

Revive, Renew and Re-launch!

AKTEA, the European Network of Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture, meets to revitalize the network to face current challenges

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AKTEA is the European network of women in fisheries and its main objective is to lobby at European Union level for women rights in fisheries. It was established in 2006 by fisherwomen organisations from different European countries who collectively volunteered to take this movement forward. For several years AKTEA was unable to organise its annual meeting due to lack of financial resources, amongst other reasons. In February 2020, however, the network was able to meet thanks to the partnership collaboration established with Low Impact Fishers in Europe (LIFE) and the financial support provided by the MAVA foundation. This two-day meeting, which was attended by 40 women from across nine European Union (EU) Member States, served to initiate the revival and re-launch of AKTEA. The AKTEA meeting is recognized as an event of capacity-building as part of the GFCM-FAO SSF University initiative, which is designed to build capacity of small-scale fishers and fish workers on select topics, to share knowledge and to promote the exchange of best practices throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea region.

The meeting focused on various themes including (i) issues related to women's activities in fisheries, (ii) how to overcome the current difficulties of the network, and (iii) a focus on AKTEA's main future objective. The meeting was hosted partly at the European Economic and Social Committee building and attended by a number of members of the European Parliament and the European Commission, and for which the EU Commissioner provided a video speech stating that women should be part of EU fisheries policies. During this meeting, AKTEA, with the support of LIFE, held an information session about EU institutions to raise awareness about men and women's rights and claims as they currently stand in EU policies. The successive sessions involved a discussion between women who exchanged experiences from their different organizations, or countries, and conversed on their aspirations of the AKTEA network.

Women from the Mediterranean (Croatia, Cyprus, Malta, Spain) exchanged views with women of Atlantic (Spain, Azores islands, France, The Netherlands, Ireland) on their contribution in fisheries. They came from different

backgrounds, and collectively represented the various pre-harvesting, harvesting and post-harvesting activities which women participate in. These include net mending, fisheries, shellfish, seaweed harvesting to fishmonger or fish direct sales, tourism and other activities. Some were vessels owners and working on board of fishing vessels, others managing the family fisheries enterprises and working either with their spouse or their sons or daughters. Not all women claimed remuneration for their work. The diverse of activities practiced in different contexts evoked curiosity across the regions, with women wanting to learn more about what each of them was doing, what their problems were, and what opportunities they had in their countries. This conversation was crucial since despite the EU being a common political unit, women's situations and realities are determined by national policies and politics. Sometimes, what is possible in one country can be impossible in another. For example, selling fish directly to consumers is possible in France, Malta and Portugal but not permitted in Spain and Greece. Net mending is a paid job for women in Spain particularly in Galicia, but in other countries, it is recognized as a support/assistance which women carry out 'for free' for the family enterprise. Combination of activities may also be observed - women can be managers but also work on fisheries vessels with their husband (Malta and Croatia), or sell fish, or conduct auxiliary work such as promoting and selling touristic excursions which their husbands conduct in parallel with fishing activities. In some cases, women are vessel owners, fully responsible for the operations and book-keeping of their enterprise. Although the women in the room had different perceptions about their place in the fishing sector, they shared the view that their contribution was not well recognized. As one Spanish woman highlighted, "We are experts without recognition."

The participation of women on board fishing vessels varied across the different countries, and within the same country. In the room, we had a nice mix of individuals with different experiences either as owners or crew. Two of the vessel owners from Spain (Valencia) and Portugal (Azores Islands) worked exclusively with women on board. Some others worked alone, and some with their families



AKTEA meeting, Brussels, Belgium, 26 February 2020. This meeting, which was attended by 40 women from across nine European Union (EU) Member States, served to initiate the revival and re-launch of AKTEA.

(Andalusia, Croatia, Malta). Women's work on fishing vessels seemed important in some countries, and this participation depended on personal choices based on historical roots in fisheries. A woman from Spain explained that her ancestors and immediate family (brothers, uncles, cousins) worked in the fishing sector, so it was only natural for her to also go into fishing. A French woman explained that she first worked as a crew member and then decided to buy a fishing vessel and work on her own. Another established herself as a fisher promoting small-scale fisheries produce to tourists and schools' children. Two women became fishers to carry on the family enterprise after respectively being divorced and widowed. Two others worked with their husbands; one through the year (Croatia) and the second only during the peak period -- especially during the migratory species season (Malta). The Croatian woman received a salary but the woman from Malta did not, explaining that it had been difficult for her husband to remain a fisher, and she gives a hand to ensure that the family tradition is continued.

Some women were also involved in shellfish gathering and seaweed harvesting by foot, mainly on the Atlantic coastline. A French woman from Brittany, was engaged in seaweed harvesting and explained that her job was not only to 'gather and dry' the seaweed along with her spouse, but also to find clients, and deliver the product to the local processing industry. Apart from the productive work to harvest marine products, the shellfish gatherers also contributed to the maintenance of coastal ecosystem and cleaning of the beaches, including collecting green algae in the sea to avoid blooms, and to protect the beaches.

The quest for clients was typical for women engaged in marketing the fish products of their enterprises. This was another task in which women excel. In areas located far from urban markets (islands in Ireland) or in countries such as Cyprus where fish is a scarce commodity, establishing clientele and guaranteeing a good distribution of fish to the local society was considered important. In Malta, selling fish in the streets or in hawkers' markets was a

traditional activity mostly done by women, usually fishers' wives, who went to the national fish auction daily at 4 AM to buy fish, and sell in different villages using small refrigerated vans.

During the summer period many small-scale fishers from the Mediterranean Sea engaged in auxiliary activities, mostly related to tourism. Women from Spain and Cyprus explained the various types of fishing-related tourism that they have developed in their fishing harbours, including on-board fishing trips and 'fish cooking' after the trip. Shellfish harvesters and net makers from Galicia had also developed activities related to tourism, including onshore visits, production of bag and "faux bijoux" from recycled material, and tour-trails promoting fishing activities along the Galicia coastline, predominantly initiated and operated by women. These diversification strategies elicited interest from other women at the meeting who were considering new activities as alternative source of income in areas where small scale fishers were finding it difficult to survive in full-time fisheries. In exchanging knowledge about the different activities, the conversation focused on three main factors: (i) the type of activities taking place, (ii) the marketing procedure involved to promote the new activity, and (iii) the national and European assistance (funding) that the women had benefited from to launch their activities. Exchange of this knowledge was a central point of this interesting discussion that could benefit many women in the room as well as their women colleagues back home and help launch new initiatives their homeports.

Although AKTEA has been formed as an organization of organizations, not all the women attending the Revive and Relaunch AKTEA hailed from national organizations of fisherwomen. Women professional fishers are members of organisations or cooperatives representing fisheries industry either as individuals (France, Portugal, Malta, Cyprus, Croatia, Spain) or as organisations as is the case of Galician shellfish gatherers. However, the importance of organizations and their role in providing women with rights and benefits was

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A group photo of AKTEA meeting, Brussel, Belgium. Participants from countries without national organisations decided it was time to act at the national or regional levels to establish their own representation.

highlighted, especially by the Spanish women who had a long experience in organizing. An interesting example was of shellfish gatherers and net menders who managed to secure access to social welfare benefits (maternity leave, retirement pension), thanks to their organizational capacity. Professional fisherwomen (owners or crew), and seaweed and shellfish gatherers from other countries in the region had gained access to social benefits like their male counterparts. Women and men in paid employment accessed the same social benefits and rights, including the right to be part of fishers' organisations, and receive training.

Discrimination within organizations was mentioned as an issue, though not however, across the region. Discussions at the meeting on this issue were long and sometimes conflicted as women undergoing discrimination sought to raise awareness about the realities and reasons. The debate showed that male attitudes were different from place to place. Some women professionals said that while doing the same jobs as men they did not face any discrimination. Discrimination and negative attitudes of men towards women were found in instances where women were in the lead in organisations of men and women. All participants agreed that women should be members of local/national fishworker

organisation, while also creating their own women's organisations to fight for their specific rights.

Within this context, participants decided that the AKTEA network should continue its activities and lobby for women interests at the EU level. The inclusion of the gender dimension in EU policies was seen as a necessity and priority for women. Women organised at national levels consider EU-level organising important to influence EU policies. Participants from countries without national organisations decided it was time to act at the national or regional levels to establish their own representation. For example, women from the Mediterranean region were convinced about the necessity to build their own network at regional and, if possible, national levels.

Participants decided to create two working groups (i) on the future of AKTEA and (ii) on women's participation in the decision-making. Sandra Amézaga Menéndez was nominated to take over the responsibility of communications from Marja Bekendam, the outgoing chairperson of AKTEA, who was moving on to new responsibilities. Participants also thanked Marja Bekendam, for all the excellent work and effort she had invested in the network over the past 10 years. ❏