

Perils and Prospects

Twenty years of organising by women in Europe's fisheries have led to important gains, challenges and opportunities

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In Europe, fisheries are considered a male activity, as men represent the main labour force on fishing vessels. This stereotype has dominated European society for many decades, despite the fact that several social scientists have brought to light women's contributions within fisheries enterprises. Women's contributions in fisheries were, and still remain, largely invisible, as they are rarely paid for their work, and women themselves consider their work as part of traditional domestic duties.

The desire to modify this common perception started in the mid-1990s, when French fisherwomen participated in fishers' movements against the economic crisis faced by the French fishing industry. Throughout these events, women participated in demonstrations and established survival committees. Their objective was to financially assist fishing families in meeting their material needs during the crisis. Women challenged decision makers with regard to the fisheries situation, and called for the survival of artisanal fisheries. At the end of this chaotic period, French women decided to create their own organisations to fight for the survival of their fishing communities and

also for their own rights. Based on the French model, many associations were established at a local level in other Member States of the European Union with help from scientists, NGOs and even the European Commission which supported projects on women's contribution to fisheries. So, by the end of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000, more and more women's groups were established around European Union. In 2006, the European Network AKTEA was established to federate the new organisations.

Carrying on, the actions of women's organisations moved from the defence of the fishing industry, communities and families, to claims related to women's rights and sustainable fisheries. Women claimed legal recognition for their invisible contribution towards work in the fisheries sector. They asked for training and education to satisfy their need to participate in enterprises and resource management. They brought into the public arena their claims, and became participants in debate and decision making, not only on matters of women's rights, but also of social issues concerning the fishing industry.

European fisherwomen's organisations can be divided into three categories: those organising women involved in fisheries harvesting and ancillary activities; those engaged in fisheries enterprise management; and those comprising wives of crew members. Each of these organisations has evolved its own mode of functioning, usually

AKTEA NETWORK



Shellfish gatherers in Galicia, Spain, harvesting shellfish. As soon as the Galician mariscadoras (shellfish harvesters) got the status of professional fishers, they integrated with the cofradías (predominantly male fisher organisations) as independent groups

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either based on the history of the fisheries sector, or on the law of each country. In some countries, women's organisations are part of male organisations, and in others, they are wholly independent.

As soon as the Galician mariscadoras (shellfish harvesters) got the status of professional fishers, for example, they integrated with the *cofradías* (predominantly male fisher organisations) as independent groups. At first, the mariscadoras groups worked mainly for their own interests, but then they increased their power by taking over the leadership of some *cofradías* thanks to their capacity to lead and manage their own organisation and profession. A new organisation, *Asociación de Mulleres do Mar de Arousa* (Women of the sea of Arousa) has been established in Galicia. It is an independent organisation, bringing together different groups of women related to the sea.

Women from France, Portugal, Greece, Italy, United Kingdom and The Netherlands created independent organisations that ran on a voluntary basis. Crew members' wives joined either boat owners' wives organisations, or created their own to struggle for the working conditions and rights of their husbands. After 20 years of activity, authorities recognise that women's organisations are good interlocutors, addressing challenges that may jeopardise livelihoods.

Lack of financial resources is probably the main difficulty faced by independent fisherwomen's organisations. As they are not officially recognised, they cannot access public financial support. They are forced to devote more energy towards raising funds to run their organisations, than towards implementing their projects and meeting their objectives. Women actively involved in the organisation contribute financially to the different expenditures related to their activism. This however can only be done by women of financial means and, therefore, often excludes others. Thus, the democratic functioning of the organisation is challenged, as women with financial means generally represent the larger boats, and they hold the power within their organisations. Wives of small-scale fishers and crew have less financial capacity and often become marginalised.

Another difficulty is to keep membership active. Only a few members are ready to give time to voluntary work. Participation in meetings demands time, which not many women can contribute, given the demands of their domestic responsibilities and contributions to their fisheries enterprise. In some cases, husbands do not accept the involvement of their wives in organisations and in the public arena. The personal situation

of the different leaders indicates that most of them are greatly supported by their husbands. It is clear that lack of finance and husband's support are the main obstacles to the ability of organisations to find active members. Another obstacle is women's lack of capacity to run organisations in a collective manner, with women more often concerned with the interests of their own enterprise. To overcome this problem, women leaders need to be trained.

Another issue is the need for women's organisations to have external assistance. The most successful organisations are those that receive help from people who are not members of fishing families. These could include scientists, social workers, and members of NGOs. The external members may be willing to give their time to build and run fisherwomen's organisations because they believe that it is the only way to obtain gender equality within this industry. They may become facilitators of organisations and assist women in defining their objectives and projects and help them conduct their activities. The organisations that do not benefit from such external support have greater difficulties and conflicts to overcome.

To sum up, the emergence of fisherwomen's organisations resulted from a fisheries crisis with their main aim being the defence of their fishing communities and their way of life. Through these organisations, the concerns of women have collectively evolved from social issues to more feminist issues, as they sought recognition of their own rights.

Through their actions, women's organisations have become players in the fishing industry and act to influence policies linked to the sector. Fisherwomen have become advocates for the social aspect of fisheries, and can play an important role in resource management.

Women's organisations take part in the decision making concerned with social aspects of fisheries, and even with resources management. Women, by creating their own organisations, have claimed their own rights. But their organisations are still weak due to lack of money, and low leadership capacity. Twenty years of experience demonstrates that these organisations have a specific role to play within the fisheries sector; however they need support. Their presence has contributed to the improvement of women's rights within this industry and to an improvement in socially informed European fisheries policies. AKTEA as a European network is lobbying at the European level for more support for fisherwomen organisations through fisheries structure funds. ❖