
Europe/ Netherlands**Sharing, learning, inspiring*****Women of Northern Irish fishing communities meet with their counterparts in the Netherlands***

By Cornelia Quist, a supporter of VinVis and a member of ICSF, with inputs from Louise Henning and Trish Slater (NIWIF) and Marja Bekendam and Mariet Groen (VinVis)

In September 2006, 14 women from the Northern Ireland Women in Fisheries Network (NIWIF) visited the Netherlands to meet with their counterparts in VinVis, the Dutch Women in Fisheries Network. The visit was the result of contacts made last May at the founding meeting of AKTEA, the European Network of Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture in Europe.

The NIWIF network is a new organization, formed by women-in-fisheries (WIF) groups based in the three major fishing harbours of Northern Ireland: Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie. The network was initiated by women of the Fishermen's Wives Support group of Kilkeel, who had been participating in several WIF events in Europe and had been inspired by WIF networks that existed in other countries, such as the Dutch VinVis. The NIWIF network chose VinVis for its first exchange visit because the Dutch network had already been in existence for six years and the Northern Irish women were interested in learning from the Dutch women's experiences and in exploring ideas about how to regenerate their own ailing fishery industry.

The Dutch WIF network, VinVis, is a network of women from family-based fishing enterprises from all important fishing regions of the Netherlands. The Dutch women saw it as a big challenge to host their Northern Irish counterparts. It was decided to focus the visit on the three most important living fishing communities: Wieringen (multi-species fisheries), Lauwersoog (shrimp fisheries) and Urk (flatfish and eel fisheries). The idea was to expose the Irish women to the history of these communities, their way of life and to successful initiatives taken up to keep their

communities and the fishery industry alive.

The Irish women visited several fisheries museums and went on walking tours in ancient, picturesque fishing villages. They were also exposed to fishing harbours, where initiatives such as a fresh-fish market and cosy eating places promoting fish dishes, were being undertaken. They also visited a fish auction where the fishermen's catch was sold with the aid of electronic gadgets—seen as a fair system that gave better prices to the fishermen. The women had lunch on board a decommissioned shrimp trawler that was converted into a leisure ship for tourists. The skipper-owner, a former shrimp fisher, informed them about the history and problems of the Dutch shrimp fishing community. A visit to the largest shrimp trading company of Europe had to be cancelled at the last moment, in all probability because the management was afraid of negative publicity at a time when relations between the company and the Dutch shrimp fishing community were disturbed (see *Yemaya* July 2003). The Northern Irish women were very surprised to hear that Dutch shrimps were being transported all the way, by truck, from northern Netherlands to north Africa (Morocco) for peeling!

One day of their visit was reserved for a sharing session between women of both the networks. Being only among women, there was space for heart-to-heart conversation. The women were surprised to find so many similarities in the problems they, as fishermen's wives, faced as a result of the ailing fishery industry in both countries. The problems varied from personal traumas, such as bankruptcy of the family enterprise or loss of their husbands in accidents at sea, to family and community problems, such as fast decline of incomes, out-migration of youth, deterioration of public facilities in their villages, and even increase of divorces. Women noted how the quality of their family lives had deteriorated, because now, to keep their incomes at reasonable levels, their husbands had to go for fishing voyages that lasted over one week, leaving behind all the responsibilities to the women on shore. Most of the earnings from fishing went back into the boats, and besides doing

all the shore-based work for the enterprise, women now also had to take up jobs outside the sector to supplement their husband-fishermen's incomes, and to be able to feed, clad and educate their children. The women recalled how their husbands were always tired and worried these days, which was also negatively affecting marital relations and the environment for the children. The women also felt that the fishermen of their communities had become more individualistic and had lost the ability to co-operate, losing influence and control. Today, they said, it is the trading companies that are in control.

Much time was spent on discussing alternatives. A few women shared how their families had been able to turn the tide. One Irish woman described how she and her husband had decommissioned their boat and started a crab-processing plant. They had learned the skills all by themselves, and worked very hard together to finally be able to earn a stable income and manage a good standard of life again. A Dutch recounted how she and her husband had successfully diversified their economic activities by changing to part-time fishing, complemented by a decorative and building business. Good co-operation and communication between husband and wife, on a basis of equality, was felt to be of great importance. The women felt that they could have an important role in broadening the perspectives of their husbands. Women also stressed the need for educating their children and their communities about the importance of preserving their culture and identity; otherwise, these would be lost within a decade.

The Irish women were impressed to see how the Dutch fishing villages were preserving their culture through well-maintained fisheries museums and community activities to promote their products and way of life. It was also seen as very important for women to come forward and participate in public meetings concerning fisheries policies and management, to speak out and defend the interests of their families and communities. Women felt that the fishing effort should be reduced, not through complicated rules and regulations imposed by the State, but through initiatives by the community itself. For the latter to happen, women could play a role in

uniting the community, even though they knew this to be no easy job.

Following this meeting was a beautiful buffet with homemade (fish) dishes, arranged by the VinVis women. The men were also invited to the buffet. In his speech, the leader of the fishermen's organization praised the women's initiative of cross-border exchange and said that the men should learn from this example.



The exchange visit ended with a visit to the monument dedicated to those who had lost their lives at sea in Urk, the largest fishing village of the Netherlands. This was a moment of deep sadness, because there were three widows in the Irish group who had lost their husbands in accidents at sea. A deep solidarity was felt among the women, tears flowed and hands were held.

The women separated in warm friendship, mentioning how energized and inspired they felt through the visit. This year they will meet again when NIWIF hosts the next AKTEA meeting in April 2007. The success of this exchange visit will certainly be shared with the other European WIF groups, and, hopefully, more of these initiatives will follow.

Some of the responses of the women who were part of the visit:

“We were impressed with the enthusiasm of the fishermen's wives in Holland in trying to keep alive

the fishing industry and with the support they give to their husbands.”(a NIWIF woman)

“In these times of globalization, it is so good to know that there are still people who stick together and make a fist for their communities and family enterprises.” (a VinVis woman)

“We visited a museum in Zoutkamp, which we all thoroughly enjoyed, and got lots of ideas for a museum which we hope will be set up in Kilkeel in the near future.” (a NIWIF woman)

“It was a great experience for us, the VinVis women, to organize this event all by ourselves, without any financial support, and by just using our own creativity and putting our shoulders together. It has strengthened our mutual relations and given us energy. It was also a great experience to look at our fishing communities through the eyes of our guests. We have learnt a lot.” (a VinVis woman)

“This was a great field trip and we want to thank all involved in the organization.” (a NIWIF woman).

“By going on with our network, going on with learning from, listening to, and supporting one another, we will protect what we believe in: Our way of life!” (a VinVis woman)

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