

From Europe/ France

Vocal, articulate and creative

The women of Femmes de Littoral, Brittany work to defend the interests of small-scale fishing communities

by Nalini Nayak, a social activist working with fishworkers in India, and a member of ICSF

The women of Brittany, Femmes de Littoral, together with the Comite Local, are now preparing to host the first Constitutional Assembly of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF). Prior to that, they intend to have a one-day workshop only for women in the fisheries. The agenda for that has not yet been finalized as they hope to do it in a very participatory manner. The preparations are now on.

You may wonder why I write about the women of Brittany. The fact is that I was really struck to see the evolution of this coastal women's organization over these last six to seven years. Up to 1990, when I visited that part of the world, there was no organization of women. The fishworkers' organizations comprised only men. There were women in the fish plants, but they were organized as plant workers in the industrial trade unions. There were very militant women among them and we have long been associated with Annette Le Sauze, who has also documented her life and struggles as a fish plant worker. In fact, during those visits to Brittany, I tried to discuss with the men in the organizations and with some of the wives of the fishermen about the problems in the fishery and the need for the women to be a part of the organizational structure. They did not seem to think there was any such need. There was only Scarlett Corre, a dynamic woman who set out to sea in her own gillnet boat and who was proud to be a fisherwoman.

By 1993-94, things changed in Brittany, both in the fishery and among the women. I am not going to write about the movement that evolved at that particular time of the fisheries crisis because it has been documented elsewhere. Suffice to say that the women not only led the struggle to battle the crisis, but they used this occasion to create their own organization and out of that process have emerged some very strong and creative women about whom I want to tell you.

Let me start with Scarlett, who still continues to be basically a fisherwoman. Even in the early 1990s, Scarlett had realized that fishers like her who could not keep up with the pressures and official requirements to modernize and professionalize would be gradually rendered redundant.

Enterprising as she is, she had begun to organize demonstrations of fish food to encourage people to eat more locally caught fish and to break out of their conservative food habits. When the crisis broke out, she paid her own way to a fish fair in Japan and there she was astonished to see how the Japanese made delicacies of all the food of the sea, including the green food in it. She returned to Brittany and decided that she would reorient her fishing and go more into gathering seaweed that she would process and market. I was, therefore, greatly surprised when, in 1999, I was taken by her not on a fishing trip but for a visit to her seaweed processing unit—a small but well-equipped unit where she produces a variety of seaweed products all of her own creation (including pralin chocolate) and markets them in very aesthetic ways. Scarlett explained to me that although all the money she had invested in this enterprise was her own, she had benefited from the organizational training input that the local government had offered and that it was Raymonde Marrec, another woman from the fishing community, who was assisting her with the managerial aspects.

Life is not easy for Scarlett, who now has her daughter helping her too. Her working days are much longer and there is more work pressure. She also gets some assistance from young people who come there not only for training but also as part of the government-supported employment programme. So she has not only found a way for herself to survive, but has managed to create some avenues of employment for others too, while remaining in her own field.

Raymonde Marrec, who helps Scarlett manage her enterprise, also has a very interesting story to tell. Raymonde had participated in the Senegal Workshop conducted by ICSF on Gender Analysis in Fisheries in 1996. Raymonde had earlier worked in a cooperative bank and, as she comes herself from a coastal community, was aware of the problems of the fishermen in relation to the credit programmes of the bank. She was forced to take their side at the time of the fisheries crisis, as she was an active participant in the women's organization then. She felt the bank should

come to the rescue of fishermen, as they could not repay their loans due to falling fish prices. But the bank would not relent and, finding Raymonde to be a thorn in its flesh, sacked her under the pretext of rationalization.

Out on the streets after 18 years of work was not easy for her. Fortunately for her, some of the fishermen, through their wives, had also got a better understanding of the crisis. They were aware of the fact that they were trapped in the vicious cycle of their boats being economic enterprises, and they could no longer play the rules of that game if they wanted to remain viable. Some of them regrouped and took Raymonde's assistance to restructure their enterprises. She served them voluntarily for two years and, in the process, decided to develop her own consultancy to support alternative enterprises for self-employment.

Raymonde has been able to make use of the funds from the EU in order to help diversify employment possibilities. Through the committee of the Femmes de Littoral, she helped use this money to raise awareness on legal questions in fisheries, minimum wages in fisheries, and the problems related to the centralization of the fish auctioning. She also used it for retraining in order to create systems of collectivization of owner-operators.

According to Raymond, the workshop in Senegal not only gave her the courage but also a theoretical framework that helped her understand the changes that were taking place and prevented her from descending into despair. She has been able to evolve her own thinking regarding the way the present process of globalisation marginalizes people. She also feels that there is no need to give up, as this process is fragile in so many ways. Listening to Raymonde gave me real hope too, especially after my own observations at the Senegal Workshop. At that time, I had felt that we had not been able to strike an easy communication wavelength with the participants from Brittany.

And now finally I come to the Femmes de Littoral, a very vocal and impressive committee of women indeed. Daniele le Sauze is the convenor of this committee and the other members that I met included Sylvie, Christine, Isabelle and a few others. Danielle, who had also participated in the Senegal Workshop, represented the Femmes de Littoral at the creation meeting of the WFF. She took the initiative to canvass

for a 50 per cent representation of women in the WFF and this has been finally achieved. Now, together with the committee, she is preparing for the Constitutional Assembly of the WFF.

The members of the Femmes de Littoral are all wives of owner-operators and there is some difference of opinion regarding the issues that are taken up, since a large number of the women in the coastal communities are wives of workers. Most of the issues that have been taken up have had to do with the wives of the owner-operators. It may be recalled that the new legislation in 1996 gave women the right to be managers of the fishing enterprise, the right to maternity leave and retirement benefits, and made available a number of retraining scholarships.

This organization is only in the making and it will need a great deal of support and vision to be able to offset the hurdles and build itself up constructively. It will be important that the various women's groups that meet before the WFF Constitutional Assembly have an opportunity to exchange views in some depth, so that they can learn from one another and think further ahead.