

Giving voice to European fisherwomen

A recently-held public hearing in Europe demonstrated that women in fisheries are fast gaining public visibility and may soon play an important institutional role in crafting their own future

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The Committee on Fisheries of the European Parliament organized a public hearing on 'Women and the sustainable development of fisheries areas' on 01 December 2010. The public hearing was initiated by Josefa Andrés Barea, Member of the European Parliament (MEP), who is responsible for gender mainstreaming on this committee. European women's organizations were invited to speak about their work, their problems and perspectives. The AKTEA network and some of its members participated in this event. The European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Maria Damanaki, also participated in the hearing.

After Carmen Estevez Fraga, chair of the Committee on Fisheries, opened the session and welcomed participants, Barea explained that the objectives of the hearing were to gain more knowledge about women's contribution to fisheries and to support women's actions. Next, Damanaki spoke about the European Commission's policies and initiatives on women in fisheries. She explained that the Commission had adopted the Women's Charter to reinforce its commitment to promoting equality between men and women in all EU

policy areas. For the implementation of the objectives of the Charter, the Commission adopted a specific strategy in September 2010. Within this framework, said Damanaki, the Commission would "encourage the creation of women's organizations at local, regional and European level". She highlighted the role of informal women's groups, who contribute to the fisheries industry as well as to communities but fail to benefit from public subsidies. She recommended the establishment of formal networks similar to those set up in Spain and called upon all Member States to "constitute similar networks everywhere". Reaffirming women's contributions to fisheries and the role of women's informal organizations to fisheries communities, the Commissioner pledged to promote the creation of national networks financed by the European Fisheries Fund.

Following the official presentations, the floor was given to women's organizations representing different countries and levels of organization. Marja Bekendam, chair of AKTEA and member of *Vin Vis*, the Dutch women in fisheries network, explained that AKTEA—a network of fisherwomen's organizations from 11 European countries—was created in 2006. AKTEA's main objective is the promotion of fisherwomen's rights in Europe. It lobbies at the European level for the recognition of women's roles in the fisheries, the attribution of a legal status to all women contributing to family fishing enterprises in all Member States, the participation of women's organizations in the decision-making process on fisheries management, the promotion of women's visibility in fisheries, the support of women's initiatives by European structural funds, as well as the maintenance of fisheries communities.

Bekendam stressed the problems encountered by AKTEA, for example, the lack of funding and leadership experience, communication difficulties due to the different languages spoken by members, and so on. Despite these shortcomings, Bekendam pointed out, AKTEA had several achievements to its credit. These included participating in two public hearings, one in 2005 and the next in 2010, by the European Parliament; lobbying successfully for a vote by the European

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Parliament in favour of a women's network within fishing communities in 2005; lobbying successfully for an EC communication in favour of the integration of women's organizations in the Regional Advisory Council (RAC) in 2008; and the publication by the European Parliament of a report on the role of women in the sustainable development of European Fisheries Areas.

Clarisse Canha from the Azores spoke on behalf of the island's network of fisherwomen's organizations established in 2008. Women's contributions, she pointed out, are very important in small-scale fisheries. "In the Azores, women undertake different tasks," said Clarissa. "They are boat owners, skippers, fish-sellers, administrators for family fishing enterprises, workers in local processing plants, and so on." The network has very close relations with the Portuguese network, Estrela do Mar, and is a member of the South Atlantic RAC.

Next, Leslie Duthie, speaking on behalf of the North Sea Women's Network (NSWN), highlighted its major function, namely, its participation in the North Sea RAC. The network plays an important role within this RAC, chairing the socioeconomic working group and ensuring that new fisheries management regulations take into account the social and economic consequences on fishermen's families and fisheries communities. Leslie explained that in 2010, NSWN also became a working member of the Pelagic RAC.

Adriana Celestini, chair of the Penelope Association based in Ancona in Italy, spoke next about the role of fishermen's wives in fishing family enterprises in Italy. Fishermen's wives contribute considerably to family fishing enterprises by undertaking a number of different tasks, mainly administrative. The exception is in Ancona, where fishermen's wives play a crucial role in selling the fish. Fishermen's wives, mothers or sisters are responsible for bringing fish to the auction; if the price is too low, they take the fish back, selling it either to fish shops or taking it to other cities for sale. The women have to wake up at 2 a.m., leaving their children either alone at home or in the care of other family members. The Penelope Association is a member of the executive committee of the Mediterranean RAC.

Monique Philip, representing the national federation of French fisherwomen, spoke about the establishment of women's organizations in France. She explained how French fishermen's wives managed to obtain

the legal status of collaborative spouse, which officially recognizes women's contribution to fisheries. This specific status gives fishermen's wives access to their own retirement pension, to free professional training, and to membership of fishermen's organizations. She highlighted the difficulties faced by women's organizations in France in accessing European Fisheries Funds (EFF) through recounting the experiences of the local association of Arcachon, which had submitted a project to the local authority for the establishment of a workshop for processing local fish. The project was rejected on the grounds that they didn't have the necessary funds (Euro 50,000) to undertake the feasibility study, and that EFF funding can be claimed only after a project has been undertaken and paid for. If women had this kind of money, they wouldn't need public subsidies, Philip pointed out.

Natalia Laino of AGAMAR, an organization representing women shellfish gathers in Galicia, Spain, not a member of AKTEA, spoke about the problems of shellfish gatherers, their difficult working conditions and the occupational health hazards they face. She called upon the EU to pay more attention to small-scale fisheries during the revision of the Common Fisheries Policy.

González Serrano, Deputy Director of the General Secretariat for the Sea (Secretaría General del Mar), of the Spanish Ministry of the Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs made a presentation on the Spanish network of women in the fisheries. Established by the fisheries administration and financed by the EFF, this is a virtual, internet-based network. It publishes references to women in fisheries and women's initiatives. It also organizes an annual meeting bringing together women in fisheries from the different regions. The first meeting, involving 350 women, was held in October 2010.

The presentations were followed by an interactive session between the MEPs and the representatives of women's organizations. The MEPs expressed surprise that the contributions of fishermen's wives are largely unrecognized. The problem of accessing public subsidies, particularly the EFF, was discussed and a suggestion made that the Chair of the Fisheries Commission could bring this issue to the notice of the European Council of Ministers. It was decided that a summary of the day's discussion would be presented before the Fisheries Commission.

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visible. Women are now willing to lobby European institutions. The fact that AKTEA was invited to the event proves that AKTEA today enjoys recognition at the EU level. However, the proposal of the European Commissioner to finance a European Network, more institutionalized than AKTEA, could potentially marginalize AKTEA. For this reason, AKTEA should grasp the opportunity to be part of, and to guide, the establishment of the future network. This question also came up during AKTEA's annual meeting held in

Brussels: should AKTEA become an institutional network or should it continue to work as an activist network? Members agreed that the network should move towards institutionalization because it needs public subsidies to ensure its expansion and to develop its activity in all member states. AKTEA will now request a meeting with the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) to discuss the possibilities of becoming the official European network. **M**