



A book-essay and reflections on Margaret Willson's book: *Seawomen of Iceland: Survival on the Edge*

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Abstract

This essay gives a summary and my reflections about Margaret Willson's book, focusing on women, women's conditions, and gender relations in the Icelandic fisheries and other sea-related industries. The author's background as an American anthropologist, a hobby-diver, and a "traveller" colors the form and content of the texts and narratives. The book covers women, and to some degree also men's lives during several centuries, from the 1700s until today. We learn about household and community life and women's lives at sea, as well as the national and political conditions of Iceland that was under the rule of Denmark until 1944. These days, the quota regime is important for the fishing practices. One of the main points of the essay is that Willson's book gives a unique and valuable empirical contribution of women to the Icelandic fisheries that play an important role for Iceland as a nation. Another point of the essay is that books like Willson's book can inspire others to write a book from their own countries. A third point is that more knowledge about women fishers and other *seawomen* may be an important step to improve their conditions.

Keywords Women fishers and other seawomen · Gender relations · Gender perspectives · Work · Iceland

Some time ago, I had the opportunity to read Margaret Willson's book titled *Seawomen of Iceland: Survival on the Edge*, published in 2016 by both Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen (274 pp., ISBN 13: 9788763544849) and the copyright holder, University of Washington Press, Seattle (312 pp., ISBN 10: 9780295995502). I wrote a review of the book (Gerrard 2017) in Norwegian for an anthropological audience. This new essay in English is based on the earlier review, but the last section has been changed to be relevant for an international and fishery-related audience. All page references cited below relate to the edition published by Museum Tusulanum Press.

Margaret Willson is an anthropologist and a "traveller"—some might call her a globetrotter—with experience from and special interests in the sea and sea-related activities, such as diving. Before she went to Iceland, she had met Icelandic students, whose narratives had triggered her interest in the country, which has almost 350,000 inhabitants and is situated close to the

Arctic Circle in the North Atlantic Ocean. Her book reveals exciting stories and narratives, especially about Icelandic women fishers and women's work on-board different types of fishing and non-fishing vessels (factory fishing, merchant marine, etc.).

Willson's descriptions and analyses cover a wide period, from the 1700s to the present day (2016). I find her book unique and it is clearly written by someone who has acquired some experience of commercial fishing, including fishing off the coast of New Zealand: Willson worked, at least for some time, on small fishing boats to earn a living while on one of her many travels.

Since my own research has focused on women and men, gender relations, and gender identities, mostly in Norwegian fisheries and fishing communities in the northern part of Norway, I found the topic of Willson's book extremely interesting and relevant. In Scandinavia at least, it is not often that an entire book about women fishers and other seawomen is published and reaches a wide audience.

Although Margaret Willson mainly focuses on women's work at sea, in households, and earlier in agriculture, she also gives her readers a glimpse into the fishery-related world of Icelandic men. She describes weather and natural conditions in stormy coastal waters and during volcanic eruptions, as well as political and economic conditions such as Iceland's dependence on and liberation from Denmark in 1944, and Iceland's economic crises—the most recent of which started in 2008.

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She also reviewed what happened when Iceland introduced the system of individual fishing quotas (ITQs).

Through her writing, she gives her readers a picture of poverty and inequality in earlier times, in contrast to life in Iceland today, a country known for its gender equality. Willson's descriptions therefore shed light on how the society's views on women in fishing and shipping have changed over time.

The book consists of eight chapters, starting with the situation in the 1700s, in which Willson presents detailed descriptions of women's and men's work. In addition, the book contains appendixes, notes, a bibliography, and an index. Last, but not least, the readers will find a selection of poems, illustrations, and maps. Willson not only writes about "the others": the Icelandic sea-related population. She also incorporates references to herself and her Icelandic assistants, who were friends, research assistants, and interpreters. In this way, she illustrates well the collaborative relationships and working methods underlying the data collection for the book. Additionally, she builds on some previous research on women in Icelandic fishing. Significantly, it is apparent that the book is a product of both Willson's and her assistants' abilities to find different narratives about individuals and events. In this way, she demonstrates the importance of good descriptions based on interviews, conversations, and historical sources. Through these sources, which are based on a number of reports, she and her assistant Thora Lilja found more descriptions than they had expected. On page 53, she writes:

we discovered dozens upon dozens of accounts of seamwomen and mentions of hundreds.

On the same page, Willson reflects on these findings as follows:

This is remarkable – I know of nowhere else in the world where a historical record reflects such a high percentage of women working at sea.

Already on p. 6, readers are introduced to what motivated Willson to focus especially on women's situation in fisheries. There, she describes how, during one of her first travels to Iceland, she and her Icelandic friend Disa became aware of women who were fishers. In the small town of Stokkseyri, which was somewhat remote in Willson's eyes, they saw a house with a sign that read as follows:

This is a reconstruction of the winter fishing hut of Thurídur Einarsdóttir, one of Iceland's greatest fishing captains. She lived from 1777 to 1863, rowed from Stokkseyri, and was acclaimed for both bringing in the largest catches and never losing a single crew member in the sixty years she fished.

When Willson asked Disa about present-day Icelandic women fishers' situation and conditions, Disa was unable to give an immediate answer. From that moment, Willson's interests were ignited and the topic for the book about seamwomen in the Icelandic context was put on her working agenda. Her motivation for writing the book was to make visible women in fishing and other maritime-related professions, and on page 15 she explains:

This book certainly explores gender equality, masculine and feminine spaces, societies' boundaries, and their permeability.

She also emphasizes the courage that women fishers as well as researchers need in order to do something that others say is impossible to do. Thus, the book is also about the importance of doing what one wishes to do, what it means to succeed, and, last but not least, how we all create and recreate realities. Through such formulations, Willson also gives the reader a pointer to her anthropological and feminist perspectives.

From the table of contents, it is apparent that the book covers four periods, and I follow this structure and use some of her subtitles in this essay. The first period concerns women's participation in fishing and their situation from the 1700s up to early 1900s. In that period, fishing was largely practiced in combination with agricultural activities. The second period covers the years from the beginning of the 1900s up to World War II. This period was characterized by the introduction of technology, larger boats, and centralization, as well as a decline in the numbers of women fishers. A new middle class emerged, with new values and new ideals of femininity and masculinity. The third period that Willson writes about mainly covers the years after Iceland gained independence from Denmark in 1944 as well as the 1970s. She emphasizes that after World War II women began to work in the fishing industry again, and in 1974 the Icelandic marine nautical colleges opened up opportunities for women students. In her focus on the fourth period (i.e., the middle of 1970s to the middle of the 2010s), Willson describes how women fishers and women at sea were affected by the introduction of Iceland's fishing quota system, after which the numbers of women and men fishers declined. In recent years, the introduction of summer quotas and the registration of smaller fishing boats, their owners, and crew have given Willson room for optimism that women will continue to have a place in Icelandic fishing.

“Survival on the edge”: women and men as fishers

During the first period covered by Willson, women's and men's ties with farms led to their involvement in fishing, as

farm workers made up a large proportion of the crew on the boats owned by the farmers. The fishing often took place out of remote and outlying fishing villages, and contributed to the inhabitants' self-sufficiency. Willson describes how women coped with fishing on dangerous and stormy stretches of seas, despite being less well equipped in terms of clothing and having less food than the men who fished. Regardless of Danish King Fredrik IV's law of 1720, under which women's work was to be attributed the same value as men's work when the tasks were the same, the differences between men's and women's working conditions at sea and onshore persisted. The law was not enforced because the fishers' catches went first to the farmer who owned the boat. The farmer later distributed the profits, giving less to women than to men.

Some skilled women became skippers, for which the skills criteria were the ability to secure big catches. Women skippers also had to be strong and exceptional in some way (p. 70), such as having an ability to interpret weather signs, cope with sexist remarks, and, last but not least, to fight for their rights. According to the Icelander's narratives, women who were good fishers were often single, with few or no children. Thus, Willson informs that, as older women, they lived tough lives and were dependent on people other than relatives—an adaptation that was not particularly easy in a family and kinship-based society.

Women's fishing skills were acquired early, both by observing how other family members or relatives performed tasks and through practical experience (p. 75). Willson emphasizes that the narratives from Iceland differ from those from other Western countries, including Canada and Australia. A common belief in these other countries was that women did not have the necessary fishing knowledge "in their blood" and therefore could not be independent fishers. As a consequence, fishing became an entirely masculine profession.

Willson links the relatively high number of women fishers to the expansion of the fishing fleet after years of difficulties, when there were simply too few men to take the helm (p. 79). After 1850, increased commercialization resulted in increased numbers of fishing boats and crew. With the increasing importance of the fisheries, gender-related prejudices were overlooked, Willson writes.

Women forced ashore

At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, changes occurred as a result of both Iceland having been granted home rule by Denmark in 1874 and the increased independence that led to an increased sense of nationality. New gender ideas and role models emerged. Men were associated with work and entrepreneurial activities outside of the home and regarded as breadwinners, while women

were associated with activities in the home, and typically had roles as housewives and mothers. According to Willson, these associations and roles were in line with middle-class values. The changes coincided with massive technological changes, such as the use of steam and diesel engines in bigger vessels of various types. Consequently, bigger ports in areas that were becoming increasingly urbanized become more important than ports in small fishing villages.

The centralization processes and a new social landscape therefore emerged in urban areas with both a middle class and an industrialized working class. Women and children became wage earners in the new fish processing plants. The differences in wages established earlier now also formed the pattern of poorer pay for women's work onshore, while the fishers, most of whom were men, were better paid. Commercial fishing was considered the most important type of fishing, but fishing to sustain livelihoods continued in the smaller places, especially in western Iceland.

"Modernity," with new gender ideals in urban areas, technological changes, and population increases, meant that there were enough men to fill the boats' need for crew, and therefore women "were forced ashore." Women fishers had earlier been considered strong and independent, but were now referred to as witches, trolls, and wolves in sheep's clothing. In later years, they were associated with whores, lesbian "he-men," and bad mothers and spouses, even to the point of scaring the fish or, conversely, as women who could ensure big catches if they urinated in the boat. According to Willson, these processes can help to explain the elimination of women from the history of Icelandic fishing to the extent that the word "seawomen" became both "alien" and "out of place." As a consequence, fishing as a profession was far from encouraged by the parents of young women—an attitude that exists today.

Post-war and independence: women return to the sea

Willson presents examples of strong independent seawomen who "found" their way back to small or bigger fishing boats after Iceland gained independence in 1944 and after World War II, and especially after the 1950s. Through Facebook, Willson found and interviewed women who could recount their experiences during the post-independence and post-war period. She explains that the women's drive and determination to fish was motivated by their desire to work at sea, the better rates of pay compared with pay earned onshore, and the importance of fishing for their communities as well as for Iceland's economy as a whole.

Some of the women recounted that the way to find a job on a boat was by persuading skippers and first officers to accept women on-board. Knowledge of English was highly appreciated due to the increasing number of foreigners among fishers

and others working at sea. Part of the training to become a “true” fisher was to be able to work hard and to overcome seasickness; failure to overcome seasickness was a source of embarrassment and shame. Additionally, women and men working onshore were skeptical of women who worked on boats. Thus, being a woman at sea was particularly challenging.

Willson’s quotations and data from her interviews convey the importance of good camaraderie on-board, of adapting to the environment, not being lazy, being tolerant towards new crew members or young boys on-board for the first time, and being “one of the guys.” Simultaneously, women had to find a balance in their toleration of jokes, harassment, and bullying. With regard to women’s and men’s ability to live together in close proximity on-board, Willson highlights the importance of women’s capacity to establish boundaries, especially with regard to sexuality, such as gaining men’s respect, independent of whether they worked on the boats or stayed onshore. They had to learn to act like male fishers.

Until the 1980s, women worked on trawlers and larger fishing vessels as cooks, for which they were well paid and were well respected, professionally. Others worked in the merchant marine as radio telegraphists. Additionally, the factory ship fleet recruited women to process fish in the same way as in the shore-based filleting factories. In 1974, the first woman student was enrolled at a maritime college and thereafter enrollment rates increased, partly because the entry requirements became more favorable for women but also, as Willson points out, due to an increased need for crew.

Women, fish quotas, and shipping

Following the introduction of quota regulations, the numbers of women and men fishers declined; in 2007, only 200 women were recorded as fishers. The privatization of quotas resulted in a concentration of quotas and capital, as well as centralization, with a large percentage of the total population living in the capital city, Reykjavik, and the hiring of increasing numbers of foreign workers. Willson explains that once again women were excluded from fishing. Women with navigation certificates found work on factory ships, in the merchant marine, on ferries, or on smaller boats, for example in the tourism industry. Thus, Willson states that fishers of both genders, but especially women, became invisible to the rest of Icelandic society.

Consequently, there were changes, for example in the way the fishers were recruited. Fishers could no longer contact the skipper on a boat in their home village or town; instead, they had to travel from home to an office in a town or city. Thus, there were entirely different routines and other demands regarding their behavior. Life on-board the boats changed too: some of the crew came from other countries, and the trips were

longer, which meant that the organization of everyday life in the fishers’ homes became a major challenge.

Willson states that following the introduction of the quota regulations, remote fishing communities became more isolated from the urban social, cultural, and political centers. People in urban areas seldom expressed any interest in the remote fishing villages. As a consequence, there was an increase in the urban impact on what Willson calls the “country’s psyche,” and on political processes in general and regional policy in particular. This in turn meant that remote communities were left with poorer schools and health services.

Willson analyzes the changes faced by fishers in the context of changes in Icelandic society as a whole. The fishing industry in particular has either been highly romanticized or presented as dysfunctional, and thus associated with the past, not with a “trendy” present. Today, women ideally should appear feminine and sexually attractive, in contrast to in the past, when they were strong and independent. By contrast, men ideally should be “business Vikings” (i.e., bankers and fishing quota buyers) who “invade” Europe and other countries through their investments. As a result, work in the fisheries and shipping has lost the respect it formerly commanded.

However, Margaret Willson finds hope in summer fishing, which is carried out from smaller fishing boats with quotas that cannot be traded. People can fish for four days per month during the summer months, until their quota is filled. Willson states that it is impossible for Icelanders to live on the income from such fishing, but it can supplement their main sources of income. Nevertheless, the quota-based summer fishing has created life in the fishing villages. Not surprisingly, such arrangements are not appreciated by the big fishing companies, which refer to this form of fishing as hobby fishing.

According to Willson, the reason why the summer fishing and fishing for particular species, such as lumpfish, are excluded from the quota regulation is that women’s and men’s earlier protests and actions led to a change in fishery policy, leading to increased numbers of female and male fishers. Another factor that has led to the increase in the numbers of women recorded in fishing is the requirement that boats and vessels under 20 t be registered. As a result, more than 100 women have become visible as fishers through the new registration scheme.

Women as activists for equality?

Willson is concerned about how the women in Iceland have fought against all forms of injustice at various times in the past. Particularly, women skippers and owners of smaller boats who were well off used their power and influence to defend other women and to help children and families in need.

Willson describes how fishers have had to fight for their rights. It was not until the 1970s, however, that female fishers

became aware that they were part of a national and international movement in the fight for women's rights. Some women regarded themselves as pioneers, while others were rather ambivalent towards being associated with the women's movement. Often, women who worked for better rights were associated with women who worked at universities and in private businesses, and then often in urban areas. Willson explains that such relationships, together with the 1720 law, are among the reasons why women fishers have not formed their own trade union; they fight for their rights by virtue of the job they do, not by virtue of being a woman.

Additionally, Willson paints a clear picture of other challenges faced by seamen, including those relating to birth and childcare. In the past, those who had a sufficient income hired staff to take care of their children. Today, women often go ashore permanently when they become parents. Some of the women interviewees mentioned that women still had to leave their children in care while they work away from home, which left them with a bad conscience. However, the women interviewees also emphasized that they wanted to work at sea and earn their own money; they were satisfied with their jobs, the experience they gained, and the sense of freedom they felt.

Following conversations with both women and men who worked at sea, Willson concluded that they did not perceive lack of respect, harassment, and hostility as their major problem. Rather, the hardest rejections and lack of respect came from those who criticized them, envied them, stared at them, and failed to recognize their contribution to Icelandic society. The media often enhances the image of women fishers as different because it portrays them as mascots. In this way, Icelandic society has internalized the industrialized world's view that women do not exist in commercialized fisheries.

A book for all who are interested in maritime cultures

Margaret Willson writes well, in an attention-catching manner, and primarily about women in fishing. Women in other marine professions belong to recent times and therefore she has not discussed them in the same thorough manner as women fishers. Willson has used various methods and approaches to provide readers with a brief history of Icelandic women workers at sea, yet readers are also given some insights into the men who worked at sea.

Since the book is written in English, it is available to a wide readership, and it is relevant for those who are interested in women and men in maritime contexts in general. Through the narratives and interviews with many individuals, Willson draws a clear picture of Icelandic women's contributions to fishing, and why the women left the boats and subsequently disappeared from Icelandic fishing history.

Bonnie J. McCay, one of the leading researchers in maritime anthropology and marine ecology, and currently Professor Emerita at Rutgers University, USA, wrote the following for the book's dust jacket:

This beautifully crafted saga about women at sea is framed as a mystery: not only why so many Icelandic women fished in the past and today, with clues found in harsh rural choices and wage equality at sea, but also why this story is not well known. Willson's findings are hugely important to both maritime and gender studies.

When McCay wrote the word "saga," she was not just referring to the book's focus on women in Iceland. I find Willson's contribution to provide an alternative saga from recent times. I do not think that the book is intended for those who want extensive discussions of models and perspectives in maritime, fishery, and gender research. However, readers can gain a good impression of her anthropological and feminist perspectives from the way the subject is developed in the book, from the well-formulated and partly analytically influenced chapter and section headings to the lively text in the form of many narratives and interesting reflections.

Willson shows that in order to identify the women fishers, it was necessary to have a gender perspective, and to be interested in and take the time to explore both historical and more recent sources. In addition to writing about named fishers in the chapters, 57 women from the past are presented through short biographies, which include names, places, and times (see Appendix A in Willson 2016). Present-day fishers are presented in Appendixes B and C, in the form of tables that include a list of each woman's age, most of whom were young women under the age of 30 years at the time of Willson's research.

I find the descriptions and reflections relating to early times most interesting because they contribute new knowledge, even for someone like me, who already has a certain amount of knowledge of women fishers around the world. The Icelandic women's conditions after World War II had both similarities to and differences from the conditions that women faced in the Norwegian fisheries. However, Margaret Willson's book is primarily about Icelandic women who have had or still have the sea as their workplace. One of her conclusions in the book is that despite their challenges and tough working conditions in dangerous surroundings, the seamen love their work and being at sea, as well as the power and irresistible attraction that this represents.

Women fishers, other seamen, and society deserve such a book

In my opinion, women fishers and seamen worldwide deserve to be represented in a book such as Margaret Willson's, which has been written with empirical thoroughness, a clear

gender perspective, and deep love and curiosity. Another academic book on women fishers worthy of mention is Brenda Grzetic's *Women Fishes These Days*, published in 2004. Grzetic explores women's lives in the restructured, quota-based Newfoundland fishery, their workload and work responsibilities, work relations, professionalization, and training. Her book differs from Willson's book in that most of the content is based on what happened after the quota system was introduced in Canada at the beginning of the 1990s.

In other European countries, such as my own country, Norway, many of the academic-oriented fishery-relevant books, chapters, articles, and reports are written in the native languages. Hence, many contributions from Norway and other countries are not accessible to readers with other language skills. Among the Norwegian academic authors, I would like to mention Håvard Dahl Bratrein (1976), who wrote about female fishers such as "Buks-Beret" ("Trouser" Beret). She was born slightly later than Thuridur Einarsdóttir, but like her, she was a respected skipper as well as a wife and mother.

Other books have since been published on coastal women working on land and as male fisher's wives (e.g., Holtedahl 1986; Elstad 2004; Grønbech 2010). Prior to the 1970 and 1980s, women's work in fishery households was in many ways a prerequisite for good fishing (Gerrard 1983). There are also books about women in the merchant marine (e.g., Lønnå 2010). After World War II, women were educated as mates and skippers, and not only as maids and telegraphists, a development that Willson writes about too. Eva Munk-Madsen (1990, 1996) has provided insights into women's work and positions through her master's thesis on women who worked in factory ship fleets. In her doctoral thesis on women fishers who worked on the quota-regulated coastal fishing boats in the 1990s, she demonstrates some of the difficulties women fishers faced in general, and particularly after the introduction of the quota system.

Additionally, novels have been written about women fishers, their relations with men, and their harsh surroundings, such as Catherine Poulain's prize-winning *Le grand marin* (Poulain 2016), which has been translated into English with the title *Women at Sea* (Poulain 2018). The novel builds on her experiences from Kodiak, Alaska, where she stayed for about 10 years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and worked as the only women with an all-male crew on large fishing vessels. With a gender-perspective trained eye, one can easily analyze the challenges she faced in a man's world—a world in which a woman had to cross many kinds of boundaries.

In conclusion, there is much still to be written and analyzed about most countries where women have been fishers and worked at sea and on the coast. Relevant information can be sourced from local history books, archives, and village records, as well as some master's dissertations and doctoral theses. However, I strongly recommend fieldwork and interviews with women who either have been or still are active fishers and owners

of small and large fishing boats. This type of research should be carried out as soon as possible, since fisheries and fishing communities are facing rapid and constant changes. I therefore address these comments to all researchers who are interested in maritime cultures and who want to make women's positions and conditions visible and contribute to their improvement.

Men and women from Iceland, at least those who can read English, are fortunate to have such a book as Margaret Willson's *Seawomen of Iceland* on their bookshelves, in their libraries, or accessible electronically. To make women's work visible is often the first step to improving women's working and living conditions.

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