

Female fishers in Lake Chapala

Meet Alejandra and Maria Elena, women fishers from Mexico's Lake Chapala region, whose work contradicts the belief that fishing is something that only men can do

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Lake Chapala is the second largest lake in Mexico, and fishing has been an important economic activity in the region for hundreds of years. From colonial times to the 19th century, there was a high regional demand for fish, thanks to the region's abundant native species. The introduction of carp and tilapia forced a change in the market structure, including a shift to fish processing and other value-adding activities. Currently, women mostly engage in the task of filleting tilapia and carp. If you talk to the fishers, most will say that women don't fish in the lake; in fact, even little boys will say: "Only men go fishing, not ladies."

However, Alejandra and Maria Elena have been fishing in Lake Chapala with their husbands for years. Though they came from different communities, they learned how to fish when they got married, Alejandra in Jamay, a fishing community on the banks of Lake Chapala,

and Maria Elena in Petatán, another fishing community along the lake. Alejandra is 43 years old and has four boys and two girls, while Maria Elena is 68 years old and has nine girls and two boys. Alejandra has been fishing for about 23 years and Maria Elena for about 50. Alejandra says that in her community, Jamay, there are about six fisherwomen. Maria Elena recalls that in her youth there were only one or two women going for fishing in Patatán, but that now more women are turning to fishing with every passing day.

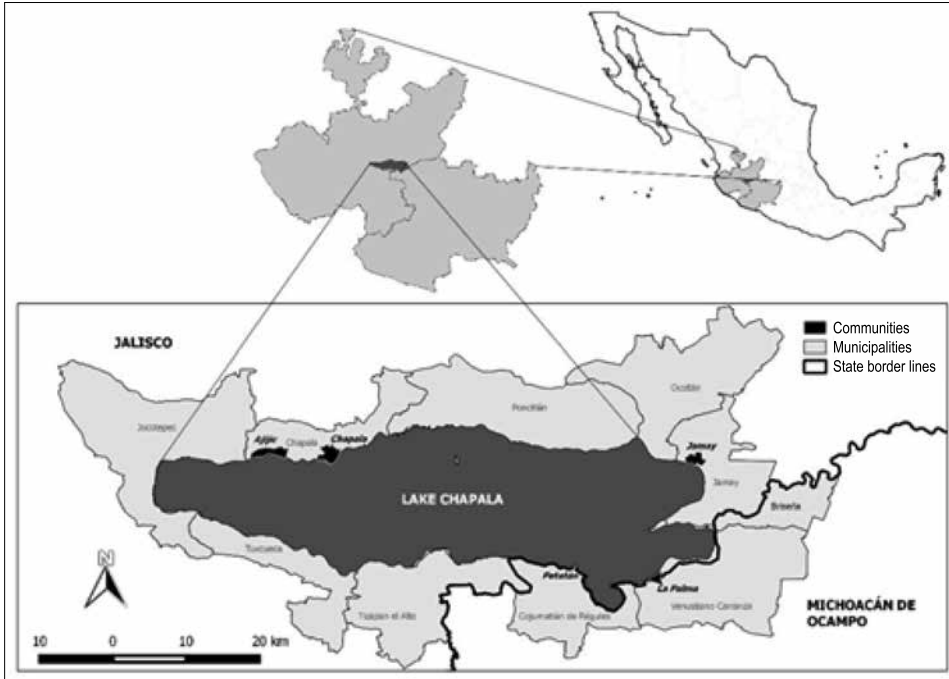
Women normally fish with their children or husbands, very rarely on their own or with another woman. "In Jamay, there are no boats that go fishing only with women on board," Alejandra explains. "Fishing is not an activity you do on your own, especially because to pull the net out of the water, it takes two people. But," she adds, "I've seen women fishing on their own in Ocotlán, with other types of nets."

Maria Elena fishes with tumbos (button set gill net). Since her husband and she are older, to take out this net and pick out the fish is not as difficult as with the manguadora, which is a small mesh, like a filtering net.

ALEJANDRA CRUZ FLORES



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The most common catch in the lake is tilapia, says Alejandra, whose typical day starts early with household chores. “We start fishing every morning by nine and continue until four or five. If the fish doesn’t come, we might stay in the lake until seven or eight at night. In the morning before going fishing, I feed my kids and take them to school. Later, my mother-in-law takes care of them.”

One of the reasons why the women go fishing is so that their husbands do not have to pay a worker to go fishing with them; thus, all the catch and earnings stay in the family and they save money, says Alejandra, “There are times when no workers can be found to accompany my husband, so I go to help and to take care of him.” On the other hand, if women go fishing it has to be with their husbands or kids, as otherwise it might be ‘seen badly by people in the community.’”

Alejandra belongs to the same fishers’ cooperative as her husband, and she says that all fisherwomen from Jamay in fact are members. Only cooperative members are legally allowed fishing permits, and so, membership provides Alejandra

legal status as well as certain cooperative benefits. María Elena, on the other hand, does not belong to any cooperative; only her husband and one of her children are members. She explains that the reason for this is that they don’t have the money needed to pay the registration fee. As a result, she misses out on the government subsidies that cooperatives receive.



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Both women enjoy fishing. Alejandra finds most rewarding that moment when she hauls catch out of the water. She says, “I prefer fishing to filleting. When I fish, I ask God to bless us and send us a lot of fish. In one day I can earn more by fishing than by filleting. Also, fishing with my husband gives us the chance to keep all our earnings in the household, leaving us with more for household expenses. Moreover, I like to be in the lake because I feel that I am working, that I am together with my husband, and that we are getting each day’s bread. I would not like to do any other work because I like fishing and also because I think I am too old to start on anything else.”

Maria Elena has other reasons. She says, “I have to help my husband because he is old, and I like rowing and going into the lake. Now that I’ve been sick for some days, I can’t wait

to go back fishing.” Until recently, in addition to fishing, Maria Elena was also filleting fish. “After fishing, I would go filleting,” she says, “because my kids were at school, and that would cost about a hundred pesos (five USD) per day. But I had a surgery done in one of my eyes, and now that I have certain problems with it, I can no longer fillet. I like both, filleting and fishing.” She adds, “I get bored of being at home.” She says that the previous year there was so much fish that they hardly had the time to take it out of the net. But three months ago, water from the Lerma River, which is highly polluted, entered the lake and now they are passing through a period of fish scarcity.

Says Alejandra: “I think fishing is for women because I too fish! I can fish and be a fisherwoman!” ❖

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