

Europe/ Belgium

Needed: A sea change

Intervention of the Spanish delegation, comprising Ms. Carmen Pechero Cacho of Asociación Galega de Mariscadoras (AGAMAR) and Ms. Isabel Otero of Estela do Mar, in the European Parliament, Fisheries Committee Meeting, 20 November 2001

AGAMAR is an organization representing the *mariscadoras* (women shellfish harvesters) of the Galician region in North Spain. Till last year there were 12,000 members, 90 per cent of whom were women who gathered shellfish on foot. However, nearly 50 per cent left the sector due to changes in the social security system. Contributions have been substantially increased, and most people cannot afford to pay. Whilst the work is full time, there are only 6-9 months of the year where an income is possible. The other months involve such unpaid work as cleaning the shellfish, maintaining the equipment, cleaning the beaches etc. This means that earnings over the year are low, but the work itself constitutes a full time job. Weather conditions in the last 12 months, combined with industrial and urban pollution, have also had a devastating impact on the fishery for shellfish. This also contributed to women leaving the sector.

Estela do Mar is an organization of fishermen's wives who work to defend the rights of fishermen to safe and fair working conditions, and to reconcile life at sea with life at home. Literally *Estella do Mar* means "Wake of the Sea", i.e. the trace that the vessel leaves behind it. Whilst the right of Spanish fishermen to work is recognized, their rights to a fair salary and basic standards of safety and working conditions are not. In recent years despite huge investments of EU monies for modernizing the Spanish fishing fleet, with many improvements in fishing capacity, navigational capability and quality of on-board storage, living and working conditions of the crew are as bad as they were 20 years ago.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning!

To begin with, perhaps we should explain why we, two women, from *Estela do Mar* and from the Galician Association of Women Shellfish Harvesters (AGAMAR), are here. We are sorry to say that our presence has nothing to do with any information sent to us by the Committee to inform us that this meeting was taking place.

We are women directly involved with work at sea, in shellfish harvesting and in defending the rights and quality of the living and working conditions of fishermen. We belong to women's organizations that are concerned with fisheries. But neither of us received any notification at all through the formal channels that, here in Brussels, discussions would be taking place on fisheries and its many associated problems, amongst which are several that concern us in our lives as shellfish harvesters and as wives of fishermen.

Somehow the information flows emanating from the Committee have been hijacked, so that news about issues that affect us, does not reach us. Luckily for us, an NGO, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), informed us, and it is thanks to them that we are here.

So the first point that the Committee needs to take on board is that the information it produces does not reach us. Immediate action must, therefore, be taken to remedy this situation as it affects our rights to receive information on issues that directly affect our lives as women from coastal communities.

But we don't want to waste time with complaints, but rather to get on to the issues that we want to communicate to the Committee. We would like to tell you, first of all, about our perceptions and about the afflictions we suffer as women shellfish harvesters.

The situation facing women shellfish harvesters in Galicia, Spain is becoming increasingly critical. In the last year and a half, 6000 women shellfish harvesters have had to give up their work. The withdrawal of the administration, the costs of social security, the pollution of the *rias* (estuaries), and bad weather have been a disaster for the sector.

It is a sector where 90 per cent of us are women who gather shellfish on foot. We lack information, adequate training, guidance and the specific support required to sustain a professional sector. We lack information, and of course the possibility to participate in decision-making processes that directly affect our lives as fishworkers.



A social focus is lacking and a sea change is needed: information must be channelled directly to fishworkers, and frameworks for participation and aid must be established that favour us directly. Mechanisms must be established *in situ* to verify that genuine communication is taking place.

As wives of fishermen and fishworkers, we also demand that the Committee adopts a social focus. Labour laws and fishworkers rights must be respected and complied with, and substantial improvements made in their on-board living conditions. We need a social focus to the policy objectives of the Committee, and control mechanisms in place to ensure that these policies are really implemented.

European aid should be made conditional on respecting the working rights of fishworkers, with monies being used to improve their on-board living conditions. Aid monies should not be used up on technical and commercial aspects, putting aside workers' rights and their on-board living conditions for another day.

In brief, mechanisms for informing, communicating and participating must be improved. An environmental focus is needed to defend the sustainability and healthy quality of our resources. And a paradigm shift is required to favour the rights and interests of those (men and women) who work at sea.

Many thanks.