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The identity of the Greek seafarer's wife. Attitudes and perceptions towards the seafaring profession. The case of Chios Island.

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ABSTRACT

Greece is the dominant force in global shipping and the Greek-owned fleet represents 54,28% of the European Union (EU) fleet in dwt and almost 20% of the world fleet in dwt. Even though there have been many studies for the Greek seafarers, there are no studies for the contribution of the seafarers' wives to the so-called "Greek shipping miracle". The purpose of this research is to record and highlight the social profile and the aspects of the daily life of the Greek seafarers' wives. Furthermore, the research aims to shed light on the attitudes and perceptions of seafarer's wives towards the seafaring profession. 145 wives of active seafarers, from Chios Island, filled out questionnaires specially made for the purposes of this research. Additionally, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted, in order to analyze and clarify some important findings that were obtained from the completion of the questionnaires.

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1 Introduction

A number of papers have been reported regarding the life of the seafarers' wives in some countries, during the past 30 years. More specifically, Sampson & Acejo [10] conducted a fieldwork study in the town of Sta. Ana in Philippines to report the role of seafarer's wives in protecting the social identity of migrant seafarers within their home communities. The psycho-social impact of the absent husband on the families of a subgroup of Norwegian seafarers is reported by their wives [17]. Tang [11], [12] examined the activities of Chinese seafarer-partners' in an online support group showing how they helped each other to suppress the unpleasant feelings of their husband's absence and how that online support also serves to change how individuals feel. The experiences of Filipino women married to Filipino seamen and their social and personal investments in their husband's migration, have also been reported by Galam [5]. The impact of seafaring on seafarers and their partners was examined via in-depth interviews with seafarers' partners in the UK, China and India [16]. Foster & Cacioppe [4] explored the stress that the

wives of Australian Merchant Navy men experience as a result of the seafarer's lifestyle and describe the difficulties that the wife and family encounter due to the long absence of the seafarer. A fieldwork study conducted in India by Sampson [9], explores the lives of women married to seafarers, charting the changes in attitudes, values and daily life resulting from their husbands' occupations. A study in Izmir tried to shed light on the problems that the spouses of seafarers face when their husbands are on sea duty [19]. Likewise, an exploratory study in the UK and China identified specific problems in family relationships associated with seafaring work patterns [13]. A study of 2006 concludes that during the seafarers' leave periods, the experience of sea-faring families has many parallels with that of unemployed men and their families [14]. Thomas & Baily [15] also examined the impact of routine absence on couple and family relations, drawing on data from in-depth interviews with seafarers and their partners.

However, there are no relevant researches in Greece, even though it is the dominant force in global shipping. The Greek merchant fleet is the biggest fleet in the world,

with 4,936 vessels (ships over 1,000 gt) of 389.69 million deadweight tons (dwt) [18]. According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority [3], 12,042 Greeks work in ships which are either under the Greek flag or are Greek-owned flying a foreign flag¹.

This fact triggered the present research that aims to record and highlight the social profile and the aspects of the daily life of the Greek seafarers' wives. Furthermore, the research's purpose is to shed light on the attitudes and perceptions of seafarer's wives towards the seafaring profession.

The sample comes from the island of Chios, not randomly, as it has been an island with great history in shipping since ancient times and is one of the most important Greek traditional shipping areas. The importance of the island lies in its geographical strategic position, as it was at the crossroads of trade routes leading from Asia Minor to the Black sea and the North African coast. From the 13th century, Chios had already become a transshipment station in the Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt, and also constituted a trade center for many European countries.

Chios is the fifth largest island in Greece and its population is approximately 51.390 [2] residing in the main city of Chios, the town of Vrontados and other villages of the Island.

Chios is known as "the island of seamanship," and the residents have inseparable bonds with the sea. The nautical insight was what prompted Chian people towards progress and culture. It transformed the shepherd and the fisherman to an experienced sailor. The Merchant Marine of Chios holds a prominent position in the international Shipping, with significant business activities in the world trade centers such as London and New York. Except for the large number of seamen, engineers and captains, Chios is also the homeland of very important ship-owners.

According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority [3], Chios is one of the main sources of seafarers who staff the Greek-owned merchant ships. Therefore, there is a large number of women who are married to seafarers. Those women have to undertake specific roles within the family and within society at large. Their attitudes and perceptions towards the seafaring profession are a subject of research that could highlight the contribution of these women to maintaining the so-called "Greek shipping miracle."

The seafarers' wives have been characterized by many people as the pillars of the family. The migration of their husbands has consequences for the roles and responsibilities of those women within the family, their social standing but also their sense of autonomy, power and competence [5].

Through most time of the year, these women that are left behind become de facto heads of household, perform-

ing the responsibilities of their migrant husbands. As a result there is an expansion in the women's roles in family affairs, an expansion that includes those that traditionally belonged to the male domain. It also enhances women's participation in family's decision making process [5]. They struggle to manage issues of their home, to discipline and take care of their children and to be consistent with their social obligations. They also have to make sure that their husbands are held in high esteem by both members of their family and the wider community and that their social identity is protected [10].

Thomas [13:76] notes: *"The very nature of a successful seafaring marriage is seen by many seafarers to be rooted in a wife who was independent and capable; a wife whom the seafarer felt confident could manage domestic, family and emotional responsibilities in their absence"*. An economical and a psycho-social agreement is reached between the seafarer and his wife in order to establish unity and togetherness within the family [19].

2 Research methodology

2.1 Data acquisition method

A combination of research methods (mixed methods) was employed for this research as apart from the quantitative recording, the purpose of the research was the development of the sociological knowledge.

In this research an explanatory sequential design was applied in two distinct phases. This design began with the collection and analysis of the quantitative data raised from the questionnaires that were filled out by 145 wives of active seafarers, from Chios Island, followed by collection and analysis of qualitative data from 15 in-depth interviews. The second qualitative phase of the study was designed to follow the results of the first (quantitative phase). It was estimated that the qualitative results will help to explain the first quantitative results, as a more comprehensive investigation was needed in order to determine the general trends that emerged from the survey.

The rationale for this approach was that the quantitative data and results provide a general picture of the research problem; more analysis, specifically through qualitative data collection was needed to refine, extend or explain the general picture [1].

During the first phase, that took place between May and June 2019, the questionnaires were sent and filled out online via the electronic platform Google Forms. The convenience sample derived mainly from our social network in Chios. Most of the women that participated in the survey were personal contacts. In their turn, they forwarded the questionnaire to their own personal contacts that were also seafarers' wives, creating snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is where research participants recruit other participants for a test or study [6]. As the seafarers' wives live in a small community, they have strong connections and acquaintances.

¹ Greek seamen employed, on 20th September 2018, on merchant ships of 100 GRT and over, under Greek flag or Greek - owned under foreign flag, having contracted with the Seamen's Pension Fund.

The questionnaires included a disclaimer about the purpose of the research. It was highlighted that the participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous and that the answers will be used solely for the purposes of the survey.

The questionnaire was divided into five parts:

1. The first part consisted of 12 questions about the demographic characteristics of the participating women of the survey.

2. The second part included 8 questions regarding personal and social life of those women.

3. The third part consisted of 9 questions concerning the aspects of their family life and especially the way they encounter issues with their husband, children and relatives.

4. The fourth part consisted of 15 questions with regard to the attitudes and perceptions of the women towards the seafaring profession.

5. The last part included 9 questions referring to their degree of satisfaction with personal, social and family life and the degree of satisfaction with the profession of their husband.

In the second phase, that took place between November 2019 and January 2020, interviews were conducted to 15 seafarers' wives that were available personal contacts from the first convenience sampling. It should be noted that those who took part in the interviews have also filled out the questionnaire of the survey.

The interviews were recorded via a mobile recording program. All women that took part in the interviews were informed from the start that our conversation was going to be recorded only for the facilitation of further analysis and that the data derived will be used only for the purposes of this research.

2.2 Sampling

The sample of the questionnaire consisted of spouses of still active seafarers, from 12 regions of the island. According to ELSTAT [3] and the census taken in Greek and Greek-owned ships (and those flying a foreign flag) in 2018, the number of the seafarers living permanently on the island was 350, making our sample representative.

The women being interviewed represented the 10% of the women that filled out the questionnaire. The range of their ages was between 30 and 55.

The specific characteristic of these women is that the majority – due to the tradition of the island – comes from maritime families and is familiar with the particularities of the seafarer's life.

2.3 Data analysis method

A statistical analysis method followed the data collected from the questionnaires using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The statistical analysis section

provided significant information on how the collected data would be further analyzed to achieve the study goals. The statistical data gave information about the demographic and social characteristics of the sample, the aspects of the family and personal life and their perceptions towards the seafaring profession. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed by using descriptive analysis method. The acquired data were interpreted and results were obtained and arranged in a format that can be understood by readers.

3 Results

3.1 Demographic and social characteristics of the sample

The majority of the sample lives in the main city of the island and in the suburb of Vrontados (75.2%) (Table 1). Regarding the age of the participants, the 84.1% are between the age of 26 and 45 (Figure 1).

Table 1 Place of residence

Residence	Frequency	Percent (%)
Center	56	38,6
Vrontados	53	36,6
Kardamila	18	12,4
Lagada	4	2,8
Thimiana	3	2,1
Sikiada	3	2,1
Kampos	2	1,4
Pantoukios	2	1,4
Other	4	2,8
Total	145	100

Source: Authors

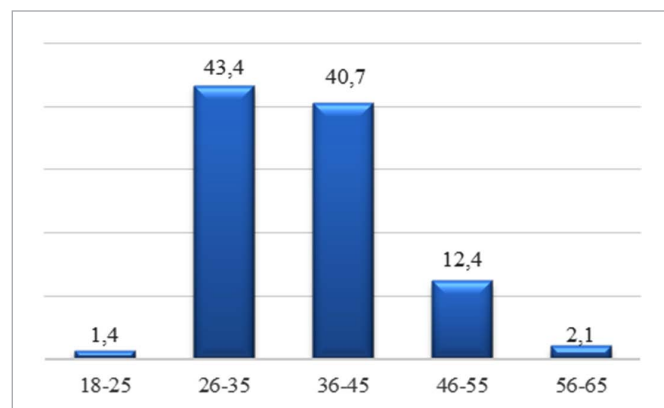


Figure 1 Age

Source: Authors

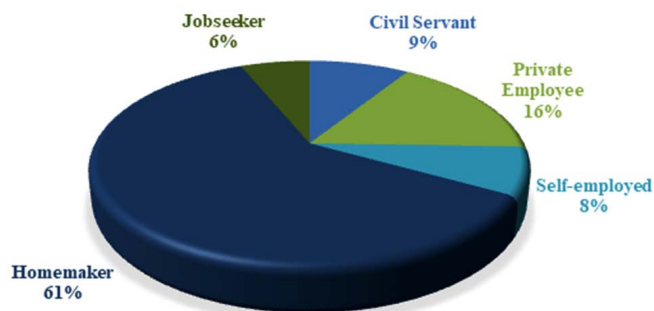


Figure 2 Occupation

Source: Authors

The participants are mostly homemakers (60.7%) (Figure 2), as during the absence of the husband they are in charge of the home issues and the upbringing of their children. The decision of not working was made jointly with the spouse (78%) (71), a 15.4% made it on their own (14), while in 6 cases (6.1%) the decision was made solely by the husband.

An interesting finding is that nearly 6 out of 10 are graduates of tertiary education. The 9,7% (14) are graduates of post-secondary education, 28,3% (41) secondary education, while only 2,8% (4) have completed primary education.

The analysis shows that the higher the educational level, the fewer the women that are homemakers (although the 48,8% is still high) and the more that are in the labor market (Table 2).

Table 2 Connection between Education and Profession

Education	Job	Frequency	Percent (%)
Primary school	Housewife	4	100,0
Secondary school	Civil Servant	1	2,4
	Private Employee	4	9,8
	Self-employed	1	2,4
	Housewife	33	80,5
	Jobseeker	2	4,9
Post-secondary education	Civil Servant	2	14,3
	Private Employee	1	7,1
	Self-employed	1	7,1
	Housewife	9	64,3
	Jobseeker	1	7,1
Tertiary education	Civil Servant	10	11,6
	Private Employee	19	22,1
	Self-employed	9	10,5
	Housewife	42	48,8
	Jobseeker	6	7,0

Source: Authors

The 85,5% have children with most of them (46,9%) having two children.

The 86,9% (126) of the spouses work in the deep-sea shipping, something quite reasonable because of the long tradition that Chian shipowners and seafarers have in that sector. A small percentage works in the cruise sector (8,3%) and the coastal shipping (4,8%).

Table 3 Husband's rank

Rank	Frequency	Percent (%)
Captain	41	28,3
Chief Officer	8	5,5
Second Officer	7	4,8
Chief Engineer	48	33,1
Second engineer	19	13,1
Third engineer	9	6,2
Electro-technical officer	4	2,8
Deck Cadet	1	0,7
Cook	3	2,1
Bosun	1	0,7
Pump-man	2	1,4
Engine Driver	1	0,7
Sailor	1	0,7
Total	145	100

Source: Authors

The 46,9% of the sample's spouses are on board from 7 to 9 months. The 41,4% from 4 to 6 months, the 9% more than 9 months and only the 2,8% from 1 – 3 months.

As mentioned by many of the interviewees, the duration of the journeys has reduced significantly, compared to the past, as previous generations of seafarers used to work on board even up to two years in a row. Now this pattern has changed and the trips are significantly shorter.

A very interesting feature that shows the strong connection of the people of the island with shipping is that 60,7% of the women being surveyed originate from families with maritime background. The seafarer's wife from Chios is also in many cases a daughter and a granddaughter, while she may be or become a mother of a seafarer in the future.

As resulted from the interviews, women that come from a family with maritime background are more familiar with the lifestyle of a seafarer's wife and are more prepared to deal with the challenges that derive from a marriage with a seafarer. However, some of them reported that they had no intention of marrying a seafarer, as they were aware of the struggles a seafarer's wife goes through.

3.2 Personal and social life

Apart from the family responsibilities, social obligations are also added to the seafarer's wife daily life. She has to deal with the social consequences and implications of her husband's absence.

In the past and especially in small communities, like Chios, a seafarer's wife was usually a target of gossip. For this reason, she had to lead a neat and modest life. The husband upon his return wanted to find a neat and honest home. A woman's morality and modest financial management were in dispute when she was always out of her house. Her social life and public activities were limited, restricting conversations only to family relatives and close neighbors [5]. Society could misunderstand even an innocent interaction and discussion of a woman with another man. That is why if she was getting out of the house she had to be escorted by her brothers, mother or mother-in-law.

On the contrary, today seafarers' wives are more independent, emancipated, educated, and more socialized. The change of attitude of the new generation contributes to this. Society has become more open to new ideas and concepts. Women go out for shopping and leisure activities with friends and family and generally live a normal social life.

However, even today the majority of the participants regard the opinion of the local community for their family as rather important. The long periods of husband's absence, raise important questions relating to the maintenance of relationships between the seafarer and the community in his hometown, as well as issues of preservation of social identity and social status. For these reasons, seafarers' partners usually focus on the effort to maintain and protect, on their husbands' behalf, the seafarer-community relations. These efforts include supporting the links with family members and friends, being present in social events and generally having an active public role [10].

As it was mentioned earlier the largest percentage of the participants are homemakers and the decision of not working was made jointly with the spouse. The majority of the women being interviewed stated that they stopped working after they gave birth to their children. It would be difficult for them to raise their children alone and having a full-time job at the same time. They would feel guilty if along with their father's absence, the children grew up with their mother's absence as well. Thus, some of them mentioned that when their husbands return, in order to make up for the time being apart, they plan trips and excursions. Being employed would be an obstacle for such quality-time activities.

During the interviews a lot of the women also mentioned that besides their day to day obligations, they try to have other personal and social activities, such as sports, gym and reading. Specifically, one of them mentioned that she had recently become an MSc student and another one that she was attending a training seminar in order to be more competitive in her professional qualifications.

3.3 Family life

After the departure of her husband, the seafarer's wife takes over the family responsibilities, something that can be seen by the answers to the question whether the absence of the husband fills them with more family responsibilities. As shown on Figure 3 the 96.6% agree and strongly agree. Seafarers do express their concern over the pressure placed on wives as a consequence of having full responsibility for both the home and family for extended periods of time [8].

Additionally, the 90% of the participants think that they have to play the role of the father as well while their husband is absent (Figure 4). They should take care of the house, pay taxes and bills, raise and educate the children. A good wife is behind a beautiful and tidy home as well as the well-behaved and educated children.

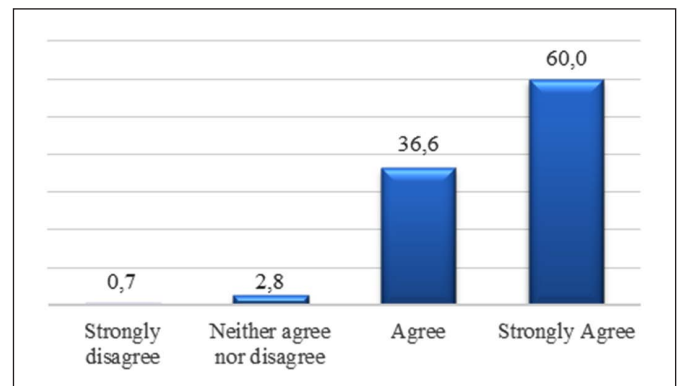


Figure 3 To what extent do you agree or disagree that the absence of your husband burdens you with more family responsibilities

Source: Authors

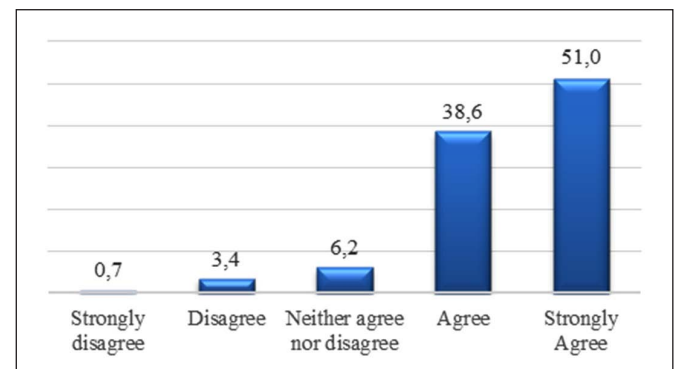


Figure 4 To what extent do you agree or disagree that the seafarer's wife is called upon to play the role of the father while he is absent

Source: Authors

Although they bear many of their husband's burdens during his journeys, only 23.4% consider that his absence changes the family balance as they learn to manage family issues under these conditions.

Each and every one of the women being asked during the interviews about who is in charge of the financial management and other family obligations, answered that they are in full responsibility of everything while their husband is away. However, this is something that does not change upon his arrival. Especially the financial management remains in the wife's hands, as the husband finds it difficult to keep up with the expenditures and needs of the house as he is away for a long period of time. A pattern of trust is born between the spouses that maintains the family balance. Other house and family responsibilities may be passed to the husband in order to adopt a "helper" role and undertake some of his wife's burdens.

Moreover, only the 4.8% believe that the relationship with their spouse is affected negatively by his absence. This was something that caused the need for further investigation. The arising question was how a couple that lives apart for the most time of the year manages to keep their relationship unaffected. The interviews gave the answer to that question.

All the women being interviewed claimed that the main disadvantages of being married to a seafarer are the loneliness and the deprivation of affection by their husband. However, all of them described the arrival of their husband back home as an opportunity of renewal to their relation and a procedure of knowing each other from the start. The everyday routine that spouses experience by living together all year long is something that a seafarer and his wife cannot conceive.

The arrival of the seafarer back home to his family is a great day of joy. He stays at home three, four or more months depending on the company that travels. Things change at that period; the family is united again and all members spend more time together. The husband is informed about the news of the house and his children. At home there is a permanent fiesta. The house opens and welcomes friends and relatives and the wife feels once again the presence of her husband.

As far as the communication with the husband is concerned, the participants in the specific part of the questions regard the frequent communication with their husbands during their travels as important and very important at a rate of 94.5%.

During the interviews women with a maritime family background gave us a better picture about the means of communication in the past, as witnessed by themselves and their family. Some decades ago the communication between a seafarer and his wife was very different from that in the present. Before the development of technology the only means of communication was the letters. The seafarers used to write letters to their wives on board and were able to send them only when the boat was in a port. Wives

could receive up to ten letters. The postman was an important and beloved person for all seafarers' wives and they were eagerly waiting for him.

At that time, telegrams were also a form of communication that was more direct yet their cost was high. They were sent in a case of emergency where information had to be communicated quickly, such as for health reasons or in cases of the birth of a child or for a family member's birthday.

The situation became easier after the use of the home phone. The letters did not stop at once because the calls were not so often.

Today, the evolution of communication helps the couple to communicate very often during the week via phone and internet. The use of webcams makes the communication very direct and safe. Spouses talk face to face, men can see their home and their children and they generally feel that they are closer to their families.

The seafarer's children, from infancy live with the absence of the father. They are deprived of both his tenderness and his companion. Due to the specific working conditions of their fathers, children grow up and turn into strangers [7]. The seafarer's wife faces the additional difficulty and obligation to maintain the feel and the image of the father for her children during his absence. That is why we have included the question about how important it is for the mother to explain to her children, from an early age, the reasons for the deprivation of their father for a long time. The 98,6% of the participants agreed that a seafarer's wife should highlight the reasons for the father's absence to their children. The majority of the women also responded that the relationship between the children and their father is excellent.

3.4 Attitudes and perceptions towards the seafaring profession

In the fourth part the participants were asked to answer questions related to attitudes and perceptions towards the seafaring profession.

The majority (77.2%) disagree that they should not be employed because of the high income received by their spouse, although they believe that they are in a better financial position compared to other women (52.4%). Although they recognize as an advantage the fact that the seafaring profession ensures a fair income compared to other professions, they believe that it is not sufficiently paid in relation to the high degree of risk involved.

Moreover, they consider that their husband's profession is not of high social status (Figure 5), even when it comes to senior crews. During the procedure of the interviews there was further analysis about this question.

Five of the women being interviewed stated that they do believe that their husband's profession is of high social status and is held in high esteem by the community. Those women's spouses have the high ranks of Captain and Chief

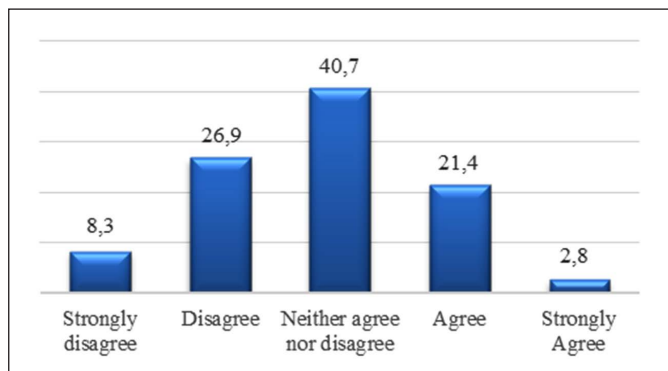


Figure 5 To what extent do you agree or disagree that your husband's profession is of high social status

Source: Authors

Engineer. On the other hand, four women answered that the high salary of a seafarer is not automatically connected to society's perception that the maritime profession offers high social status. Furthermore, the rest of the women being interviewed mentioned that they do not personally think that their husband's profession is of high social status; however they are aware that other people, especially from other provinces, acknowledge the high social profile of a seafarer.

Women's negative perceptions about the high social status of their husband's profession may derive from the following analysis. A seafarer's wife, born and raised in an island like Chios, is substantially familiar with the seafaring profession and the maritime tradition of the community. Being part of a maritime family, she knows the exact difficulties and disadvantages of this profession at first hand. Not only for the seafarer, but for his family as well. The long absence, the isolation, the loneliness, the load of responsibilities, the risky life at sea, are only some of the problems that make a number of the participants believe that their husbands' profession does not give their family a high social status.

However the long tradition of shipping as a significant factor in the country's economic prosperity is shown by the perceptions of other people especially from the provinces, about the maritime profession.

In the following questions the 90% of the participants stated that they would like their spouses to work for the same money ashore. However, if the income were less the degree of acceptance would be reduced to 57.2% (83).

During the interviews those questions were mentioned again, in order to gain more specific information.

All women do respond positively to their husband working for the same money ashore. Four women answered that they would encourage their husband to work ashore for less money. It was clear that the salary will not be the same, but their husband will not be forced to live away from his family. Five women answered that they

would do the same only if they were both employed. The other six women answered that they would not encourage their husband to work ashore for less money, because they have a certain lifestyle and they would not be able to keep up with the increased obligations. Some of them also mentioned that they do not want their husband to leave the seafaring profession for another job that he is not qualified for. The support of the women for their husband's career is also shown from the questionnaires, when they were asked whether they consider their husband's career important the 84.8% (123) responded that it is important and very important.

As it was mentioned before, the woman in Chios can be simultaneously granddaughter, daughter, wife and mother of a seafarer. In recent years a trend is even observed as a number of women follow the seafaring profession. It is clear from the following figures (6, 7) that the participants recognize that the seafaring profession is inseparably linked to the tradition, culture and economic prosperity of the island.

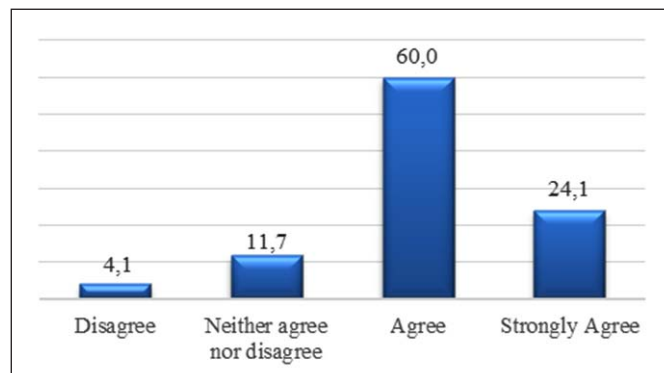


Figure 6 To what extent do you agree or disagree that the seafaring profession is tied closely to Chios tradition and culture

Source: Authors

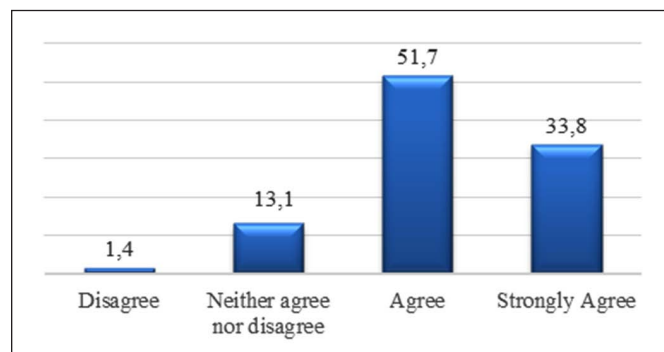


Figure 7 To what extent do you agree or disagree that the seafaring profession is an indispensable part for the economic prosperity of the island

Source: Authors

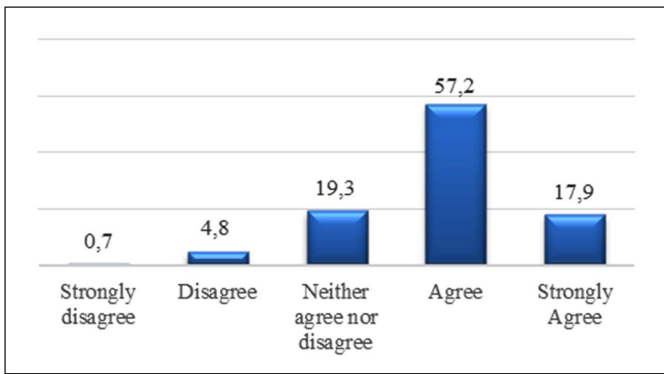


Figure 8 The seafaring profession encourages young people to stay on the island and create families

Source: Authors

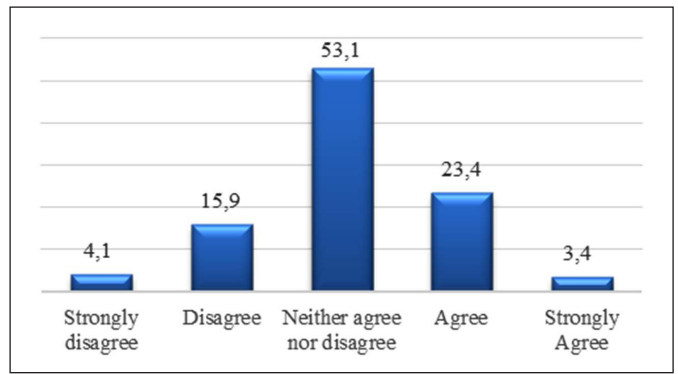


Figure 9 Would you encourage your children to follow the seafarer's career

Source: Authors

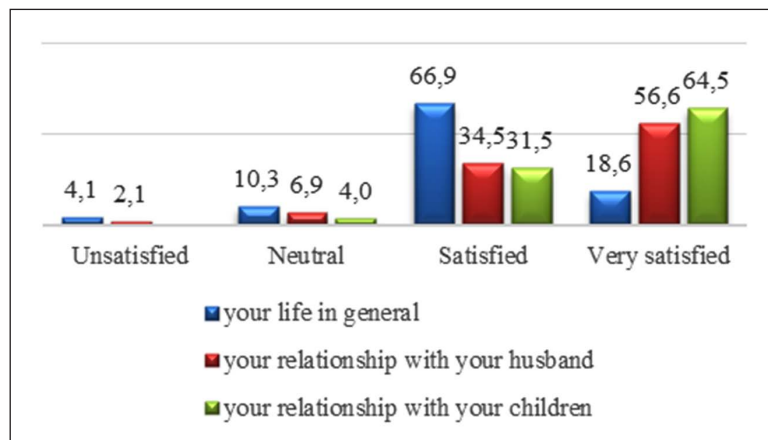


Figure 10 Level of satisfaction (1)

Source: Authors

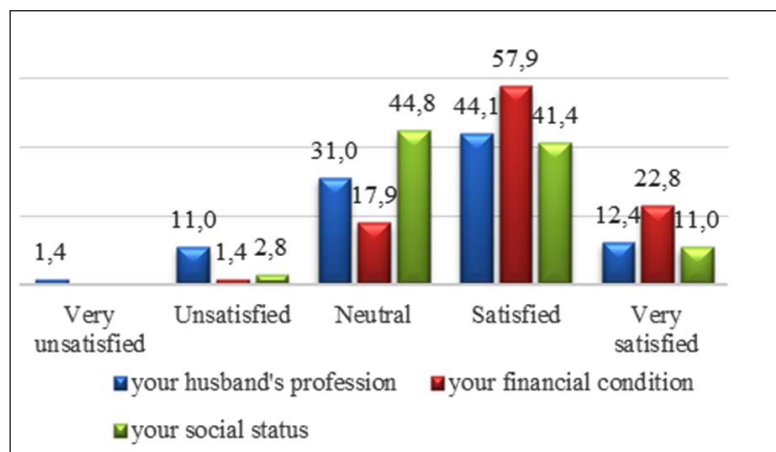


Figure 11 Level of satisfaction (2)

Source: Authors

In addition, nearly the 75% of the participants regard the seafaring profession as an important incentive for young people to stay on the island and start a family (Figure 8). Indeed, nearly 6 out of 10 believe that young people must continue working at sea in order to maintain the maritime tradition.

When asked if they would encourage their children to pursue a career at sea 20% (29) were negative, 26.8% (39) were positive, while the majority (53.1%) was neutral (Figure 9). This is something that was shown from the interviews as well. About half of the women answered that they would like their children to follow the maritime profession as this option would ensure a favorable standard of living. The other half stated that they would support their children's career choices and they would encourage them even more if their choice included a profession in the maritime sector (some of them were mother of girls and were positive with the possibility of working in a shipping company).

In the last part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to respond about their satisfaction in personal, family and social life.

When asked how satisfied they are with their lives in general, the 85.5% (124) said they are satisfied or very satisfied. There is also a very high level of satisfaction with their family life, both with their relationship with their spouse and their relationship with their children (Figure 10).

Also, the 73.1% are happy with their personal life, while 59.3% are satisfied with their social life.

Despite the difficulties in the seafaring profession, most of the participants are satisfied with the job of their husband and what that offers to their family, as shown in the Figure 11.

4 Conclusions

Completing this research and taking into account the specific attitudes and perceptions of those women towards the seafaring profession, it is very important to highlight the deep maritime culture that characterizes the seafarers' wives of Chios.

The majority of those women come from a family with maritime background. They have the ability to manage the domestic and family responsibilities and possess the strength to deal with the emotional burdens of their husband absence. They are capable of undertaking the financial management of the house, raising their children and being an active part of the society.

Seafarers' wives recognize that the seafaring profession is inextricably linked to the tradition of the island and offers considerable economic prosperity. They respond that the profession of their husband is not well-paid compared to the high degree of risk yet is certainly higher than a profession ashore. They think that it does not offer a high social status to their family; however, they still support their husband's career. They also believe that young

people should continue the maritime tradition of the island and encourage their own children to follow a profession in the maritime industry.

It is often stated that for a seafarer to be considered successful in his job, beyond the experience and education, he must possess the advantage of seamanship that characterizes the Chians and makes them a point of reference to the global shipping. On the other hand, born and raised on an island like Chios, women contribute significantly to maintaining the maritime tradition of the island and the seafaring profession, by being the pillar of the seafarer's family.

However, there is room for further research through a potential comparative study that will record the attitudes and perceptions of seafarers' wives that live in other Greek regions (island, coastal and non-coastal).

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