

# Hanging in the balance

**Dwindling financial and managerial resources are threatening the existence of fisheries networks like AKTEA that have played an invaluable role in making visible women's contributions to European fisheries**

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Established in 2006, AKTEA is the European network of women's organizations in fisheries. The women's organizations involved with the network are varied: some assist their fisher spouses; some gather shellfish; others mend nets. European fisherwomen's organizations, through their sustained work, have become important players in the fishing industry and have been able to influence policies linked to the sector.

Fisherwomen in Europe today are advocates of the social aspects of the fisheries, playing an important role in resource management. Some of them are members of Regional Advisory Councils, advising the European Commission on fisheries matters. The authorities often consider women to be more open-minded than men in discussions on critical issues concerning the fisheries. But today it is also the case that after 20 years of activity, these organizations are facing severe difficulties. Women's organizations in Europe are run on a voluntary basis, a mode of functioning that does not

enable them to build long-term projects. They require financial and managerial support from the authorities to contribute more fully towards the development of sustainable fisheries policies. Without such support these organizations will cease to exist.

Today, like other organizations in the sector, AKTEA faces a host of difficulties. The future of AKTEA was, therefore, the core agenda of its annual general meeting held on the 15 October 2013 in Brussels. The network is finding it more and more difficult to carry out its regular activities. For the last three years, it neither held its annual meeting nor published its bi-annual newsletter. Communication between members, always a challenge due to the diversity of languages spoken within Europe, now represents a significant expense.

During the annual meeting participants were asked to respond to the two following questions: "Do we still need the network, and if yes, for what?"

From the general response it was clear that for its members, the network must continue its activities: first, because AKTEA is the only forum where fisherwomen from different countries can share their experiences; and second, because the network plays an important role in the promotion and visibility of women's contributions to the fisheries at the European Union (EU) level.

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policies for its members. For these reasons, the constituent women's organizations decided to issue a statement addressed jointly to the EU decisionmakers, Commission and Parliament explaining AKTEA's role and importance for women in fisheries, and seeking funding to continue the network. Convincing European decisionmakers of the significance of the network is a necessary precondition for financial support from EU institutions. The statement would argue that AKTEA contributes to the building of the EU by offering a space where women, as European citizens, learn about other member States and about Europe.

The implementation of European policies concerning gender equality has opened the doors to EU structural funds for women. The current European Fisheries Funds (EFF) and the future Fund for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs have started paying more attention to women's initiatives at the level of both the fisheries enterprise and collective action. At the enterprise level, women can apply for funds to support diversification of their activities; at the collective level, funds are available for networking. In practice, however, only a few countries pay attention to gender equality measures introduced by the EFF, and women's initiatives funded by the structural funds are few. This lack of attention forces fisherwomen's organizations to question their role, existence and acceptance in the public space.

The actions to implement the European strategy for equality between women and

men for the period 2010-2015 in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (COM 2010 491, SEC 2010-1080) also refer to women in fisheries. A proposed action is to "support MS (Member States) in promoting gender equality in the EFF programmes by drawing lessons from the mid-term evaluation" and the creation "of a pan-European network of women active in the fisheries sector and in coastal regions to improve the visibility of women in this sector and establish a platform for the exchange of best practices". Both these proposed actions were claimed by the AKTEA network during the consultation process for the European roadmap of equality. However, despite these proposals being endorsed by the European Commissioner responsible for the fisheries during a public hearing at the 2010 fisheries commission of the European Parliament, fisherwomen's organizations are still waiting. This long wait will negatively impact not only AKTEA, but also the national level organizations that have helped improve women's rights within the industry and formulate socially-informed fisheries policies.

Fisherwomen would like to believe that this last request for financial support will find a better echo among the authorities than their previous appeals have. The bitter truth is that without adequate support the majority of fishworker organizations will soon disappear. ❖