

FROM EUROPE/ Netherlands

## Vocal, independent, but still invisible

*Women ('wives') of fishing families in the Netherlands want to participate in fishermen's organizations, but meet many barriers.*

by **Cornelie Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for the Women in Fisheries' Network of the Netherlands**

Women ('wives') of fishing families in the Netherlands, are not members of fishermen's organizations, in spite of their work in the fisheries enterprise. One reason is that the membership is based on boat-ownership and it is primarily the men who own the fishing boats. Another reason is that the women feel that the organizations are a real bulwark of the male gender, where they feel out of place. This is one of the outcomes of a survey on the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen in the Netherlands, implemented by the research department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery (1999). The survey was also the reason to call for a meeting of women of fishing families, where they could give their reactions and discuss their position.

The attendance at the meeting was very good. Women of about 60 percent of the Dutch artisanal fishery ("kotter") sector had responded to the survey, of which about 50 percent had come to the meeting. As the survey had only covered the wives of boat owners, the large majority of participants came from this back

ground. There were only a few women boat co-owners and also only a few wives of 'mates' (workers).

Practically all the women indicated that they were involved in the fishing enterprise, but mostly in activities on the land, such as administration, book-keeping, contacting the banks, auctions and other business, and last but not least, in cleaning and buying provisions. Only a few women were involved in actual fishing. Women in families with smaller fishing boats clearly worked more hours for the enterprise, compared to those with larger boats.

The survey furthermore revealed that around 60 percent of the women are involved in decision-making regarding investments, finances and labour for the enterprise. The women indicated that their involvement in the fishing enterprise is primarily because they like it and because they are interested. Another reason is—and this counts primarily for the smaller enterprises—that their participation is seen as an important money-saver.

Despite this clear participation of women in the fisheries business, they are practically invisible 'in the books'—they do not receive a salary, neither are they insured—and in the fishermen's organizations.

Also, though the large majority of women indicated their interest in fisheries policies, only a few women had accompanied their husbands to a meeting of the fishermen's organization. This non-participation of women in fishermen's organizations became the major issue discussed during the meeting.

The discussion was far from half-hearted. The women were literally queuing up near the microphone, because all had something to say. I nevertheless observed a clear difference in response by age and by regional culture. Women of the older generation and the more conservative (protestant) cultures indicated that they were satisfied with the way the men ran the organizations and they did not see why women should become members. They were happy with their informal status and felt that they already had sufficient influence by participating in decision-making regarding the finances of the fishing enterprise. They also felt that the organization played an important social role for the men, who already had a poor social life because of their long trips at sea. They felt that the men would feel better if there were no women around.

Women of the younger generations, on the contrary, clearly indicated that they would like to participate in the fishermen's organization and become members. The main reason they gave is that they feel part of the fishing enterprise and, therefore, are very interested in fisheries policies. They also indicated that they want to participate for their personal growth. Some of these younger women have already participated in local meetings. Nevertheless, all women agreed that it was not easy for a woman to enter fishermen's organizations, as they are seen as true male bastions.

Women said that their husbands did not like them participating in meetings of the organization, because they felt that *women are too critical* and this made them feel embarrassed in front of other men. The men also did not like their wives to be one of the few women in the meeting, because they were afraid of gossip.

One woman said that she was the only woman participating in the local fishermen's organization and the men, at first, looked strangely at her. She also realized that she had to know her business well, because one mistake from her side would immediately call for facetious reactions from the men. But after some time, the men had got used to her participation and now respect her. Another woman said that, at first, she had not understood all the technical topics that the men were discussing during the meetings, but that this had encouraged her to read and educate herself. Now she is a full participant in the discussions.

It was discussed how to improve the participation of women in the fishermen's organizations. At first the women directed their questions to the chairperson of the Dutch Fishermen's Union, who had also been invited to this meeting, to ask him why invitations were sent only to the men for meetings. Because of this the women felt they were not welcome to participate. The chairperson answered that there was no conscious policy to invite men only, but that it happens this way because the membership is based on boat-ownership and that the owners are primarily men. But he immediately promised to send the invitation next time to the husband and the wife.

Some male participants suggested that the first step should be to involve women in the local organizations, but this was not shared by some of the women. One woman shared that she always attended the meetings of the national union, because it was there where the most important matters were discussed. She also said that if women would only participate in local organizations, they would not have the chance to occupy influential positions.

Another suggestion was to form a separate women's organization within the national union. This did not find sufficient support, because the women were afraid not to be taken seriously by the union. However, in the end it was agreed to start an informal network to explore possibilities and strategies and a group of women volunteered to be contact persons for such a network.

The chairperson of the Dutch Fishermen's Union indeed kept his promise. The first national meeting of the fishermen's organization was well-attended by women. Towards the end of June the 15 contact persons of the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands had their first meeting in the fishing village of Urk. The women were from all over the country and represented different fishery sectors, but mostly the small-scale fishery (shrimp fishers). The wives of 'mates' (workers) were also represented.

There was a lively discussion again. I pointed out to the women how surprising it was that they were so vocal and independent, but still invisible. The women mostly blamed themselves for this, because they had not taken the initiative to change this situation. Although there were differences of interests, the women were successful in arriving at a common agenda. On top of this is the need for recognition of the role of women in fisheries, both formally and in the society. I can not tell you more, because we first want to further discuss our strategy. In September we shall meet again. I will keep you informed.