
From Europe/ Portugal

Amphitrite's women

The women of the Amphitrite project emphasize the multifaceted nature of their activities

by Alexis Fossi, a fisheries biologist working with artisanal fishing communities

The important role of women in fishing communities is well known, especially their roles as mothers in a family context where the husband is frequently away. However, their professional competencies in the fisheries enterprise are still not adequately recognized. This was one of the goals of the European project, Amphitrite, which brought together fishermen's wives from le Havre (France), Póvoa de Santa Iria (Portugal) and Yoff (Senegal).

In each of the three countries, animators of the network organised informal meetings with women fishworkers in order to identify the professional competencies associated with their daily work. It was observed that in each of the three communities, the activities of the wives of fishermen were multifaceted: in Portugal, women actually engaged in the fishing activity; in France, they were involved with managing the fishing enterprise; and in Senegal, with fish processing and marketing.

Women were seen to have acquired, in a variety of domains, several competencies connected to seafood products and their marketing, and, therefore, to everything related to managing the boats and the household.

During the first interviews, the local-level animators also tried to highlight the process of development within the communities, and the position of women within them. They tried to develop an understanding on how and why, for example, women in Le Havre and Yoff had been effective in organising themselves, so that other groups of women could draw lessons from their experience. Following this, a three-day meeting was organised in Le Havre. Its goal was to create a meeting point and to enable an exchange of experiences, and a sharing of common problems (lack of recognition of their role, environmental problems which threaten their activities, future of the small coastal fisheries in the context of globalization...) amongst the different groups of women who had participated in the preparatory sessions.

During the sessions organised at the meeting, one of the important themes discussed was how best to valorise the professional competencies of the women, and perhaps, how best to eventually transfer these either to a field outside fisheries or to another geographical area.

What was also evident was the women's preoccupation with the future of their children. They were also aware—being in contact with the public (fish consumers)—that it is important to explain their work and the difficulties they face. Therefore, another goal of the Havre meeting was to bring out together an illustrated, bilingual pedagogical file, in French and Portuguese, aimed at children, synthesising the information given by women of the three countries. This booklet is presently being finalised. Readers will discover in it the similarities and differences amongst the three fishing communities as well as the specific role of women in each of these. It will make readers sensitive not only to an activity largely ignored, but also to the marine environment and to the relations that exist between the North and the South through the example of fisheries. It will, therefore, be a complete document that will allow trainers interested in approaching numerous questions through the coastal fisheries activity.

The women of the Amphitrite project wish to continue sharing their experience with other fishermen's wives throughout the world, in order to take up common action against those acts and deeds which threaten their activities and the future of their children.