

Latin America/ Brazil

Changing women's lives

Income women earn from processing crabmeat is leading to socioeconomic and cultural changes in some parts of the state of Para in Brazil

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Women's work in fishing communities is little recognized or acknowledged, especially when it involves processing shellfish. This can be explained by many factors, one of them being the division of labour in these communities. Whereas women are shore-bound to 'drudgery' work, men engage in the more prestigious sea-faring activities. For example, net repair and maintenance as well as the preparation and salting of fish are frequently relegated to a 'non-work' status. Thus, women's involvement in productive activities is considered of little consequence.

In spite of its significance, the work of women processors in Guarajubal is not recognized by their companions or by the women themselves. Apart from the reasons mentioned above, women themselves do not want to upset the existing social order in their community.

Women processors will not openly admit to the significance of their work because to do so would be tantamount to claiming that their companions are unable to sustain their roles as providers. Within the domestic sphere, one notices that women play a significant role in decision-making, but upon further investigation one finds that women tend to accede more power to the men in their family.

Residents of Guarajubal, like in other fishing communities, are not strictly limited to fishing as they also farm and hunt to sustain themselves. Situated in the coastal region of Pará state in Northeastern Brazil, Guarajubal forms part of the municipality of Marapanim. Marapanim, on the Atlantic coast, is crisscrossed by many rivers and streams, and is home to extensive mangrove areas. Fish, shrimp, crabs and other species of crustaceans and molluscs have been harvested in this region for a long time although

harvesting crabs has become an important activity in the last decade. The work of women shellfish processors starts after the crabs are caught in nearby swamp areas and ends with packaging the crabmeat in plastic wrappers. Crab collection and processing started approximately 10 years ago in Marapanim and, since then, this type of work has led to sociocultural changes in the many towns that comprise this municipal district.

Shellfish processors are predominantly healthy, adult married women, with children, since some income can be earned from this activity without necessarily travelling too far from the domestic space. Concern over reconciling remunerative work as collectors and processors with the non-remunerative activities of housework (childcare, cooking, garden cultivation, livestock raising, etc.) is encountered more among married women, as their single counterparts without children seek working opportunities elsewhere, in the municipal district headquarters or in other municipalities of northeastern Pará.

The work of women shellfish processors begins at daybreak, starting with household chores such as preparing food, washing clothes, childcare, sewing and maintenance of fishing equipment. After lunch, the women head off to begin their work, returning only by the evening. Men, who manually catch the crabs by reaching into their burrows and pulling them out, usually do the physical capture of the crabs. The task of removing the crabmeat from the shell is that of the women. This is stored for delivery to the middlemen, locally known as a *marreteiro*, who usually monopolize this trade.

Women may start off in this work accompanying their relatives or neighbours, ostensibly to help them. Help may not be as much towards production as towards giving company to friends to render their work more pleasurable. Thus, 'help' in itself is more of a leisure strategy among women of Guarajubal than an effort to reduce the overall workloads. Children also engage in shellfish processing to help their mothers. It is more the girls who learn these skills, as the boys prefer to engage in work considered more 'masculine'.

To become a shellfish processor in this region requires patience. The amount of crabmeat processed daily depends on the amount of time invested in this activity

and can take up to six hours to shell 120 crabs yielding about 2 kg of crabmeat. In addition to taking care of their young children, shellfish processors have to display great perseverance in performing a repetitive task that can also cause injury as they often cut their fingers in the process of separating crabmeat.

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Although women do face some risks and adverse conditions in their work, there are hardly any other alternatives for paid work in this region. Despite these problems, therefore, women recognize the positive changes that the processing activity has brought about, both to their lives and that of their families. These changes are evident from a socioeconomic as well as a cultural perspective. The socioeconomic status of working women has improved and, at the same time, women now enjoy more decision-making powers within the family as well.

Nowadays, in Guarajubal, the decision as to how many children a couple will have, rests primarily on the woman. This change is a direct consequence of a married woman's increased participation in the job market and their greater purchasing power. Of course, other factors such as television have influenced behaviour in Guarajubal.

The observation that women now have greater control over the number of children they have is reinforced in other ways. When comparing the degree of domestic violence suffered by women in Marapanim's communities, we can observe that married women processors who have started earning an income are more prone to resisting their companion's aggression than are women who do not engage in this activity.

The processing of crabmeat, known as *massa de carangueijo*, has thus stimulated many changes in the lives of people in northeastern Pará. Until recently, women had few prospects for gaining access to paid labour. They are now able to reconcile earning an income with other activities normally attributed to women, such as being mothers and companions.

People engaged in harvesting and processing crabs are aware that increasing production can eventually compromise the sustainability of this species. Public policy, so far blind to this issue, could eventually see the implementation of a 'closed season' for harvesting crabs.