

European Union

A new world ?

Woman's roles in European fisheries are finally given attention, but there is still a long way to go to give women the recognition they deserve

By Cornelia Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for VinVis

A two-day conference to discuss ways to enhance the role of women in the fisheries sector of Europe under the newly reformed Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) was held on 23 and 24 January 2003 in Brussels. It was the first time in its history that the European Commission (EC) organized a conference on this subject. The conference was also unique in that a majority of the women participants came from fishercommunities themselves.

“This is a new world”, were the first words that escaped from the mouth of Commissioner Franz Fischler, responsible for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development, when he was confronted with the around 150 women that were gathered for the conference. The women were from the fisheries sector of all the Member States of the EU. There was also a small delegation from Norway and Iceland, which are not EU members.

Launching the conference, Commissioner Franz Fischler said that women's roles remain little known, let alone understood. He said: “Recent statistics show that you participate actively in fish processing, in the marketing of fish products, in aquaculture and also in fishing. Around 84,000 women are employed in these sectors, representing 22 per cent of all employment in the fishing industry.”

“Woman's activities in the family and in the industry support sides of fisheries are usually unpaid and often unrecognized. These activities become especially crucial in times of crisis when you are the key to keeping communities and families together. This is why we must take into account the role of women in studies and management decisions concerning the fishing industry.”

Mr Fischler reminded the participants that encouraging stakeholder participation in the European Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is one of the crucial aspects of the CFP reform adopted by the European Council last

December. The new CFP includes long-term management goals in fisheries, limits fishing effort, proposes to end by 2004 all public aid for the renewal of the fleet, and proposes more harmonized controls across the EU. These changes will benefit the industry and the coastal areas concerned, said Mr Fischler.

Ms. Rosa Miguelez Ramos, the vice-chairperson of the Fisheries Committee of the European Parliament, was the second to address the conference. She said that despite the fact that women have always worked and made their contribution to the sector, the family, and the community, they always have been invisible and unrecognized. It is time, she said, to change this situation by giving women access to decision-making, formal education, training and inputs for economic activities. She regretted that this conference was only organised after the CFP reform was adopted by the European Parliament and that women from the fisheries sector were not given a larger role in the CFP. She concluded that the Commission should now show it is serious about women's participation and that one way of doing this is by encouraging women's networking at the European level.

The first day of the Conference was dedicated to the *Study on the role of women in the fisheries sector* carried out for the European Commission by the consultancy group Macalister Elliot and Partners Ltd (see http://europa.eu.int/comm/fisheries/doc_et_publ/pub_en.htm). The results of this study were presented by Mr Jorgen Holmquist, Director, EU Directorate General for Fisheries. He said that the study gave a surprisingly homogenous picture of the role and position of women in fisheries in all member states of the EU. It showed that women's occupational participation in fisheries is the highest in the fish processing industry and thereafter, to a lesser extent, in aquaculture. The occupational participation of women in capture fisheries was shown to be very little everywhere. The study revealed that woman's role in capture fisheries is, in particular, that of the collaborating spouse, who is involved in activities such as bookkeeping and keeping contact with the auction, bank, and authorities. It also showed that the biggest obstacles for women to participate professionally in fisheries activities are the responsibility for childcare, none or limited access to decision-making within fisher organisations or trade unions and lack of prospects for better jobs or career in the sector. It showed clearly that woman's work in fisheries is generally unpaid or underpaid.

Mr Holmquist then invited the women participants to give their reactions, to which the women responded in large number. Here follows an impression of the responses:

- Many women commented that the study does not reflect what women's roles really are. They said that the study was mainly based on rather poor benchmark data and very little on interviews with women in fisheries. Women were also critical that, in general, the study was rather pessimistic and that no success stories of women's involvement in fisheries were included.
- Women also said that the approach of the study limited women's role in fisheries to women's work in the sector only. They pointed out that women generally also play a very important role in communication and social cohesion within the fishercommunity. Without woman's support, there is no future for coastal fisheries-dependent communities. More attention should have been given to women's potential roles as representatives of the interests of the sector and the community.
- Women also commented that women's roles in areas concerning safety and crew affairs were not sufficiently highlighted.
- Women from the inland fisheries sector were critical that their role was not given any attention in the study. In this sector, more women are seen in fish capture, they said.
- Women from the fish processing sector of Brittany (France) were alarmed that the study recommended that women workers be helped to exit the fish processing industry for jobs with better prospects. They said that fish processing is mostly an old artisanal profession and that if this profession disappears, these artisanal skills also would be lost. They wondered why the recommendation was not to upgrade this work by improving the working conditions and the image of the work.
- Many women expressed their concern about the decline of small-scale fisheries, which had led to the disintegration of their communities as a result of economic distress, social problems and exodus of populations. They also were worried

about the poor public image that exists about fisheries and they queried how the profession can be made more attractive. Women questioned why policy-makers are almost solely concerned with the technical and ecological aspects of fisheries and so little with the social and economic aspects.

- Women more than once called attention to the big environmental polluters of the sea. They said that the 'polluter pays' principle should be practiced and that fisherfamilies, who are the victim of serious environmental pollution, should be compensated. The practice of paying compensation years after an environmental disaster should be changed and immediate compensation should be provided.
- Women felt that it is of great importance for them to get access to organizations in fisheries (from local co-operatives to national organizations) and to be given a chance to participate in decision-making. It was suggested that women also should get representation in the Regional Advisory Councils that will be installed under the newly reformed Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

Holmquist replied that he shared most of the concerns that were expressed by the women participants. He admitted that the study of women's roles in fisheries is incomplete, but said that it should be seen as a starting point to call attention to women's roles and to create spaces for women in fisheries.

On the second day of the conference the participants were given information on financial support available under various EU programmes of relevance to them. Unfortunately, there were an overload of presentations and too little opportunity for questions and discussion. It also became clear that access to these programmes remains dependent on the willingness and initiative of the national governments of the EU Member States. And it has been the experience that most of these national governments are not aware of the opportunities to support women in fisheries or do not see the importance of it.

Reports of some projects that targeted women under an EU-funded programme for small-scale coastal fisheries development, were also presented. Some of these projects developed women's co-operatives or

business and support networks. Some trained women in computer literacy, bookkeeping and marketing skills. Although these projects had proven to be successful, they were, in general, experimental in nature.

The attention of the participants picked up again when Holmquist began his concluding speech with the following observations:

- The CFP has an impact not only on those at sea, but also on those on land. It is, therefore, important not to leave out women anymore;
- It is clear that women lack access to information, training and resources;
- The Directorate General of Fisheries commits itself to actively supporting women's networking at the European level. To start with, initiatives will include a website and a mailbox;
- DG Fisheries will review working conditions in the fisheries sector and look into how to improve the image of the sector;
- DG Fisheries will pay more attention to the socio-economic aspects of fisheries;
- DG Fisheries is willing to promote the participation of women in the Regional Advisory Councils;
- Environmental pollution of the sea is an equally important concern for the EU Commission. They are, however, restricted in implementing stricter regulations and sanctions, because the Member States put other interests first;
- DG Fisheries will look into how to upgrade the study of women's roles in fisheries and how to follow up on this conference;
- Pressure will be exerted on Member States to pay better attention to the interests of women in fisheries, both at the local level as well as at the regional level.

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