

## Europe/ Belgium

### Information is Strength

*Women from fishing communities and women supporters from Spain, France, Holland and Norway met in Brussels from 19 to 22 November 2001 to exchange experiences and to discuss the review process of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)*

**By Brian O’Riordan, Secretary of ICSF’s Brussels office**

*Without women in fisheries, there will be no fish in the sea.* The strap line of ICSF’s Women in Fisheries (WIF) programme underscores the importance of the role and place of women—as wives, workers, business partners, in decision making, in fishworkers’ organizations, as spokespersons etc. And unless their role and place in fisheries are recognized, and the space for women in fishworker organizations is respected, the prospects for coastal fishing communities and the



In the European context, fishing communities as such are fast disappearing. The introduction to the European Commission’s Green Paper on the future of the Common Fisheries Policy (the Green Paper) paints a dismal picture. “As far as conservation is concerned, many stocks at present are outside safe biological limits... If current trends continue, many stocks will collapse”. It goes on to note that: “The fisheries sector is characterised by economic fragility... this is reflected in poor profitability and steadily declining

*employment. In the future the Community fisheries sector will have to be significantly smaller than it is today, if it is to survive.”*

Alarmingly, in all the 41 pages of the Green Paper, there is only one reference to women. In a short section entitled “Addressing other social issues” (Section 5.7.1., page 35), the Green Paper notes that: “Apart from providing sustainable employment in the fisheries sector and assisting in the conversion of fish workers to other sectors, where necessary, the Community still needs to address other social issues, such as improving the physical safety of fishing vessels and regulating working conditions in the sector including working hours, in order to minimise safety risks.... **The Community is also concerned to ensure that the substantial role played by women in the fisheries sector is recognized and enhanced.** But what is the role played by women in Europe? The European Commission (the Commission) will publish a study report early in 2002 that should throw some more light, and include some proposals on the future role for women in European fisheries. Meanwhile the annex to the Green Paper (Volume II, in the Report on the Economic and Social Situation of the Coastal Regions), notes that: “An estimated 84,000 jobs... were held by women... in 1998. Even in fishing... women hold about 6% of the jobs. Female participation is recorded in harvesting of bivalve molluscs in Spain and Portugal, in an on-shore capacity in fishing enterprises in Belgium and Spain, and in gear repair and preparation in Greece. Women also hold the majority of jobs in fish processing... and also fill an estimated 30% of the 47,000 jobs in aquaculture...”

Despite this recognized importance, women have been noticeably absent from the decision-making processes and in the consultation process on the future of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). In preparing for the CFP review, the previous Fisheries Commissioner, Emma Bonino, had announced that: “...it is only through an open dialogue involving every group concerned with fisheries in the community - from the industry itself to environmental organizations, consumers, scientists and public authorities - that we can contribute to building the common fisheries policy of tomorrow”. And that: “...it would be wrong for the review of the common fisheries policy in 2002 to be limited to a few aspects of the Community rules in force. Instead... the aim should be to enable

*fishing to remain... an activity that is in keeping with economic requirements and the environment and provide employment and development opportunities for the people and regions that are dependent on it."*

However, the consultation process has made it clear that the European institutions see fisheries primarily as a technical subject, and as an industrial sector. Other considerations (artisanal fisheries, participation, social issues, quality of employment, etc) have been afforded much less importance, ignored, or rejected as irrelevant. Thus, in a special meeting of the Commission's Advisory Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture (ACFA) on fishery management issues, when the Development NGO spokesperson, Mme Danièle le Sauce, the wife of a fisherman, raised the issue of women's participation, and concerns about employment and future prospects, she was told to keep to the point!

Against this background, ICSF invited women from fishing communities and women supporters from Spain, France, Holland and Norway to come to Brussels, to meet and exchange experiences, to discuss the review process of the CFP and to meet with the EU institutions. The idea of holding such a meeting had been mooted for some time as a way of revitalising networks and relationships between women in fisheries in Europe.

There was also a particular advantage to holding such a meeting at this time: the meeting was organized to coincide with a hearing in the European Parliament on the Review of the Common Fisheries Policy, where the Parliamentary Fisheries Committee would present their response to the Green Paper. There was also to be a meeting of an ACFA Working Group, where the development NGOs had requested an additional agenda item on women in fisheries, ahead of the publication of the Commission report on this subject. Finally, the 'Green Paper Process' on the review of the CFP would be finalised at the end of 2001. There was therefore an opportunity to make a final contribution to the process through the parliamentary hearing and the ACFA meeting.

Women participants were invited in their personal capacity, but also as members of fishing communities, fishworker organizations and as women directly involved in their fisheries sectors. Specifically, the objectives of the 4-day meeting (19 to 22 November) were:

- To have a reflection between women fishworkers and women supporters on the role of women in EU fisheries, and the space and possibilities available/desirable for women fishworkers and women from small-scale fisheries in the new Common Fisheries Policy (post 2002);
- To increase understanding about European decision-making and consultative processes, with particular regard to the review and reformulation of the CFP;
- To make an input to the European Parliament and Commission decision-making processes on future policies concerning women in fisheries.

A particular concern highlighted by the women was the lack of information available at the grass roots on the decision-making processes, particularly in a form that was accessible to them. They also commented that it was often the women who were more literate than the men in fishing communities, and thus women played an important role in reading and explaining official reports, briefings and other information to their husbands and partners. All complained that such information as was available to them on the review of the CFP was not in a very user-friendly form.

The main conclusions of the meeting were that there was a need for more regular exchanges, particularly on how women could get better organized. They also highlighted the need for:

- Greater participation of women from fishing communities in the decision making processes;
- A more focussed discussion on how they could influence policy making in their favour;
- More formal arrangements that would enable women to network and exchange on a more regular and sustainable basis.

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