

# Coastal and fisherwomen in action!

**In Portugal, the Estrela do Mar network turns into a formal association following a two-day training workshop**

By **Katia Frangoudes** (Katia.Frangoudes@neuf.fr), facilitator of the AKTEA network, Member, ICSF  
**Maria do Céu Baptista** (mr\_baptista@yahoo.com), charter member of Estrela do Mar, independent adviser at Mútua dos Pescadores, and **Marja Bekendam** (akteawif@outlook.com), chair of the AKTEA network

For more than ten years, Portuguese fisherwomen had been members of Estrela do Mar (Sea Star), an informal network under the umbrella of Mútua dos Pescadores, a specialized insurance company, registered as a co-operative, for fisheries and maritime activities. The fisherwomen decided to work together as part of an informal network to get to know each other before establishing a formal association. In this period, Estrela do Mar was able to successfully promote fisherwomen rights within the fisheries sector. Their presence was acknowledged in all projects promoted by Mútua dos Pescadores as helping to build a strong *esprit de corps* within the informal structure.

The first steps toward building the network were taken in 2002 by Cristina Moço, Director of Department of Social Action and Training at Mútua dos Pescadores, within the framework of a European project for the establishment of fisherwomen organisations in Europe. The project helped Portuguese fisherwomen learn from the experiences of other fisherwomen in Europe and establish their own informal network, later named Estrela do Mar. In 2006, Estrela do Mar joined AKTEA—the network of fisherwomen's organisations in the European Union. Estrela do Mar was one of the first groups to integrate with the Regional Advisory Council (RAC) of South Atlantic and to participate in the decision making process of fisheries management in the region. More

recently, efforts were undertaken at regional levels, facilitated by Maria Baptista and Marta Pita under the banner of Mútua dos Pescadores, to help transform the network into an association. This effort through meetings and discussions of the fisherwomen was possible with official co-financing from European funds through their PROMAR (Fisheries Operational Programme 2007 to 2013) programme.

On 19 September 2014, 35 fisherwomen representatives from five Portuguese regions met at IPMA (the Portuguese Institute of the Sea and Atmosphere) in Algés near Lisbon, to adopt the by-laws of the network, soon to become a formal association. The meeting presented the charter the challenges ahead to various representatives of unions and of political parties, to the Adviser of the President of the Republic, and to representatives of the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment, who had all been invited to the event.

Estrela do Mar is active in bringing together women working as fishers, spouses of fishers playing an active role in the family business, net menders, shellfish gatherers on foot and boat, small-scale fish vendors, managers in the sector, factory workers, and workers at fishers associations. The association also has members from local coastal associations for culture and development. It sees its primary role during the present economic crisis as being able to maintain fisheries activity at the community level, while simultaneously bringing in a gender perspective. These issues were discussed and highlighted at the meeting in September.

BRUNO COSTA



Participants at the national level meeting of Estrela do Mar (Sea Star). Estrela do Mar were able to successfully promote fisherwomen rights within the fisheries sector and their presence was acknowledged in all projects promoted by Mútua dos Pescadores

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AKTEA network also participated in this meeting and explained the role it plays for the promotion of the gender dimension in the fisheries at the European level.

On the following day, women participants met in smaller groups as well as in the plenary to prepare the Plan of Activities to be taken up by the Board of the Association. The discussions helped participants articulate their own needs, listen to their regional needs of their neighbours, and finally, to find a national resonance of a common shared agenda.

There is the need to improve women's knowledge and skills. During the present economic crisis, women are looking to find new jobs, and also improve their qualifications to sustain their livelihoods. Women are even prepared to train to become crew aboard fishing vessels. The availability of women as potential crew members can present a solution for artisanal boats (small-scale fishers) facing difficulties to recruit crew.

Caring and raising children is mainly women's work and their ability to work on fishing boats would depend on the family's capacity to take care of the children when they are away. Nurseries within the communities need to respond to women's changing needs, for example, to factor into the daily routine the impact of tides, craft might have to leave shore and return to shore on high tide. Separate toilets and showers for women are important when working on larger fishing craft out at sea for long periods. Many women drew attention to the lack of these facilities not only on craft but even in harbours.

Specific attention has to be paid to needs of old women, widows and elderly people facing difficulties because of low social security coverage and small pension entitlements. Houses for elderly people could be established within fisheries communities.

There is need to strongly defend the fisheries activity. The consumption of wild fish instead of fish grown through aquaculture should be promoted; otherwise it will be more and more difficult for fishers to earn their livelihood. Portugal's consumers are currently able to access fish produced through aquaculture as well as imported fish.

This has to be regulated if the fisheries are to survive.

Women net menders from the town of Peniche asked for better working conditions, in clean surroundings—safe from rain, wind and hard sun. They stressed the need to open this activity to women coming in from other harbours; some of the net menders volunteered to train newcomers.

Traditional lace making, which produces *renda de bilros* or bobbin lace, common in Peniche and also in Vila do Conde, is an example of alternative source of income. After the meeting, women lace-makers showed their products. A first prototype of their logo—a fish star—was shown. It was discussed that this could be used as a gift or a form of raising money for the association. Preserving cultural and other values of fisheries communities and transmitting these to the next generation is seen as a common duty. Preserving stories, songs, plays, and dialects as a form of maintaining and continuing social identity and coherence is considered a necessity by the women.

As a network they expressed willingness to contribute to the maintenance of this common heritage. The promotion of the fisheries heritage at a community level also means the preservation of the local art of wooden boat building, which is often beach-specific and adapted to the specificity of the coastal waters or natural harbours. The women not only used these boats to fish or collect shells, but also decorated them on the days of their patron saints—the Senhora das Dores (Lady of Pain), the Senhora da Agonia (Lady of Agony), and so on.

Portuguese law demands that a national association like Estrela do Mar should have at least 1000 members before its opinions are formally taken into account. This is a high target and requires a lot of work at the regional level. For this reason it is important that the Board and the members are supported to meet regularly through well-designed workshops. The association expressed the hope that it would continue to receive support in this endeavour from the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment. ❏