

Europe/France**Wedded to the sea**

This is an interview with Lilianne Carriou, President of the Local Fisheries Committee of Lorient-Etel, France

This interview by Fanny Brun of Pêche et Développement has been translated by Brian O’Riordan of ICSF’s Brussels office

“I don’t originally come from a fishing community”, says Lilianne. “I married a fisherman, and, in so doing, I became wedded to the sea. Getting used to the world of sailors has been far from easy, filled as it is with such uncertainty. To start with, as I worked outside the sector, it seemed quite archaic to me. I did not understand much about it, and it was difficult to adapt to it. But there was no alternative: either I had to adapt or spend every day in tears. So, I adapted.

My husband started out as a small-scale fisher with a small boat of 10 m. After some years, he acquired a 16-m boat, then a 17.5-m one. Today, he operates a 20.6-m vessel. But he has never changed from being a net fisherman. He has remained true to his convictions, and never changed his profession.

The great crisis in the 1990s

It was thanks to the great fishing crisis of the 1990s that I really discovered my husband’s profession. That way of life, along with the whole sector, was in jeopardy. It was then that I became painfully aware



that the profession was in the process of disappearing. It was really a major concern. I learned that the families from the port of Lorient, whether in small boats or others, were facing great difficulties. None of us saw the crisis coming; all of us were caught by surprise. I took part in agitations with men and women from the Lorient district, and later in neighbouring areas, as the movement snowballed. There was quite an outburst.

I have always been a social activist

When your children are young, you get involved as a parent in school and sporting associations. So my involvement with organizations goes back a long way. To start with, I did not get involved with the fisheries sector because I did not understand it.

Later, quite rightly, I wanted to learn about it. My husband had explained to me at great length about fisheries issues, and I wanted to deepen my discussions with him. And it’s a fact that, as a couple, it was a very difficult discussion, because we were not at all on the same wavelength. But it helped us to grow and to develop together. We have both always respected our commitments to each other as well as our differences, and that helped us to be open about a dialogue. When the fishery crisis hit, I decided to join up with the women, and joined a course on how to manage a fishing enterprises.

I continued with this struggle because I was convinced that women had a role to play in the fisheries sector. It was really far too much of a man’s world. So I joined the regional women’s association, where I was the President for a number of years. Thanks to that women’s association, we were able to develop, gain official recognition for our status, address issues of safety and psychological counselling, and other matters that men had never really given much thought to.

I feel that a major change has come about in recent years. While it’s true that the fisheries sector has always presented difficulties, I feel that we have progressed well. And I think it must be said that this is thanks to women. Today, amongst the new generation, shipowners and crew are well aware that women contribute significantly to the business.

President of the Local Fisheries Committee

Even today, I sometimes ask myself how I came to

be in the Local Fisheries Committee. One of the demands made by the women was the right to join professional organizations. We had demanded to be eligible as collaborating spouses for membership, and to hold office in professional organizations for the 2002 elections. That was not an easy process, and doors were shut in our faces all along the way. Finally, there was a glimmer of hope, as a small opening appeared for collaborating spouses and even, at last, for other women too. But then, again, why not? One must act quickly, as events take place. Not many women ultimately made it to the organizations, but the way was open to us. That was something really important.

Nevertheless, we had to ask our husbands about standing in for them. Personally, that made me very embarrassed. Undoubtedly, my husband was the professional. But I would have preferred us to be referred to as “Mr and Mrs”, rather than me as a wife standing in for a certain mister, because he was not there. In the end, that was not possible; it had to be either, or. So I asked my husband whether he wanted to hold office in the organization. He said it was not possible for him; that he could not do everything, and be everywhere. There was the boat and the business to look after, they had to function. So I asked him if I could take his place. He said that I should do as I please.

This was how I gained entry, and was able to vote. In the end, it must be admitted that the men did open the doors for me. I was not there by chance. When they proposed various posts to me, I took all of them up. Following the recent retirement of the President of the Local Committee, I was elected President. I was very surprised indeed. I felt that a proper fisherman would make a better representative. But they all said they were struggling to manage their affairs and that they needed to be represented in this sector, so they elected me.

I am living through a great adventure. Like in a pregnancy, I have been in this job for nine months now... I could not have imagined what was going to happen. I have been caught with my back to the wall, because no sooner had I arrived, everything started to happen, what with Total Allowable Catches (TACs), quotas, controls, fuel costs...It's not possible that more things could have happened to us at the same time, it's a very difficult year.

All of us are in the same mess, whether as fishermen, fish merchants, fishmongers, processors, we are all links in the same chain today, and I believe that we must really stick together, if we are to progress in this sector. There is no other way—if a link in the chain breaks, we will all be set adrift.

I am here because I have faith. I want to believe that this sector is going to pull through. That will not be without pain, but there is every chance of succeeding if we keep united. I have been astounded to see how well the professionals have responded. I think that they have adapted to the changing situation, with each passing day. I have rarely witnessed a situation where people have adapted so quickly to what is happening. In today's fishery, there are more constraints than opportunities, but I am very impressed with their behaviour. What's more, in Lorient, many young people still want to invest despite the worrying situation. As for us, we must back them up; it's our duty.

*Fanny Brun can be contacted at:
peche.dev@wanadoo.fr*