it seemed to be flattering for us retrospectively. At least to me.” (Česká televize 1996-2014)

She also recalls humiliating comments after the concert in Kladno: “Bring the grain.” Other band members recall the situations when someone often went to them after the concert and tried to explain to them how to play, because they were girls.

The band is by its style ranked on the border between punk and new wave. It is definitely interesting for its distinctive raw sound and lyrics that was always sang by their songwriter.

Some members of Dybbuk was later dragged into a more interpretive band playing lightweight soft rock called Panika (Panic). Panika released their only full album in 1991.

Finding women narrators from the period before 1989 is very difficult. From interviews that I have already finished, some of the narrators remember the time but most of them started to participate actively after the fall of the communist regime.
Like the entire society, the punk subculture has gone through a transformation. If punk was until then only a musical subculture and its main idea was mostly generational protest, nihilistic slogan “No Future” and a left wing mentality after 1990, the current Czech society of today began to introduce new topics – the state of the environment, animal rights and the newly rising neo-Nazism. Czech punk subculture started to branch out in different directions, some of them became focused on anti-racist activism, some on environmental protection and others on animal rights. And those are exactly the places where more women began to actively participate.

Another important change is that organizing punk concerts became easier and in most cases legal. At this time we can find more women in the role of organizers of concerts and festivals. The Czech audience could meet with a larger scale foreign bands for the first time. First, squats were created to become a place of cultural events of this genre. For this reason, I finally decided to follow the evolution of the punk scene in time.

The question why there was and still is such a small representation of women musicians became an evergreen of each of the interviews that I have conducted. Four of them were with men - gatekeepers, nine interviews were with women of the Czech punk subculture. Some of them are active musicians, some of them are organizers of events, artists, everything all together or “only” a lifelong fan. Replies that I received from my narrators as to why there is a low number of women in music groups were general and also personal. “Because women have no hobbies. I only know one or two who has some.” I learned from one of my male narrators. “I was the older sister and I was taught to cook and clean up. My brothers were the ones, who was supposed to go out in the world and tell some ideas.” recalls one of the narrators, who later became the organizer of music festivals, but who never found the courage to have her own band.

Why there is such a significant difference between number of men and women in bands is a question that I’ve asked myself since the beginning of the research. I do not have a clear answer but it is certainly related to the status of women in society in general and I think that the exact answer is not an achievable goal of my thesis.

The aim of the thesis is to explore the role of women in the Czech punk subculture as it was transformed along with the development of subcultures and society.

IS PUNK DEAD?
A lot of the narrators in my interviews sought the answer to the question of whether the old slogan “Punk is not dead” is still valid. Some of them got the feeling that the punk era was already gone. A lot of women narrators left the punk life by the time they started their own families. For some of them, it is difficult to find a balance between grown up life and not betraying their youth ideals. This question was wisely commented in the Broken Pencil magazine: “In many respects, the move from scummy squats and dives to the nation’s bookshelves is an inevitable one. Punk isn’t necessarily something that grows up, but its fans do. Their hair may be a little greyer, and their clothes more respectable, but the hunger for the music never wanes.” (The year the Punk Book broke 2013)
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Being an icon: The perception of the seafarer’s wife as a national character”

Hanna Hagmark-Cooper  
(Aland Islands):

Abstract: The Åland Islands are a group of islands in the Baltic, roughly halfway between Stockholm and Helsinki, inhabited by some 30,000 people. Åland is an autonomous, Swedish-speaking part of Finland and a maritime community both economically and culturally.

In a publication on the subject of Åland identity, 50 individuals representing different professions and population groups on and outside Åland were interviewed. One of the informants was a seafarer’s wife. She was the only person to be identified through her spouse’s profession rather than through her own. Equally, in an exhibition titled Portraits of Åland Women, two of the thirty-nine women were identified as seafarers’ wives. They were the only ones presented in their role as somebody’s wife. This suggests that the seafarer’s wife holds a prominent place in the gallery of Åland national characters and that she is regarded as a good representative of the community.
In November 2006 a temporary exhibition called The Woman and the Sea opened at the Åland Maritime Museum. It was an exhibition that focused on the female experience of maritime life, both at sea and on land. It was the story of female sailors, officers and passengers as well as seafarers’ wives onboard and ashore. It is rather telling that it takes a special temporary exhibition to tell the story of maritime women because somehow they are always an exception. At sea, they are an anomaly, because both the ship and the sea belong to the realm of men. Ashore, they are also perceived as different due to their family structure and independent position. I am neither the first nor the last to observe that maritime women are often neglected in women’s history and that maritime history to a very large extent focuses on men and ships. Research in maritime history has concentrated on economic and structural aspects of the maritime industries, and on the men who worked at sea, on the docks, or as shipowners, shipbuilders, brokers and agents. This is hardly surprising since the maritime industries are extremely male dominated. Traditionally, women have entered maritime history either as exceptional women in a man’s world – for example as female pirates and women-in-command – or they have been mentioned incidentally in studies concerning maritime communities and the domestic lives of fishermen or seafarers.\(^1\) Since the 1990s women have become a bit more visible, initially through anthropological and sociological studies, but later also within the discipline of history.\(^2\) The historiography of Åland’s maritime pursuits follows the traditional pattern. While there is a vast literature relating to the economic and structural nature of the Islands’ shipping industry, shipowners, captains, crews and ships; maritime women are dealt with very superficially in historical publications.\(^3\) In order to find out about women’s experiences of maritime life in Åland past and present, one has to turn to alternative sources, such as fiction, auto biographies and diaries, or – as in this case – life stories.\(^4\)

This study is based on a collection of oral interviews and written life stories from Åland seafarers’ wives. To facilitate comparisons, the informants were divided into three groups, representing different generations of women. Generation group one consisted of eighteen women, born between 1912 and 1935. Their husbands were retired and the children had long gone moved out. Generation group two were made up of twenty-eight women, born between 1940 and 1954. Their husbands were still working but they had no children living at home. The twenty-nine women in generation group three were born between 1948 and 1969. Their husbands were active seamen and they had children living at home.

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THE SAILOR’S WIFE AND THE ÅLAND IDENTITY

Åland is fundamentally a maritime community, and as such, the sea has a strong symbolic value in the creating of identity. Anthony P. Cohen highlights the importance of symbolism in the construction of community. This is because increased contact with the outside world can, despite numerous social and economic advantages, be a threat to a community’s traditional structure and vitality, as external influences gradually wears down the community’s structural foundations. The way forward is therefore to replace the structural foundations with symbolic ones.

Åland cannot be regarded as being isolated. On the contrary, situated as it is in the Gulf of Bothnia, it has always served as a bridge between Sweden and Finland, and influences from even further away were brought to the Islands by visitors from abroad or by native sailors returning home. Åland served as a trading place for the Vikings, Hanseatic merchants occasionally stopping there on their way to or from Turku and Viborg, while French monks of the Franciscan Order founded a monastery on one of the outer islands. The official mail route from Stockholm to Turku and St Petersburg, established in the eighteenth century, went over Åland, and with the introduction of long-distance seafaring in the nineteenth century, new ideas and influences were brought to the Islands. Since the 1960s, frequent and regular ferry traffic drastically reduced the time and effort in travelling and thus made both mainland Finland and Sweden seem much closer than ever before. To a large extent, it is the island’s dependency on shipping that has forced its inhabitants to interact with the outside world to a much larger extent than would have been the case had they engaged solely in agriculture and subsistence fishing.

According to Cohen’s theories, Åland’s structural boundaries should have suffered a severe weakening from its contact with surrounding communities. That may be true, but as Cohen predicted, symbolic boundaries have taken precedence. These boundaries are evident in a strong sense of local identity and in a clear awareness of traditions and culture. An important symbol for Åland is its special status as an autonomous region, supplying the population with an abundance of symbolic capital, such as the flag and the stamps. Another symbol for the Åland identity is the sea, resting on age-old traditions of the first settlers arriving by some form of sea-going vessel, making a living on the barren skerries by hunting seal and fishing. It is within this context that we find the seafarer’s wife.

 Prevailing discourses in Åland show that the sea is of strong symbolic value to the Ålanders. At the same time as it is a very concrete and real border to the rest of the world, the sea is simultaneously a link to the same outside world. It is from the sea, the islanders get their income, and it is also a source of mental and physical wellbeing, an element that offers comfort and peace of mind. In 1997, the topic of the annual publication Åländsk odling was Åland identity. In the introduction, Professor Bo Lönnqvist writes that the Ålanders perceive the sea as a source of strength in many ways. He further contests that the word sea in itself has a prominent position in the Åland vocabulary, that the word works as a tool in the construction of a specific Åland identity. In the book, fifty individuals, representing different professions and population groups on and outside Åland, were interviewed. With maritime industries employing such a large number of the population, it was not surprising to find a sea captain, a chief engineer and a shipowner among the fifty informants. More noteworthy, however, was the fact that one of the informants was present as a representative of Åland seafarers’ wives. She was the only person to be identified through her spouse’s profession rather than through her own. The same phenomenon was apparent in a temporary exhibition at the Åland Museum in the summer of 2000, called Åländska kvinnoporträtt (Åland women portraits). There were writers, labourers, politicians and doctors among the thirty-nine women presented in the exhibition, as well as two women interviewed in their capacity as seafarers’ wives. Again, these two were the only women to be presented in

5 B. Lönnqvist, “En icke ålänning” i Åländsk odling, no 57, Mariehamn 1997, s. 13.
their role as somebody’s wife.  This phenomenon is evidence of how significant the seafarer’s wife is in the
gallery of Åland national characters, and that she is perceived to be a worthy representative of the maritime
community that Åland is.

The iconic status of the seafarer’s wife goes back a long way.  In a travel journal from 1871, a visitor noted that
Åland women, more than women elsewhere, had to learn to deny themselves a lot:

She is hardly even fully aware that she owns a friend for life, before he is pulled away from her.  Out at sea is
his home, there he wrestles with dangers and maybe with death, while she works in the quiet home and hardly
has time to think of the one she loves out there, and for whom worry fills her bosom.

Although not all women in Åland were seafarers’ wives, the author of the quote above to choose to let the
circumstances of the seafarer’s wife symbolise those of all Åland’s women.

In Åland, it is a given fact that the island’s women are more independent that women in other parts of the
world and that the reason behind it is that the island’s men have always worked at sea while the women have
taken responsibility for home and family.  The seafarer’s wife is often presented as a female ideal and there
are a lot of stories that strengthens the image of the strong and enduring woman, who despite very harsh
conditions manages to create a home for herself, her children and her roving husband.  Equally, exhibitions
and publications like the ones mentioned previously contribute to the iconization of the seafarer’s wife.  The
iconic status of the seafarer’s wife is so engrained in the common psyche of the island, that it makes it difficult
to accept that in real life not every seafarer’s wife can or wants to live up to it.

There are also stories that with comical undertones reveal the independent nature of the seafarer’s wife.  One
such story goes briefly as follows:  The seaman is at home for one of his short and rare visits. The couple goes
to the grocery shop together but when the wife returns home she realizes that something is missing.  She
takes her a while to conclude that her husband is not there. She returns to the shop and finds him, lost and
confused, among the shelves.  The story alters a bit depending on who is telling it but the point of the story is
always the same.  The woman is so used to doing everything on her own that she forgets that her husband is
with her, and the man is so unfamiliar with life ashore that he is lost without his wife as a chaperone.  These
stories mainly relate to the time before the 1970s but there is no doubt that the seafarer’s wife is still afforded
high symbolic status.  She is often represented when a cross-section of the Åland population is to be
presented.  This is an indication of just how important the seafarer’s wife is as a symbol of the Åland identity
and what a good representative of the Åland community she is perceived to be.

INDEPENDENCE

In the current scholarly debate there is some disagreement regarding the assumed independence of women in
maritime communities.  When it comes to women in the Baltic and North Seas during the 19th century the
broadly held viewpoint is that although maritime women were perhaps more independent than other women,
they were forced to be so by the circumstances in which they lived. Coastal communities were still
fundamentally patriarchal and women’s work was secondary to men’s.  One of the questions in this study was
whether the women felt more independent than women whose men worked ashore.  I had expected a
resounding Yes, but as it turned out – and as I should have realised – it was not as straightforward as that.  It
was not possible to place the informants’ attitudes concerning maritime women’s degree of independence into

6S. Salminen, Katrina; A. Blomqvist, Vägen till Stormskäret; G. Högman, Den åländska kvinnans historia, s. 402–436.
Sea; D. Paap, Gode Make! Min Gumm! En brevväxling mellan Tilda Mattsson och hennes man skepparen Mats Mattsson’, Skärgård, no. 2,
Turku 1985; P. Thompson, Living the Fishing; S. Cole, Women of the Praia; D. J. Starkey & C. Lazenby, ‘Altered Images: Representing the
trawling in the late twentieth century’, England’s Sea Fisheries: the Commercial Sea Fisheries of England and Wales since 1300, D. J. Starkey,
straightforward categories such as ‘independent’ and ‘not independent’, since the word ‘independence’ could be used to describe a number of different things. It was used to denote self-confidence and personal integrity, as well as to refer to an ability to cope on one’s own, of being dextrous and a practical problem-solver. Moreover, a few informants regarded independence as synonymous with being economically self-sufficient. Common to all informants was an awareness of the discursive stereotype, and in their reconstructions the women placed their own experiences in relation to this image. I think it is noteworthy that women who wanted to distance themselves from the stereotype showed more awareness of its existence than did women who conformed to it.

Despite a plethora of differing attitudes, an attempt was made to sort the reconstructions into thematic groups. Sixty-two of the seventy-five life stories dealt in some way with the idea of independence, and these accounts were placed into three groups. The first and biggest category consisted of reconstructions that predominantly followed the discourse of the strong and independent seafarer’s wife, made thus through her experiences of maritime life. This category accounted for almost two in five narratives, twenty-nine accounts in total. The second category, which consisted of nineteen accounts, also comprised narratives in which the women presented themselves as independent. The significant difference was that they did not necessarily feel more independent than any other group of women. Their sense of strength and assurance did not only stem from their maritime experiences, but also from other factors, such as inherent personality traits and non-maritime events. Some of these reconstructions stated that the informants’ inborn autonomy was the sole source of independence, and thus totally unrelated to her being a seafarer’s wife. The third group was made up of fourteen narratives contrasted with the two previous types. In six of these accounts, the informants claimed that they were not at all independent, at least not in the sense of possessing the vast reservoir of confidence generally associated with maritime women. In the remaining eight accounts, the informants either stated that their independence was none the greater than any other woman’s, or that they were unsure as to what extent their situation differed from that of women whose husbands worked ashore. Finally, it should be pointed out that although the reason for a woman’s independence was not always explained through her maritime lifestyle, but was said to be either innate in the informant or had been gained through other experiences, about two-thirds of the reconstructions did infer that being on their own had given them the practical skills to cope with the daily management of the household, even if it had not always given them confidence and self-assurance.

THE TRADITIONAL IDEAL

The stereotypical characterisation of an Åland maritime woman is that of a strong-minded and resolute woman, multi-skilled as well as self-confident, and perhaps even somewhat domineering. This image was adopted by just under two-fifths of the informants in this study. It was not, however, exclusive to Åland women. This was also the image to which the older maritime women in Cole’s study likened themselves, and Kaijser argues that since seafarers’ wives spent so much time alone and had to assume greater responsibility than other women, they gained self-confidence and a very independent position. Although this attitude was significant in all three generations, it was more common among the older women. Both in Generation One and Generation Two, nearly half of the reconstructions followed this line of reasoning, compared to less than a third of the accounts in Generation Three. Typical of these reconstructions was the tendency to state that the informant’s particular circumstances as a seafarer’s wife was the reason behind her said independence, implying that she would have been less accomplished had her husband worked ashore. The women stated how they had adjusted to their situation and, in doing so, had learnt how to cope on their own. Some stressed their transformation into a seafarer’s wife, describing how they had grown with the responsibilities put on them. Others contrasted their situation with that of women whose men worked ashore, emphasising the increased
responsibility that a seafarer’s wife had to shoulder; ‘It is self-evident that we as seafarers’ wives become more independent. We have a completely different responsibility for children, house and home etc. And you have to make your own decisions’.

An interesting aspect of this quotation was that the informant was not only referring to herself but appeared to speak for seafarers’ wives as a collective. In doing so, she intuitively suggested that all maritime women shared the same experience. This could serve as evidence of how ingrained the stereotypical image of the maritime woman was in Åland society, for although seafarers’ wives were forced to cope on their own as best they could while their husbands were at sea, it did not, as we shall see, necessarily make them feel any more independent.

Compared to the other two generations, fewer third generation women presented themselves in accordance with the dominant discourse of maritime women, but those who did, did so wholeheartedly. They would make it obvious that they thrived in their role and that they would not want to change anything. One informant proudly proclaimed: ‘I think I’m more independent than women whose men work ashore and I think that is a strength; as a matter of fact I wouldn’t want to change anything.’

Another informant wrote:

I consider myself more independent than many other women. You are forced to deal with so much more when you are a seafarer’s wife. Many who have their men on ‘home turf’ take so much for granted and whine over trifles, for example that the husband is going away for 1-2 days. I feel strong! I would not want to exchange my seaman!

In both accounts, the informants stressed that they ‘wouldn’t want to change anything’. This was a powerful way of signalling their contentment with their situation. It was almost as if they felt that they had to prove something to the rest of society. And admittedly, despite being one of the most common professions in Åland, at the end of the twentieth century, seafarers were still attributed with some of the old vices associated with the profession - drinking and womanising in particular. There was ample evidence that the wives were faced with insinuations from people around them doubting their partners’ character. Maybe this was why they felt they had to state their contentment so clearly. Age was another factor. At least one older informant pointed out that she was more remonstrative when she was younger. With time she mellowed and accepted her situation, recognised her limitations and made the best of what she had.

Perhaps the ‘mellowing with age’ syndrome explains why older women usually were more careful in their approach. Despite claiming that they generally felt more independent than women who had their partners at home, informants of Generations One and Two were more willing to acknowledge that they too experienced moments of insecurity. In cases where the informants appeared very self-sufficient, they still recognised that the strong sense of independence that they as seafarers’ wives felt they possessed was more complex than just being able to cope well on one’s own. For when the husband returned home, some women found it difficult to let go of their autonomy, continuing to make all the decisions without much consideration for the seafarer’s opinions. During the seafarer’s active period this was more easily overcome, but when the seafarer retired ashore, for whatever reason, the situation became more difficult to handle. One informant wrote:

I believe I’m much more independent than women whose men work ashore; yes, and that is the seafarer’s wife’s big problem. You’re supposed to cope on your own, the household economy, and all the practical stuff and first and foremost you are almost solely responsible for your children. This is fine but the problem is that

10 Respondent G3088
11 Respondent G3070
12 Respondent G3081
13 Respondent G203-230799
14 Respondent G2049
when he is at home I feel it is my responsibility to make him feel manly and important. Seamen want to be much more masculine than many other professionals.\(^{16}\)

In this case, her husband had to retire from the sea prematurely and she continued by saying: ‘You have to attempt to create a completely new life and try to make him feel important at home. Maybe it would have been better not to be such an independent woman then’.\(^{14}\) This account followed the outlines for the stereotypical view of maritime women, but it also reminded the reader of the negative effects it could have on a relationship.

Most reconstructions that followed the central line of debate were relatively positive in the attitude they conveyed. They stressed how maritime life had made them stronger and more confident in their own abilities. There were cases, however, where adherence to the dominant discourse, i.e. the ability to cope as a seafarer’s wife, was pushed to the extreme and the self-presentation resembled self-sacrifice more than independence. There was one such narrative in the sample, presented by a woman of Generation Two. She claimed that seafaring life had made her more resilient to hardship and more appreciative of ‘friendship, compassion and love’. She described her marriage as unhappy and her husband as a miserable recluse. Nonetheless, as if to demonstrate her strength, she stated that her compassion was certainly strong enough to keep living with her ageing husband. She ended her narrative by saying ‘such is life’, and one can almost hear the valiant sigh with which she said it.\(^{17}\) This could be interpreted as the attitude of a strong and resilient woman, but was in fact a good example of how the dominant discourse also produced ‘martyrs’.

**NURTURE AND NATURE**

Accounts that took the second discursive position stressed both nature and nurture as significant elements in the women’s sense of independence. To a varying degree, they also downplayed the impact of seafaring life on this issue. One of the women admitted that although there was an element of truth in the saying that seafarers’ wives became more independent through the particulars of seafaring life, she found it somewhat overrated. In her view, personality was equally important.\(^{18}\) The same view was expressed in a narrative by another seafarer’s wife of the same age, who said that in order to cope with her life situation, the maritime woman needed to be ‘quite independent and fond of solitude’.\(^{19}\) Innate independence was frequently placed alongside independence gained from life as a seafarer’s wife in this group of reconstructions, particularly among the two older cohorts. In one reconstruction, it was a child’s handicap that was given as the main reason for independence, while the strength of coping alone with day-to-day life and the problem of letting go of her autonomy when her husband was ashore took a more peripheral place in the narrative.\(^{20}\) One informant claimed that if she had not been of an independent nature she would not have achieved all she had done. However, she continued by saying that she had also ‘learnt to be independent’.\(^{21}\) This was an attitude prevalent in the majority of accounts in this category. In some accounts, factors other than personality and maritime life were said to have influenced the informant’s character. One example of this was a narrative in which the informant accredited her independence to the loss of her parents at the age of eight. However, her reconstruction also contained episodes that illustrated her adjustment to maritime life and how it had taught her to be independent. In several places, the informant attested how she had ‘grown with the tasks’.\(^{22}\) One such episode was where she described her role in the building of their home, but the most poignant example was a stillbirth that the informant experienced early on in her marriage:

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\(^{15}\) Respondent G2005
\(^{16}\) Respondent G2005
\(^{17}\) Respondent G2088
\(^{18}\) Respondent G201-060799
\(^{19}\) Respondent G204-290799
\(^{20}\) Respondent G2029
\(^{21}\) Respondent G103-020899
\(^{22}\) Respondent G1093
The year prior to the birth of the oldest son, I experienced a premature birth, despite among other things a seven week stay in hospital. At that occasion too H was tied up with his work without any possibility of taking leave. Birth, christening and funeral – all on my own, but with the support of good friends. For H this event was difficult too. But in both fortune and hardship you grow in your role. You had to learn to stand your ground and be diligent,\(^{23}\)

This was a woman who never explicitly proclaimed her independence, but with short sketches of this type, she managed to exude an air of humble self-confidence. The attitude permeating from the reconstruction as a whole was epitomised in the last two sentences of the quote above. Each event in life, whether good or bad, served to build a strong character. This was also an attitude that was evident in the life stories presented by the oldest generation of women in general, not only in this category. This was a generation that had experienced the aftermath of the First World War, felt the blow of the Great Depression and begun their adult life in the shadow of the Second World War. Perhaps this had taught them not to complain openly, but to cope as best they could with what they had

The ‘nurture-nature’ position was the most popular category among Generation Three narratives. Ten of the twenty-eight women in this age cohort presented narratives that followed this discursive pattern. The corresponding number of narratives in this group made by women in Generations One and Two were three out of eighteen and six of twenty-nine respectively. Furthermore, six of the eight women who asserted that they were of an independent nature and would have been so irrespective of their partner’s occupation, belonged to Generation Three. The two other women who took this stance were of Generation Two. As will be demonstrated in the discussion on work and leisure, younger women displayed a higher propensity to present themselves within an individualistic discourse. Therefore it was not surprising to find many women proclaiming that their sense of independence had little or nothing to do with their husbands’ choice of occupation. One informant claimed that she was ‘of a stubborn and independent kind’ and had been so since her teenage years.\(^{24}\) Another woman said that she had always been confident of her abilities and she did not think that it was dependent on her choice of partner. On the contrary, she felt that she and her partner had got together ‘because we have discovered qualities in each other that suit this kind of life’.\(^{25}\) The equation of independence and seafaring thus took on a different shape. Not only were women who married seafarers forced to obtain a certain level of independence in order to cope on their own, but this narrative seemed to imply that self-reliant women and seafaring men made a good match. For a strong-minded woman who thrived on responsibility, partnership with a seaman meant that she could maintain her sense of independence as she was left to manage her and her children’s lives more or less according to her own design. For the seafarer it was reassuring to know that he had left house and children in the hands of a capable woman. This attitude was supported not only by the informant above, but by other women who claimed that life with a seafarer suited their independent disposition, that they probably would not cope living with a man who worked ashore.

ANOMALIES

The third discursive position evident in the data was that in which the informants positioned themselves in opposition to the central discourse. In all, only two women of each generation did not consider themselves independent, either in relation to other seafarers’ wives or in general. Despite acknowledging their ability to cope on a practical level while they were on their own, their narratives did not project an image of the strong and confident character that formed the basis of the traditional ideal, and which was also widespread in the nature-nurture approach. The women nonetheless showed an awareness of the prevailing image by setting it against their narratives. That the ideal of the maritime woman as a self-sufficient and versatile person could

\(^{23}\) Respondent G1093
\(^{24}\) Respondent G3038
\(^{25}\) Respondent G305-100100
be regarded as detrimental rather than beneficial was stated very candidly in the following excerpt: ‘Compared to women who have their husbands ashore, I am expected to be independent but it only gives me a feeling of failure’. This quotation demonstrates the informant’s consciousness of how the society in which she found herself expected her to behave, but instead of giving her encouragement these expectations only increased her feelings of being a failure. This phenomenon is also discussed by Abrams, who contends that the idealised image of the Shetland crofter woman is not only positive as it prevents other narratives to surface. The honouring of only one cultural ideal hinders the emergence of alternative histories.

A frequently returning issue was the meaning of independence. Two women, who had both divorced their seafaring husbands, raised this question explicitly. One of them said that although she was capable of many things, she was still financially dependent on her husband. The other woman said that there were several kinds of independence and although she coped with daily life, she confessed that she ‘was on her tiptoes’ while her husband was at home. The same ideas were evident in a third narrative, in which the informant commented:

The question of independence is a difficult thing. Sometimes I think I’ve been independent but as soon as my husband came home that came to an end. We have had many difficult years when my husband has been at home through early retirement. I struggle each day to make my voice heard and for my independence.

This statement signalled the confusion the informant felt on this particular subject. While she was on her own, she felt that she coped well and could handle her situation. She felt confident and self-sufficient, just as a seafarer’s wife should, according to the societal consensus. A certain degree of acclimatisation was an unavoidable part of the seaman’s return in all maritime families. In the majority of cases, the different parties managed to negotiate their space and role in the family successfully, to find an equilibrium that suited all family members. In this particular testimony, however, it appeared that the informant was unable to maintain her status when her husband returned from sea. The exact reason behind this remains hidden from the reader, but there was doubtless something in the seafarer’s character that made it impossible for his wife to feel like an able and confident woman while he was at home.

The remaining eight accounts in this category dealt only very briefly with ideas of independence. In half of them, the informants professed that they were unable to tell if they were more independent than women whose husbands worked ashore. One of the women commented that whatever the degree of her independence, she still envied women who had their husbands at home. Another woman commented that she found it difficult to determine whether or not she was more independent since her husband’s work on the ferries did not take him away from home for any length of time. The same opinion was voiced by another informant, the difference being that she also stated that she was forced to be independent when her husband was at work. This comment was another reminder of the different meanings of independence. The other informants did not regard themselves more independent in relation to other women. In one account the informant was of the opinion that ‘most women nowadays are incredibly independent’. Perhaps this was true, but possibly it was unwise to pose the question whether maritime women were more independent than women whose husbands worked ashore, for in contrasting these two groups of women, a divide was implied that might not have existed in reality. Nevertheless, the topic had to be approached in some form, and by

26 Respondent G2050
27 L. Abrams, Myth and Materiality, p. 30
28 Respondent G205-290799
29 Respondent G304-070799
30 Respondent G1065
31 Respondent G2036
32 Respondent G2055
presenting informants with the discursive stereotype they were given the chance to agree with it or to reject it to varying degrees. The result was a debate that clearly illustrated the complexity of the idea of independence and it also brought to light the subordinate discourses on the subject that existed in Åland society at the turn of the millennium.