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Hearing on "Women and the sustainable development of fisheries areas" (organised by the Fisheries Committee of the European Parliament)

**Brussels, 1 December 2010**

Madam Chair, Honourable Members, ladies and gentlemen,

Last March, the Commission adopted the Women's Charter to reinforce its commitment to promoting equality between women and men in all EU policy areas. In September this year, the Commission adopted a comprehensive EU gender equality strategy to implement the Charter's objectives for the upcoming 5 years.

Today, this hearing on Women and the Sustainable Development of Fisheries comes at the right time – and fits in perfectly with recent Commission's endeavours. I would like to thank you for organising this event and for giving me the opportunity to express myself on this issue.

In general, I intend to make sure that the principles laid down in the Charter will flow through my entire field of responsibility – as regards both fisheries and maritime affairs.

Today's hearing, however, focuses on fisheries – and so will I.

Indeed, promoting women's equality in this field is not just a question of social fairness: it is also indispensable to improve living standards in coastal regions and to reach our goal of a smart, green and above all inclusive growth by the year 2020.

I will therefore talk to you briefly of today's role of women in fisheries, and especially in the sustainable development of fisheries.

I will then move on to the actions we are planning for the near future to give women a primary role in our policy.

Women already play an important role in the fisheries sector. In the EU well over one hundred thousand women are employed in the fisheries sector – which is to say about a quarter of the sector's workforce. This involvement varies greatly across sub sectors – barely 4% are women in the catching sector, but in aquaculture they are 31% and in the processing sector 56%.

Yet these figures fail to acknowledge a number of important factors.

- Firstly, many women are "invisible" to statistics because they work in the family business but are not officially employed, nor do they benefit from social security - not to mention some of the net menders and shellfish gatherers, who often work under very precarious terms.
- Secondly, what these figures don't tell us is that too often women carry out low-grade, unskilled tasks; and that their access to decision-making, for instance on resource management or fishing rights issues, tends to be very limited.
- Finally, the figures do not show the invaluable contribution women bring to the socio-economic fabric of local fishing communities.

This last point is quite relevant for our discussion today – so let me elaborate on it.

We talk a lot about smart growth and innovation these days. In fisheries, you will find that women often diversify and add value to the work of fishing communities.

For example, they devise new ways to process or market products, or they will venture into alternative businesses associated with fish.

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, women innovate.

I could give you many examples of such smart, women-led initiatives: women who develop small-scale processing units to obtain high-end products which they sell for higher prices; or they find direct-sale solutions which keep the fish within the community; they run seafood restaurants and catering services; they organise visits to shellfish farms or thematic coastal walks.... And so on.

Just only two weeks ago, at the Commission's CFP Reform Conference ("Another Future For Fisheries") we learned about a group of women in Galicia who decided to do something about the bad state of the goose barnacle stock which was due to the non-respect of catch ceilings etc. The two women who presented their project were goose barnacle gatherers themselves. Facing these disadvantages day by day, they took the initiative to found an association and dedicate their work on regulating and controlling the market price of the mussels by themselves together with the regional ministry. This is a very good example for a smart and innovative initiative led by women.

This kind of small-scale, high added-value projects is precisely what the European Fisheries Fund aims to support in its axis 4.

Thanks to this funding chapter, women and women's organisations can get involved into local partnerships which design and implement local development strategies according to a bottom-up approach.

They can also make use of funds to add value to local fisheries products or to start businesses in other sectors, such as tourism, food or renewable energy. Alternatively, women can use the funds to upgrade professional skills or enhance worker adaptability and access to employment, particularly in favour of women.

Later this afternoon another woman, Monica Burch from the Support Unit of the European Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET), will present the opportunities offered by axis 4 of the EFF in greater detail.

For now, I'd like to underline that gender equality is one of the overarching principles of the European Fisheries Fund. Member States have to make sure to support projects which enhance women's participation in the fisheries sector and the development of fishing communities.

Besides axis 4 of the EFF, also axes 3 and 5 provide support for measures of common interest, such as networking and exchange of best practices among organizations promoting equal opportunities between women and men as well as awareness-raising.

So much for the situation today!

Let's now turn to the future, and to how we plan to tackle this lack of visibility and recognition of women and build up their role in the fisheries sector. There are actually quite a few things we can do.

- One: I think we need to encourage the creation of women's organizations at local, regional and European level. In many Member States informal groups have already greatly benefitted the sector and coastal communities with their work.

Spain is a very good example. They recently created an official network of women in the Spanish fisheries sector. Mr. Gonzalez Serrano will tell us all about it later on, but I wish to use this opportunity to personally congratulate the Spanish General Secretariat of the Sea for this initiative.

I want to encourage Member States to follow the Spanish example and create similar networks elsewhere. Once they are up and running, we might even envisage a European Network of women active in fisheries and coastal regions, to exchange best practices and improve awareness and visibility.

- Two: Member States are currently evaluating the implementation of the European Fisheries Fund. How much support has been granted for initiatives run by women, or directed at women? To what extent has the Fund been used to promote equal opportunities so far? The evaluation - due for June 2011 - will tell us.

From its outcome, we will draw lessons on how we can reinforce gender mainstreaming in the future funding instrument - after 2013.

- Three: in the coming months we are launching a new study on employment and the role of women in the fisheries sector and coastal regions.

The results of both the evaluation and the study will be the subject of a conference we plan to hold in the second half of 2011.

This event will also provide a platform to discuss experiences to date and to explore how existing informal women's networks at regional, national and European level, such as AKTEA, can be given more prominence. AKTEA will give a presentation here today as well.

In a same vein, I will encourage the creation of similar networks in other sectors of the maritime economy.

- Four: with axis 4 we realised that, if given the opportunity, women do actually make use of the EFF. We want to build on that from now on, and tap into the huge potential women carry to contribute to the sustainable development of Europe's fisheries areas.
- Five: we have already made sure women are represented in all Regional Advisory Councils. We have involved women in our reflection on the Reform of the CFP and have made sure women's groups are represented in all relevant events and consultations – such as the one held two weeks ago.

My services are now examining the possibility of organising specific workshops on the role of women in fisheries; we are also looking at ways to showcase and mainstream best projects in which women participate.

- Six: The FARNET Support Unit has started to include gender issues into its work on diversification and local governance. They have already set up a discussion group on women in fisheries on their web forum. This provides a space for networking and exchange between actors interested in issues related to women and the sustainable development of fisheries areas.

AKTEA, the European Network of Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture, is playing a key role in these discussions.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, we need to enhance the situation of women in the fisheries sector: these people work hard and yet there is an unacceptable contradiction between the role they play in fisheries and the wealth they generate on one hand and the social recognition and lack of access to social benefits they get on the other hand.

As a Commissioner - and as a woman- I feel I need to do all I can to redress this imbalance.

Luckily, the upcoming reform of the Common Fisheries Policy offers me a good opportunity to do so once and for all. As you know, I plan – among others - to decentralise decision-making and to empower the people who work in the sector.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, means to also empower women.

Thank you for your attention.