

## Europe / Netherlands

### Challenging stereotypes

***VinVis, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands, has been in existence for two years now. Time again to report on the process of finding a common orientation...***

**By Cornelia Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for *VinVis*.**

Last year I reported how some of us, who had met during a symposium on the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen, had formed a women in fisheries network of the Netherlands. We had called it *VinVis* (see *Yemaya* No.4, August 2000 and *Yemaya* No.8, December 2001). In the first year of our existence we had been struggling to find a common orientation and, at the same time, to fight responses of cynicism, paternalism, or just ignorance from the fisher community itself.

Last June *VinVis* completed its second year of existence. We feel it has been a very good year, a year of stabilizing and gaining recognition. And a year of exploring our role in fisheries. At present we welcome new women to our network at every meeting.

One important event that helped the *VinVis* network find its orientation and direction, was the role women of the network played during the cod crisis in early 2001. At that time the Dutch fishing community was disproportionately affected by the decision of the European Union to close large parts of the fishing grounds in the North Sea to protect the codfish from depletion (see *Samudra* No.28, April 2001). Government and public opinion was strongly influenced by the environmental lobby and there was little sympathy for the plight of the Dutch fishermen. The women of *VinVis* felt that their first priority was to protect the future of the Dutch fisher community that suffered from internal divisions, a poor public image and a lack of perspective about the future.

Another event that facilitated this process of orientation was the launching of the so-called Green Paper by the European Union to review its Common Fisheries Policy. All stakeholders were invited to respond to this. The women of *VinVis* studied and discussed the Green Paper together and were the first from the Dutch fisher community to come up with a response. This act

encouraged a group of young fishermen, among them the husbands of the *VinVis* women, also to respond. Both these responses were later adopted by the national Dutch Fishermen's Union and found broad support among the Dutch fisher community.

In November 2001, a symposium was organized by the Dutch fishermen's organization with the title "What is your opinion about the future of the Dutch cutter-fishery". Normally only fishermen would participate in such meetings, but, at the request of *VinVis*, the wives of fishermen were also invited. Many, both men and women, responded to the invitation. It was clear that there was a broadly felt need in the community to reflect about the future. Discussions were very constructive and both men and women expressed great concern about social and environmental issues and their willingness to work for a fishery with a future. After a long time the 'community feeling' was back again. And, for the first time, wives of fishermen were accepted as partners in a fisheries discussion.

This new visibility gained by the wives of fishermen was the reason why *VinVis* was approached by the media. We knew that we had to be very careful. We first gave an interview to the national fisheries paper. An article in this paper, which is found on the table of every fisher household, was seen as an opportunity to explain our mission to the community. When we asked to see the draft article, we were alarmed to read the typical woman-stereotype jargon in the article. Fortunately, the journalist was cooperative and after about three or four revisions (!), we finally felt it could be published.

When other media persons approached *VinVis*, we discovered that whilst the journalist of the fisheries paper had seen women of fisher households as plain housewives, the other journalists were only interested in hearing about women who go fishing out at sea. This meeting with the media led to an animated discussion amongst us about the kind of role/ image of women of fisher households we wanted to show to the public. This again facilitated a reflection and awareness process among the women of *VinVis*.

In exploring women's roles in fisheries, the women of *VinVis* became more aware of the value of their contribution, and of their potential. The women

continued to approach the Dutch fishermen's organizations, expressing their sincere interest and concern about the future of the Dutch fisher community. As a result, they were invited frequently for meetings and given information. *VinVis* also got a special niche on the website of the national fishermen's organizations and in the national fisheries paper. Women of *VinVis* regularly write the column "Diary of a fisherman's wife". It looks as if women have finally got into the world of the fishermen. Wives of fishermen are more and more mentioned in reports and documents as a group that deserves to be heard. And more and more women speak up.



The women of *VinVis* took up a role, which was new for the community. They began participating in public meetings on issues that affect the future of Dutch fisheries. In these meetings they met with officials of various Ministries, with environmental activists, with other stakeholders using coastal resources. They were confronted with different ideas and perspectives. Quite often, the women of *VinVis* were the only spokespersons of their community at these meetings. As long as they went as a group, they felt encouraged. In this way, opportunities were created for issues

important to their community to become part of the socio-political dialogue and for women to broaden their own perspective.

Through the ICSF *VinVis* was introduced to other fisherwomen's organizations in Europe. They learned about fisheries and, in particular, about the role of fisherwomen in other European countries. On 20 November 2001, they collectively presented a list with issues of concern to women in European fisheries to the European parliament (see *Yemaya*, No 8). This was a unique event.

The recognition that the women of *VinVis* have received in their role as advocates of the fisher community and the appreciation they receive for this from the community, has strengthened their self-confidence. They do not, any more, hide their ambition to gain knowledge and skills and even a more equal partnership in the fishing enterprise. They feel less inhibited now to raise issues in the community, that are controversial but need to be addressed for the sake of the future of the community, such as the relationship between boat-owners and crew, (un)sustainable fishing practices and internal divisions within the community. They also feel less reluctant now to publicly confront men of their community who tend to stereotype women, and they can even expect the support of other men in this. The *VinVis* network has proved to be an important base on which women of fisher communities have been given the opportunity to develop skills, knowledge and insights. Crucial for its existence has been the finding of a common orientation and the opportunity to set its own agenda and priorities.

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