

↳ Christophe, sailor on the *Chti'Breizh*, prepares four-metre-long fishing nets to throw into the water.  
Photo: © Sadak Souici



# The brave women of the fishing industry

With its division of tasks, still highly gender-based — the men on the boats and the women working in bookkeeping, sales and fish processing — the sector is struggling to rid itself of its masculine image and culture. But there have been campaigns to highlight women's contribution, and they are making progress. From fishing to filleting, we report from Lorient, one of France's largest fishing ports, alongside these forgotten workers.

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When the *Chti'Breizh* returns from its day at sea after a long week stuck in the harbour, the halo of golden light around its crew might suggest to the three bystanders, hanging around by crane No.1 in the auction market, a spirit of euphoria due to a good catch. But on deck, there is no joy in the weary expressions. Didier unties the rope to moor the boat, while 22-year-old Théo stands ready to pile up the 15 or so crates in which, under a pile of ice, the fruits of the day's labour can be seen. "What a life!" he exclaims, his face veiled behind the smoke from his cigarette. And then, in a less pessimistic tone, he says: "60 kilograms of fish. Just about enough." In the cabin, Anne Le Strat scans the quay and turns the rudder slightly. She is the only fisherwoman in Lorient. And what is even more remarkable is that this 12 metre netter she is bringing in belongs to her. She is a fishing boat owner.

She is always the one steering the *Chti'Breizh*: when it goes out to sea at two

o'clock in the morning and when it returns, with crates of fish that are never overloaded. The perverse thing about this job is that the worse the weather is and the greater the danger, the better the fishing. This day, it is exceptionally cold: 2°C. At the start of each trip, she has to think about where she will lower her nine nets — a difficult choice, and one which can be disappointing if, after several nets are hauled in, there is nothing to show for it apart from a few jellyfish and pieces of dead fish. Anne sails for two hours on Lorient's special "highway": a route taken by a lot of boats, where visibility is down to GPS readings alone. During this time, Théo and Christophe sleep in the cabin. Their resting place is behind the navigation station, on the floor, between boxes and bottles of water, with their legs tucked in against their chests and their heads resting wherever they can. You have to squeeze in. There is a tiny area for a nap down below, but unfortunately it is next to the engine, which makes a terrible racket.

Once they have arrived in the chosen area, Anne Le Strat uses her sonar to

inspect the sea bottom. There is no guarantee that she will find exactly what she is looking for. She wakes the two sailors. After downing a quick instant coffee, they get dressed up in their gear: a yellow waxed jacket, another jacket, a scarf and some plastic gloves that do not keep you warm. That is plain to see: their hands are pink and swollen from the cold's bite. Less than five minutes after waking, they set to work and start casting the floats attached to the nets overboard. It must be six o'clock by the time all the floats are in place. Still in the cold, they clean themselves up a bit before changing. There is just time to snatch an hour's sleep before they need to get dressed again. After some complicated manoeuvring, they then use a hook to recover the floats one by one. The pulley on the side of the boat hauls in the nets. One of the sailors removes the fish and starts sorting them, while the other stows the nets in big chests. "When we go out, we never know whether we'll bring any fish back." And here is the proof: out of nine nets, two have produced nothing. You can read the disappointment

on the sailors' faces, and it is the owner who has to take responsibility. What is more, the fish has to be in perfect condition: if the tiniest fin is missing, the fish is unsaleable. That is when the laborious stage of sorting, species identification and cleaning begins. The boat makes the return journey in the early afternoon, after the crew have grabbed a sandwich or some stewed fruit. Anne switches on the self-navigation system, leaves the machines to the senior sailor and allows herself one hour's rest before they reach Lorient and she takes the helm again. Here, everyone knows the crop-haired female skipper.

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*"When we go out, we never know whether we'll bring any fish back."*

↳ Anne Le Strat, 38 years old, captain of the *Chti'Breizh*.  
Photo: © Sadak Souici



↓ In the mending room at the Professional Maritime and Aquaculture School of Étrel, where students learn to repair nets.  
Photo: © Sadak Souici



## 64 women to 4 736 men

The presence of women in the industry is rare in the extreme. In Brittany, the primary fishing region in France, there were 64 women in 2017. Five in middle-water fishing, with trips lasting from 10 to 15 days, seven in deep-sea fishing, where expeditions can last several months, 46 in small-scale fishing and six in coastal fishing. This is compared with a total of 4 736 men, according to a report by FranceAgriMer (the French Government's agriculture and sea products agency), which has carried out one of the very few studies on the place of women in this trade. Katia Frangoudes, a researcher at the University of Western Brittany specialising in gender issues in the maritime sector, complains about the lack of interest politicians show in research on women in the fishing industry. Because, with no precise data on their numbers, the roles they play and their economic contribution, these women have been invisible for decades. Kept away from the boats, they

unofficially handle the administrative side and are mainly present in buying and selling establishments and processing factories, where they are in the majority.

To get to her position, Anne Le Strat explains modestly that "it all happened quite naturally". But her career has been punctuated by occasions when the doors were closed in her face because she was a woman. She had to have twice the determination. After a vocational baccalaureate diploma and some experience in fishing, the birth of her daughter in 2016 prompted her to seek a less burdensome job. Her husband, Didier, is part of the crew, and he is the one who helps her when the weather is not good. For eight years, they both went out to sea, accompanied by other sailors, for a fortnight at a time. At the time, he was a fisherman too, and Anne was a mechanic on his boat. Then she moved over to oyster farming, where working days are more conventional, even though you are bent double from dawn to dusk. This is where sexism at work reared its ugly head. "I was very highly qualified,

but no one looked at my experience. It was as if I'd come straight out of maritime vocational school. I was 33, and it was very bad for my morale. When you belong to a minority, you're judged twice as harshly. I wasn't exactly bulky, and to them, with my small frame, I didn't measure up." In the end, it was the boss's partner who persuaded him to take her on. "There's no doubt that women have to make twice the effort to be accepted," confirms Sylvie Roux, the Assistant National Secretary for fisheries at the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) union.

However, at the age of 38, Anne Le Strat now has her own boat. And when the fork lift truck driver has finally shifted her crates of pollack, sea bass, ling and tope to the auction market's cold room, her husband Didier doesn't miss an opportunity to remind her: "Everything okay, Madam Owner?" She smiles, then hurries over to the office to declare her catch. The port of Lorient is the biggest in France in terms of value, at 77 million euro in 2019 and providing more than 3 000 direct jobs. Every day, at the end of the afternoon, the netters (net fishing) and the liners (line fishing) land their catch. It is the turn of the trawlers (trawl fishing) from midnight to the start of sales at four o'clock in the morning. In the meantime, all fish are identified according to species, size, weight, origin and the name of the boat in a shed staffed by about 40 employees. Yellow and blue crates progress swiftly on a conveyor belt through the next room, where the sales take place, and the one after that, where consignments are allocated to fishmongers, restaurateurs, wholesale traders and foreign buyers. For the past 15 years or so, sales of consignments have been computerised: the criers no longer shout them out, and, as for the buyers, they use remote controls, often hidden behind an elbow or under the table. This is to curb the curiosity of neighbours — mostly men, but several women are also present in the room, where 550 consignments pass through every hour. The next stage is entirely handled by men, mostly temps, who sort the consignments and lug them about ready for delivery. Tiphaine looks after logistics in a team that controls the flow of hauliers heading off for sometimes distant fishmongers' shops. She dropped off her CV one Friday, 17 years ago now. "It's a world of lunatics!" she responds, with a hint of tongue-in-cheek amusement. "From midnight to six o'clock, it's a mad rush. When I get home, I have a two-hour nap in the afternoon, and I sleep for four hours in the evening. Even when I'm on holiday, or at the weekend, I get up at five

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*"My hands, my neck, my shoulders  
and my lower back all hurt."*

1. SMIC stands for "salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance". It is the minimum hourly wage in France, below which no wage earner over 18 years old can be paid. For a European overview of the minimum wage, see [www.etui.org/Z4Y](http://www.etui.org/Z4Y).

o'clock. I can't sleep in late." "A world of lovable lunatics," adds Erwan Martineau, who is showing us around the site.

### Severe pain

"Lovable" or maybe "brave", because in this trade everyone who labours at the auction market suffers from pain. "Your body soon takes a battering," says Anne Le Strat, who once fractured a bone in her back. "Every sailor has a history of injuries to relate," but the body suffers on shore as well. Like in this filleting factory, where 12 women are busy skinning and filleting the fish. They arrive before six o'clock in the morning, to stand on the other side of some lockers and a conveyor belt in the shape of a large letter U, surrounded by continuous loud mechanical noise, without knowing when they will be

*"When you belong to a minority, you're judged twice as harshly."*

leaving. It all depends on the orders. Many of them have decades of experience, like Nathalie, who suffers from severe pain "in my muscles and my bones". Along with her, Édith is one of the most senior. She is 59, and for 39 years now she has been inserting the blade of her knife under the scales, gutting the fish and placing the product in the crates. If she is still going to be working in the afternoon, she has a one-hour lunch break. On the other hand, if there are fewer orders, and the filleters can leave before two o'clock in the afternoon, they only stop for 30 minutes at nine o'clock. No luncheon vouchers. Wages start at the SMIC.<sup>1</sup> Édith earns around 1 700 euros. "What's more, I don't like fish," she admits, giggling, in the rest room. "It's a demanding job, for sure. Even though there are a few machines, my hands, my neck, my shoulders and my lower back hurt. I've been suffering like this for at

least 20 years. Once I was sent home sick. I'd contracted sciatica and I had a slipped disc. But I didn't have an operation because people say the pain can be worse after the op. So I went to see an osteopath and that helped the pain." For them, 2020 has not offered the slightest hint of the "post-Covid world". Several employees were on short-time working. "But the work goes on, so actually we grafted even harder."

Family constraints led to Édith making harsh compromises so that she could go to work at twenty to six in the morning. Her husband, a labourer, used to leave even earlier, at three o'clock. "At first, without a childminder, I used to take my little one with me on foot at five o'clock in the morning. Then I took the other one to the day nursery. It was all a bit makeshift," Édith recalls. Sylvie Roux of the CFDT emphasises the point: "Women are mums too. Some jobs in fishing are difficult or dangerous. It isn't a choice you take lightly." So, faced with the difficulty of the job and the family compromises, what draws young people towards this activity? Even though the sector has difficulty in finding new recruits, there are 12 maritime vocational schools in France, one in Étel, 30 minutes from Lorient. It should be said that, for women, some battles have paid off. In this sphere, a particular year is anchored in the collective



↳ Seagulls fight over the pieces of rotten fish thrown into the sea by Christophe.  
Photo: © Sadak Souici

memory: 1994, the historic combat that sparked everything off.

## Longed-for freedom

In 1994, French people were suddenly confronted with a section of the population on their TVs that they had tended to forget: fishermen. There was a lot of tension in the air. Resources were growing rare between 1991 and 1992, customs barriers came down in 1993 and diesel fuel was going up in price. The atmosphere was so strained for the French fishing industry that a huge proportion of fish consumed was imported. French fishermen were no longer in a position of strength, and their production dropped markedly during this period. "All the ingredients were there for everything to be blown sky-high," recalls Sylvie Roux. She was one of the founders of the women's movement created in response to the strikes by their seafaring husbands, which led to the burning down of Brittany's Parliament in Rennes. The women gave their support and started organising themselves. "The men set up their movement, and we set up our own. We realised we weren't alone." In 1998, the European Union gave way to the demands and granted them a less-than-ideal status as "assisting spouses" to highlight all the shore-based work that went unrecognised. For the following 10 years, the tiny advances in the legislative texts grew increasingly out of step with the organisations being set up on a large scale among women, like Aktea, the first European network of women in fisheries and aquaculture.

It is clear that some young people now at the maritime school at Étrel adhere to these "feminist" convictions, without actually saying as much. This is the case with Jeanne, 17, and Pierre, 18, both of whom have been elected to the Youth Regional Council and are members of the Equality Commission. Jeanne, speaking in the mending room where students learn to repair nets, is aware of this: "In this industry, as a woman, you know that you have to hold your own against the men." Even though her results in fishing were good, she has decided to go into the business side. Mature and determined, she wants to be the pilot of a yacht, to travel, to have her own boat and enjoy a certain degree of longed-for freedom. She is one of the 10 to 15 committed women, explains Yannick Perron, head teacher of the maritime school for the past three years. "For the time being, nothing much is moving," she acknowledges, "even

though things are being done to show that everyone has his or her place in the maritime sector." Pierre, whose parents did not come from this background, is a case in point. On holiday as a little boy, he used to go fishing with the adults. He liked it. But he is under no illusions. "Between Brexit, Covid, the crisis... It's not an occupation that inspires confidence. It's better not to think about it," he tells himself. On his first fishing trip, he was so sea-sick that he lost five kilograms in five days. A lot of sailors are unwell when they are out fishing, so he

is not ashamed. In fact, several students have given up on training, but Pierre is determined to keep hanging on. What he, like Jeanne, Édith or Anne Le Strat, is calling for is a bit of recognition. "It's as though no one gives a hoot about fishing. We're ignored in both Paris and Brussels," complains Anne, back at home after her day of hard labour. Giving her baby the bottle, she recalls her trips to the European Parliament with the fisheries committee. She wanted to see the people who, in politics, are all too ready to say they are the ones "steering the ship". ●

↓ **Didier, the husband of Anne Le Strat, gives her a hand on days when the weather is bad.**  
Photo: © Sadak Souici



↓ **Édith in the filleting factory.**  
Photo: © Sadak Souici

