S eafarers the world over know all about their own problems of loneliness and isolation from their homes and families. But how many of them truly understand the depth of the difficulties of their partners who are left to struggle alone with the responsibilities and problems of family life? Who can understand their need for help and support when only another woman in the same position can truly understand? Yet often, there will be no one to share problems and help and support when only another woman in the same boat; they can turn to them for help and understanding? It has been recognised for many years that women's friendships with other women are of tremendous value to women, providing as they do, somewhere to let off steam, empathy and the support needed to go on. The experience of seafarers' partners may be in a better position in this respect because they are more likely than partners in other countries to live in flats built in seafaring communities and allocated by shipping companies, this pattern too being becoming a thing of the past. The younger generation of seafarers' partners in China are not so isolated from their lives – they can burden them, share problems and help and support when the need arises.

The seafarer, Li Ronglu, has set up a website, the home page of www.54seaman.com, to provide somewhere where seafarers' partners can talk about their problems with the only other people who truly understand their problems: other seafarers' partners. When seafarers are at sea, their partners are working with other seafarers who are both literally and metaphorically in the same boat. They can talk to each other about their problems. But most likely the partner of a seafarer knows of no other woman in her situation: the days of whole communities where the men went to sea are long past in China and in most, if not all, other parts of the world too. However, while some Chinese partners of seafarers may be in a better position in this respect because they are more likely than partners in other countries to live in flats built in seafaring communities and allocated by shipping companies, this pattern too is becoming a thing of the past. The younger generation of seafarers' partners in China are not so isolated from their lives – they can burden them, share problems and help and support when the need arises.

The interviews in this article are taken either from the postings by the partners of seafarers on the Home of Chinese Seafarers website to help and comfort each other, sharing problems, and also joys, with other women, their talk and sharing of their predicament: people like themselves, seafarers' partners. Says one seafarer's partner: “Before I knew about this Chinese seafarer, will be living a single life while at sea, oblivious to what might have happened to their husbands when seafarers are at sea. They cannot empathise with the feelings of seafarers' partners. Even though I talk with them, I can never go as deep as I wish. And there are many things that they do not understand. I have to explain to them over and over again. It is tiresome. There is no empathy.

Other seafarers’ partners describe their predicament, in their own words, below:

When I went to my husband, I sobbed and said, ‘I have no life. What can I do?’ He did not answer. He just said, ‘I have no time to listen.’

I can find those who understand me and who could understand them. But I cannot find anyone who can understand what I am going through because they cannot understand my feelings and can feel isolated from each other without worrying that the website person does not want to listen.”

Lijun Tang, a postgraduate fellow at the Seafarers' International Research Centre, looks at a website where the partners of seafarers can communicate with each other.

Li Ronglu, who set up the site, invested a great deal of his own money and energy in it, narrowly surviving several financial crises. Thanks to this seafarer's efforts, there is now a website “home” for the partners of Chinese seafarers: www.54seaman.com. More such websites would clearly be helpful to the partners of seafarers around the world. But whoever sets up such a website will need to be aware that this takes time and money. However, anyone, possibly a group of seafarers, who undertakes to follow the example of this Chinese seafarer, will be investing a valuable service for the partners of seafarers.

When I am under pressure, I have nowhere to turn to. It isotonous. I am always alone when I get home. I can find those who understand me and who could understand them. But I cannot find anyone who can understand what I am going through because they cannot understand my feelings and can feel isolated from each other without worrying that the website person does not want to listen.”

As one seafarer’s partner puts it: “I have to explain to them over and over again. It is tiresome. There is no empathy.

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Yet another has this to say: “Coming to this website, I feel that I am entering my partner’s shoes, not because I am a partner, but because they have run out. I brought up my son alone. My husband … … I had to leave things behind and run away.”

The interviews in this article are taken either from the postings by the partners of seafarers on the Home of Chinese Seafarers website to help and comfort each other, sharing problems, and also joys, with the only people who can truly empathise with their predicament: people like themselves, seafarers’ partners.

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