

VinVis: The women in fisheries network

This article charts the origins and significance of VinVis, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands, consolidates its achievements and outlines the challenges it faces

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VinVis, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands, is an autonomous women's organization. It consists of wives of fishermen from traditional fishing communities, who are concerned with a sustainable future for the fisheries and their communities and also feel that women's role in fisheries should be recognized and validated.

The origins of VinVis are rooted in a symposium held in April 2000 on the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen in the Netherlands. Presented in the symposium were the results of a pioneering research study, commissioned by the Dutch Directorate of Fisheries, on the role of fishermen's wives.



The study revealed that in addition to domestic work and child care, the wives of boat-owner fishermen were largely involved in activities related to the family fishing enterprise. However, these activities were not registered in the accounts, and though officially invisible, were valued at an estimated one million Euro annually. The majority of the women were also engaged in voluntary community service. The study found that even though the majority of the women indicated they were interested in fishery policies, very few actually participated in meetings called by fishermen's organizations.

In the symposium, well-attended by wives of fishermen, the reasons for low participation were

discussed. Why hadn't the wives of fishermen followed the example of women farmers in the country and formed a professional organization of their own? The younger women were less accepting of their present conditions than were their older counterparts. Towards the end of the symposium, a group of women, most in their late twenties, volunteered to start an informal network to explore new spaces for women's roles in fishing communities. On the 22nd of June 2000, these women met again at the fish auction at Urk, an important fishing village. And so VinVis, the women in fisheries network, was born.

Problems afflicting the Dutch fishing industry aided the network's launch. The cod crisis of 2001 (precipitated by the EU decision to ban fishing in certain areas of the North Sea in order to combat stock shrinkage) and the shrimp crisis of 2003 (which followed the termination of production regulations by the Dutch anti-cartel authorities), brought a sense of mission to the network.

In the words of a wife of a shrimp fisherman-boat owner: "While we were busy with our advocacy campaign on the land, our husbands went to sea, fishing. They had to, because of the high investments loans, which had to be repaid. The prices collapsed and our husbands had to go for longer fishing trips. We had no family life anymore...Our husbands were filled with negative energy and our community began to fall apart...Everybody in our village and our region has, in one way or the other, some relationship with fisheries and the sea. That is why I hope that unity will return for the sake of preserving a future for our children and our community... I regard my first mission as bringing back unity among the shrimp fisher community and finding support for our cause. I also want to have a family life again. I feel supported by our women in fisheries network, VinVis."

VinVis members began to participate in local fishermen's organizations. They also pioneered innovative initiatives at the local level such as the Sea-Fresh Fish Market of Wieringen. Their efforts succeeded in gradually enhancing the fishing community's image.

In the beginning, the men regarded the women's effort with some ambiguity. The women quickly realized that they had to develop business expertise, for even a single mistake could invite critical reactions. They began preparing themselves to participate meaningfully in discussions. Supporting each other, women began to feel less inhibited

about raising even 'controversial' issues, such as unsustainable fishing practices, crew concerns and internal divisions. In course of time, women's participation won them respect. Nevertheless, men still find it difficult to accept women in leadership roles. Until now, only one woman of the VinVis network has been elected to the board of a local fishermen's organization.

The VinVis network became an active participant in various public discussions. The women studied important documents, such as the Green Paper, to review the EU Common Fishery Policy (2001-2002) and formulated their own response. They met Ministry officials, researchers of fishery institutes, representatives of the fishery industry, environmental activists, and other stakeholders of coastal resources. At every meeting, VinVis highlighted the importance of the wellbeing of the family and community in the discourse on fisheries. They often reported their experiences in the widely-read Dutch national fisheries paper *Visserijnieuws*.

Although the VinVis network was not a formal representative organization, it won the recognition of the Fisheries Ministry and was invited to consultations for the Netherlands National Strategic and Operational Plan for the European Fisheries Fund. However, despite the fact that VinVis presented a position paper and intervened in consultation rounds, the administrators failed to adequately incorporate the perspective of women of fishing communities.

In January 2003, an EU Conference on the role of women in fisheries gave an important impetus to the network helping VinVis in building relationships with other women-in-fisheries organizations throughout Europe. Between 2003 and 2005, VinVis became active in the participatory research of the FEMMES Thematic Network, aimed at promoting women's role in fisheries and aquaculture, and in networking with other European women's associations. In 2006, VinVis became one of the founding members of the AKTEA Network of Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture in Europe with a VinVis member elected as its vice-chairperson. Exposure to the wider problems of fishing communities all over Europe and opportunities to share experiences and strategies with other women's associations were of great value and inspiration.

VinVis started as an informal and open network. However, this informality, particularly in the early years with women joining and leaving all the time, hampered the emergence of a collective long-term programme.

The women of the network had diverse backgrounds and interests. They came from different communities; some were from ship-owners' families and others from crew members' families; sometimes they came from rival

fishermen's associations. They had to deal with cynical and paternalistic reactions from their communities. They frequently faced a conflict between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. There was also the problem of inadequate organizational skills as well as a lack of resources such as time, funds and childcare facilities.

On the other hand, the informal and open structure had many advantages. It allowed women to make their own decisions, to share experiences and knowledge, to respect differences and offer advice and support. The active use of email communication added to this process, although face-to-face meetings remained most important. The network also welcomed the present author to play the role of facilitator, adviser and supporter.

By 2004, the VinVis network had evolved a stable core of about ten women who carried out the network's mission with great enthusiasm, often using their personal resources to do so.

The activities of the VinVis network have not gone unnoticed by the Dutch Fishery Administration and professional fishermen's organizations. This has led to a growing awareness about the potential role women can play, particularly on issues concerning the quality of life within fishing communities. Nevertheless, the enhancement of women's roles and status fails to receive priority and is reflected neither in the agenda of fishermen's organizations nor in the fisheries policy.

Inadequate support from the government and professional fishermen's organizations prevented the further growth of the network. The only aid received was a one-time grant of Euro 1000 from the Dutch Fishermen's Union (*Nederlandse Vissersbond*). However, the husbands of VinVis members belonged to different fishermen's organizations. Since none followed its example, the Dutch Fishermen's Union, although appreciative of VinVis' work, was reluctant to extend further financial support.

One of the active core members of the VinVis network says: "The women who are in our network at present feel that they can only participate because of the support of their husbands. Although our work is appreciated by our fishermen's organizations and some of its leaders, the women of VinVis still face patronizing attitudes. Generally speaking, Dutch fisher communities are still very conservative in their perceptions about the role and position of women. As a result, women feel reluctant to join the VinVis network, even though they approve of our mission."

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