



EUROPE



# WOMEN IN FISHERIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## Abstract

Women in Europe were known to have participated actively in the fishing sector since the 19th Century. Statistics collected from the European Union showed that women participate actively in fish processing activities, followed by marine aquaculture, marine fishing and inland aquaculture. Even in the European Union, where women have greater basic human rights than their counterparts from developing countries, the former to a large extent still play an invisible and subservient role and are largely excluded in fisheries management systems.

## Introduction

The subordinate status of women in the western world originated from the Greek and Roman civilizations when women were relegated to roles in the home and were responsible for child-bearing, while men took over public responsibilities (Rodda 1993). It was not until the 19th century that women took active actions against their subservient status and sought fairer treatment through women's movements. Women in Europe were known to have participated actively in the fishing sector as far back as the 19th century. They worked in the fish processing factories, and during the peak of the herring industry provided the much-needed labor. Apart from processing, women were known to work also as fishmongers. However, women's role in the fishing industry apparently has not changed much with time and till today their presence is still felt predominantly in these two areas. An attempt is made here to provide some statistics on women in fisheries and to highlight some gender issues in some European Union (EU) countries.

## Women participation in fisheries

Statistics from the EU showed that of the various fishing sectors, participation of women (in terms of number) was greatest in fish processing followed by marine aquaculture, marine fishing and inland aquaculture, with no women involved in inland fishing (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Participation of women in the various fishing sectors in the EU.**

Sector	Total no. of fishers	Total no. of women	% women
Marine fishing	214,000	12,840	6
Fish processing	89,500	52,805	59
Marine aquaculture	50,300	14,084	28
Inland aquaculture	11,500	1,725	15
Inland fishing	9,500	0	0
Others	112,000	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>486,800</b>	<b>81,454</b>	<b>16.7</b>

Statistics collected in 1997 from the fish processing industry in various EU countries showed that Italy has the highest percentage of women workers (87%) followed by Portugal (75%), France (68%), Germany (55%) and Sweden (52%), while the United Kingdom (51%), Belgium (55%), Spain (55%), Netherlands (61%) and Greece (68%) have a higher percentage of men than women involved in this sector. A survey carried out on women in five EU countries that are involved in marine aquaculture showed that Greece has the highest percentage of females (50%) in the mariculture industry, followed by Finland (30%), France (23%), United Kingdom (15%) and Spain (7%). In the academic field, a study carried out in the Institute of Aquaculture in Stirling, Scotland showed that more than 80% of the professional staff are men, while women dominate in the technical and administrative fields.

## Gender Issues

A few surveys carried out in the EU on women and fisheries indicate that inequality between men and women is still rife. Men dominate the EU Consultative Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture, which comprises a group of mainly big fishing industries (Gorez 2000). In spite of their involvement in the fisheries sector, women of fishing families in the Netherlands are not members of fishers' organizations mainly because membership is based on boat ownership and it is primarily the men who own the fishing boats (Quist 2000). A survey (quoted from Quist 2000) carried out in 1999 by the Research Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery in the Netherlands indicated that:

- Although women participate actively in activities (administration, book-keeping, accounts, auctions) related to the fisheries sector, only a few are involved with actual fishing;
- About 60% of the women are involved in decision-making regarding investments, finances and labor for the fishing enterprise;
- Despite their participation, women do not receive a salary nor are they insured;
- Although many women have interests in fisheries policies, only a few women have accompanied their husbands to meetings in fishers' organizations;
- All the women interviewed agreed that it is not easy for a woman to enter fishers' organizations since they are seen as predominately controlled by men, and their husbands did not like them to be present in the meetings.

Subsequent to this survey, women were invited to meetings called by fishers' organizations. They have since contributed actively to the meetings and there is unanimous agreement to conduct a study on the role of women in fisheries.

A study carried out in Northern Europe described by Jentoft (1999) on the role of women in fishing communities under pressure showed that during times of crisis, women's roles were not restricted to the household and their husband's fishing enterprise. They also took on a role in the community, keeping it together and maintaining the spirit and life's meaning during the difficult times. Despite their contribution to the fisheries sector, women's issues, interests and knowledge are disregarded in fisheries management systems; Jentoft attributed the cause to the absence of women in management who have no one to raise issues specific to them.

## Conclusion

Even in the EU where women have greater basic human rights than their counterparts from developing countries, the former to a large extent still play an invisible and subservient role and are largely excluded in fisheries management systems. To ensure sustainability of development projects and fairness to women, more recognition should be given to them for their role and contribution to the fisheries sector.

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