

# An uphill task

**AKTEA's presentations at a recent symposium highlight the challenges that women in Europe's small-scale fisheries face**

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The Institute of Social and Political Sciences of the University of La Laguna in Spain in association with the GOBAMP2 Project and the Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) partnership, organized a symposium on 'European Small-scale Fisheries and Global Linkages' at Tenerife in Spain from 29 June to 1 July 2016. The purpose of the symposium was to discuss issues affecting the sustainability of small-scale fisheries (SSF) in Europe and explore linkages to global SSF, especially through markets and stewardship efforts.

Seventy scientists, students, fishers and managers participated at the symposium. They discussed wide-ranging issues of relevance to SSF in Europe. Needless to say, gender equality in European SSF was also part of the discussion. Marja Bekendam, Chair of AKTEA, the European network of women's organizations in fisheries and aquaculture, highlighted the importance of women's contribution in small-scale fisheries.

The AKTEA network was started in 2006 in Ancona in Italy. Its name derives from the goddess of Hellenic mythology symbolizing the shore, which is the source of fisheries-based livelihood for European women in SSF. The group emerged out of a process of deliberations held in transnational meetings by fisherwomen from different European countries. AKTEA has several aims: for women's roles in fisheries to be visible and recognized; for employment statistics in the fisheries to reflect gender; for women to have access to decision making on fishery management and coastal development; for enhanced visibility of coastal and inland fishing communities and women's contributions to these communities, and for greater exchange of experiences and sharing of knowledge.

AKTEA is a voluntary network. This is true of most organizations of fisherwomen in Europe except for a few notable exceptions. In Spain, for example, the Spanish Network of Women in Fisheries, a network of fisherwomen, women shellfish gatherers and organizations supporting women in fisheries, was created by the Secretariat of Fisheries in 2010. Another example is that of Estrela do Mare, the Portuguese network of women fish

harvesters, small-scale fish sellers and wives of fishers, which functioned on an informal basis for many years before gaining legal recognition in 2014.

Women in Europe's fisheries and aquaculture undertake mainly activities on the shore. Their tasks are multiple, from net mending to shellfish gathering and administrative work. In family-based fisheries enterprises, women play an important role that is undervalued and under recognized. Fisherwomen in Europe today are advocates for the social aspects of fisheries, and for their own rights. Some of them play an important role in resource management by participating in the advisory councils for fisheries regional management. European and national authorities have stated that they consider women as being more open-minded than men on critical issues concerning fisheries.

At the Tenerife symposium, Carmen Serrano Soller, a member of AKTEA, made a presentation on a fisherwomen's group named Thyrius in Valencia, Spain. The group members had for several years struggled against a patriarchal custom whereby local fishing rights passed down the male line. Though several court decisions were made in favour of the women's group, fishermen's associations still refused women the right to fish. A January 2008 ruling of the court in Valencia finally forced the fishermen's organization to allow women fishing rights. But women found that eel, the most important fish species in the Laguna, had disappeared due to overfishing. Women of the community are now conducting a campaign for the revitalization of the local lake through a restocking programme. But they still have an uphill task to get their ideas accepted by the local fishermen.

The story of the women fishers of Valencia demonstrates the difficulties women experience in the face of patriarchy. Even when women have submitted proposals for sustainable fishing for community benefit, these tend to be ignored. It is important that the experiences of these fisherwomen are given space, and also, are heard by other communities of fishers.

At the symposium, a presentation made by Yesmina Mascarell, an independent researcher, highlighted the role of female ship owners in Valencian Mediterranean coastal communities. Women in the Valencian *confraries* (fisher's artisanal associations) are invisible in the public space in terms of access

to power, property and decision making as well as in terms of their work, which is largely unpaid—areas where the cultural and social exclusion of women is more noticeable.

In the area studied, around 275 women are part owners with their husbands or other relatives and only a few of them (less than six per cent) are sole owners. They bear the main responsibility of running the family business. Nevertheless, their work as ship and crew managers is still unpaid, unreported, and is not regarded as contributing to the Marine Social Security, and, thus, without retirement rights. Moreover, their presence at decision and power positions is still very low; women make up only a small percentage of the members of fisheries' organizations and their management board teams.

During the TBTI symposium, members of AKTEA met with the newly established SSF organization called LIFE (Low Impact Fisheries in Europe). The aim of LIFE is to provide a clear and coherent voice at the European Union level for the largely silent majority of European fishers, who operate on a small scale and who use low impact fishing gears and methods but have historically lacked dedicated and effective representation in Brussels and at the level of Member States.



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AKTEA members asked LIFE to extend support to actions by fisherwomen. The contribution of the authors of this piece towards building the bond between AKTEA and LIFE was acknowledged. ❖

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