

Europe

Weaving networks

Women of fishing communities in Europe are trying to strengthen their networks

This piece by Solène Le Roux is from *Le Marin*, 20 February 2004

“Women play a double role in fishing—directly, in the processing sector, and indirectly, as wives. But this latter role is not recognized, and hence remains invisible”. Europe-wide, this statement made about Spain by Maria-José Gonzalez Martinez, General Secretary of FEABP (the Spanish Federation of Fishing Boat Owners), is something all fishing women’s associations share. A study has shown that views are similar in the 15 member States of the European Union (EU), where 84,000 women work in the fishing industry, representing 22 per cent of the workforce. Hence the desire of the associations to defend themselves at the European level, as expressed by their representatives at the meeting organized by AGLIA (Association of French Coastal Atlantic Regions) on 4 and 5 February 2004.

“The status of women has evolved with the 1997 Fisheries Law. They have increased their representation in the local fisheries committees, in the co-operatives and in management centres”, said Anne-Marie Esteban, Vice President of the Federation of Women in the Maritime Sector, a national organization derived from the fusion of Fifel and 3FM. “But still we often face rejection by the sector, or paternalism, which is another way of shutting us up. The maritime world can’t evolve without the active participation of women.”

Maria-José Gonzalez Martinez from Spain made a similar statement: “Increasingly, women can be found heading fishing enterprises. Qualification and pay levels have improved. Through social contributions, women have earned the right to retirement pensions and sick leave. But as regards equality in the workplace, salaries remain 12 per cent lower than those of men and there is still a significant lack of recognition of their participation in enterprises.”

“Women have an irreplaceable role that must be made visible,” acknowledges René-Pierre Chever, Secretary

of the Guilvinec Local Fisheries Committee. “In times of crisis, they organize or support campaigns. They (also) have a long-term perspective on the resource”. “In Spain the women have fought with the boat owners to improve fishermen’s working conditions,” adds Maria-José Gonzalez.

In order to allow women to take up work requiring higher qualifications, or to carry out their current responsibilities in a better way, wives who collaborate in artisanal maritime businesses can avail of training organized in Sables-d’Olonne. In two years, it is possible to acquire the equivalent of Level 4 in administration, management and business practice. According to Florence Pinaud, President of the Vendee Sailors’ Wives Association, this training was proving to be “very positive”. With Ministry support, it could become recognized and widespread.

Training is also a priority for UMAR (*Uniao das Mulheres de Alternativa Reposta*) in the Azores because, as highlighted by the Director, Clarisse Canha, “women taken on in fishing are not paid”. Women provide administrative assistance, they prepare the equipment (longlines, nets, etc.), but they are invisible in the profession or they have seasonally paid work in the canning factory, which is precarious. UMAR is proposing training to improve the employment prospects of women, and to valorize their knowledge and experience.

There are regular exchanges of experiences between women’s associations. When 200 of them met in Brussels at the end of January 2003, they proposed the construction of a truly Europe-wide network. “Like the one in Latin America that groups 533 women from 23 organizations”, suggested Maria-José Gonzalez. “We could then make proposals to the European Commission.”

The website project ‘Women in the Net’ proposed by the Italian organization, Lega Pesca, and financed by the EU could benefit this network. “As language is the main constraint, this site will be available in French, English, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese,” indicated Francesca Ottolenghi, who works for the project. An online forum, monthly chats and audio-conferences would allow an exchange of ideas on women’s contribution to fisheries, strategies for professional valorization and enhancement of qualifications. If the

EU accepts this project, it could be established within five months.

As the organization grows, “fishing women must ensure that their associations do not get manipulated,” warns René-Pierre Chever. Already some people are trying to get them to take up positions to block community decisions.