

Europe / Netherlands

Our First Steps

The Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands has now been in existence for one year. How did it go? What were the highlights? And what were the limitations?

By Cornelia Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for VinVis (the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands)

Last June the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands completed one year. It has not been an easy process, but we feel that the network has overcome its main 'teething troubles'. So we have given our network a name. She is called VinVis, which is an abbreviation of *Vrouwen in de Visserij* (Women in Fisheries), but also the name of a large beautiful whale, which holds a symbolic meaning.

How did we begin?

In April 2000 some of us met during a symposium about the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen in the Netherlands. Here the results of a survey by the research department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries were presented to the fishing community and the government. It was revealed that a large majority of fishermen's wives are involved in fisheries activities themselves and that the fisheries and the family enterprise gave a very important meaning to their lives. Nevertheless their role was still an informal one and women were not participating in formal fishery organizations. It was felt that this was the reason for the preservation of traditional gender relations in the fisheries and the continuing weak social position of the wives of Dutch fishermen.

Despite the good attendance at the symposium and the lively discussions (*see Yemaya no 4, August 2000*), there was no follow-up organized, either by the government or by fisher organizations. So it was the women from fishing communities that met during the symposium and wanted to continue the discussion, who took the initiative to meet again. On 22 June we had our first meeting at the fish auction of Urk, where it was decided to form the Network. After this meeting many more followed. Initially these were held at the fish auctions of the various fishery regions of our country. Of late, we have held our meetings at the offices of our two national fisher(men) organizations.

Who is in our network?

In our network there are wives of boat owners and crew from all important fishery regions of our country, representing all the different sectors fishing in Dutch waters. These women are involved in a range of activities in the family fishing enterprise, such as administration, responding to the concerns of the crew, contacting and dealing with banks, insurance companies, auctions, etc., cleaning, supplying groceries, and more. Some of the women are co-owners of the enterprise, together with their husbands. Some women have jobs, mostly in shops or as house help. The network is open for all women who feel concerned about the future of the fisheries and the fishing community and want to be actively involved in influencing present developments in a process of positive change.

What do we do?

We discuss and study a large variety of fisheries issues, such as concerns of the crew, fisheries management, fish trade, fisher organizations, and fisheries policies and politics. We exchange information and experiences about the different fisheries sectors. We also discuss the role and position of women in fisheries. We participate (and speak at) public meetings and maintain contacts with organizations that influence policy-making and with the media. We also aspire to build contacts with fishermen's wives in other European countries.

What have been the highlights?

- We have visited various fish auctions in our country and learned about present developments in Dutch fish trade.
- We have had meetings with each of the two Dutch national fishermen's organizations to discuss with them the objectives of our Network and the support we wish to receive from them.
- During the North Sea Crisis of February/March 2001 we sent letters to our Minister of Fisheries, Members of Parliament and the press about the negative effects of closing large parts of our fishing grounds in the North Sea for our community. We also gave our first public speech during a large fishermen's meeting in Urk (*see Samudra no 28, April 2001*).
- We have participated in several public meetings concerning (the future of) Dutch fisheries, organized by the government or by fisher organizations and voiced the concerns of fishing

families. We hold the opinion that in fisheries policy *the focus should be shifted from the fishing boat to the people on the fishing boat.*

Our public participation has been well received so far.

- We studied together the Green Paper for the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Union. This helped us to have in-depth discussions about present developments in fisheries as well as the role of women in fisheries and to develop our own vision. We sent our response to the EU Fishery Commission and the EU Parliament. We distributed our response to governmental, fisher, environmental and various other organizations concerned with the future of European Fisheries. We also had an exchange with fishermen's wives of other European countries regarding the Green Paper and, in particular, on the prospects in it for the women of the fishing communities.



What have been our limitations so far?

- Although we are from the same country, we face problems as a result of differences in culture, class and age. There are differences in perceptions and attitudes, which sometimes leads to miscommunication. There are also differences in knowledge and experiences about fisheries. In

spite of this we have succeeded in staying together and to be open and respectful of each other. We try to build open and transparent relationships, where friendship is more important than status.

- Generally speaking our fishing communities are still very conservative in their perceptions about the role and status of women. Women, therefore, feel reluctant to join our network. All the women who have joined our network have the support of their husbands and also of their parents and in-laws.
- Although we receive support from both national fisher organizations we still feel that they want to patronize us. Initially our plan was to work closely with the two organizations. However, we now keep some distance because we feel they are not yet open to our concerns and ideas. By holding our meetings in their offices though, we do keep the door open to them.
- As we have decided to function as a network and not form a separate women's organization, we have no funds or institutional means. We also lack organizational experience. We depend on each one's personal capacity to contribute and we sometimes make use of the institutional resources of other organizations. This creates limitations, but also creates the opportunity for network building. It encourages the active participation of each one of us as we cannot depend on an office. Of course we readily make use of modern communication technology, such as the internet, that has become broadly accessible these days.

Those who want to get in touch with us and/or want to receive a copy of our objectives and our reaction to the Green Paper on the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Union, please send an e-mail to cornelie.quist@wolmail.nl