

## Europe/Netherlands

### A village built with fish...

*In Urk, the well-known fishing village of the Netherlands, a woman talks of her twenty-six years as a worker in the fish processing industry.*

**By Cornelia Quist, a member of the ICSF and contact person of the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands.**

Our village is built with fish. We are a fishing community in heart and soul. With the largest fishing fleet of the Netherlands and also the biggest auction, we naturally also have an extensive fish-processing sector. In our village we only process fresh fish for consumption.

Most of the fish processing plants are small-scale. The very small ones have around 15 workers, while the others have 30 to 40 workers. The few large enterprises have around 250 workers. During the 26 years that I work now in the fish-processing sector, I have mostly worked in the small-scale plants. But presently I work in a large fish processing plant, which has much better working conditions.

The small-scale fish processing sector mainly does the primary level of processing, meaning they clean, strip and debone the fish. The large-scale enterprises, which are the chief buyers of the fish from the small-scale sector, process the fish further as high quality frozen fish in consumer packaging for supermarket chains. They have the capital and infrastructure to buy fresh fish from other domestic and international auctions. The small-scale enterprises are very dependent on the large-scale sector for both the supply and demand of fish and this is the main reason of the vulnerability of the small-scale sector of our village.

Working in the fish processing plants has a low status in the rest of the society, but not in Urk. Practically all the women of our village have worked for at least a couple of years in fish processing. Women here generally have no aspirations for higher education. As soon as they are 15 or 16 years, women begin to work in the fish processing plants as stand-by workers. Their first motivation is to save money for their wedding and to furnish their house. The piece-rate system and the possibility of long working days, give young women, who still have the physical strength for this, an opportunity to earn a lot of money in a short period of time.

They can only hold on to this stressful working life for three or four years. After that they get all kind of physical complaints. But the young women also do not work any longer than this, as they marry here at a young age and have kids soon thereafter.

Married women also work as stand-by workers, but generally only for a few hours per day. These women primarily work to buy extra things for the household or for some 'pocket money' as they call it. As we all know each other in this village, the fish processing enterprise just calls a few women when there is a good fish supply and a need for labour, and these women, in a short while, recruit other women.

There are not many women like me, who see their work in the processing industry as a real job and as a major livelihood activity. This is understandable because the working conditions are very hard. When I worked in the small plants, it happened quite often that we were sent home, because there was no fish supply. And in particular I, being unmarried, suffered from this more, because it was always the unmarried women who were sent home first. We also were only given temporary contracts and we had no regular wages.

I know that this situation still has not changed. I also have not seen a real wage increase in the last 15 years. The work is physically very demanding, monotonous and stressful. The absence through sickness is high. There are no chances for any promotion.

No, this is not the same for the men workers. There are also men, who do the same type of work as the women, but we can see that men are more often regular workers with a permanent labour contract. This is because men are considered as the breadwinners. Because they are regular workers, there are better chances for them to get a wage increase, a promotion and to undergo training. All the workers who operate machines are men, all the foremen are men, all the higher positions are occupied by men. This is why we women get no ear from our superiors when we have complaints. These men say that our complaints are 'typical women's moaning'.

In the fish processing plants of Urk, the workers are not, in general, members of the trade union. If you are a member, the chances are high that you will be boycotted in getting employment. But the trade unions are also not really trying to get a foothold in Urk. I once

have tried to get the support of the trade union, when again only unmarried women were sent out of their jobs. But there was no response from the union. The fish processing industry is one of the rare industries in our country with no collective labour agreement.

But in the large processing plants, the working conditions have improved. In the company where I work at present, we have a worker's council since 1998, where we can go with our complaints. But as women we still feel many barriers to open our mouth, as there are still only men in the management.

Although the large processing plants have mechanized a great deal of the work, there is still a big need for human labour in the processing of fresh fish. Women are still the major labour source for the menial type of jobs in the sector, certainly here in Urk. But I think that the labour supply for the fish processing industry may become a problem in Urk in the near future. Although our community still has conservative ideas about women, we can also see here that more and more women today have aspirations to obtain better education and better jobs. Besides that, there is more competition from other industries in our region, which offer better working conditions and better wages.

The people of Urk are known for being hard workers and therefore very much in demand. I have heard that in other places there are more migrant workers now entering the fish-processing sector, because Dutch workers are not willing to do these types of jobs. I don't know if this will happen in Urk, because we are still a very closed community.

If the fish processing industry wants to keep its local labour force, it will have to adjust the labour conditions and listen to women's needs. We can see this already happening in the large processing plants. But most probably this will be at the cost of the small-scale sector.

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