

# Managing Mercado del Mar

Women play a key role in the running of Mercado del Mar, one of Mexico's largest fish markets

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Women's participation in post-harvest activities in Mexico dates back to pre-Hispanic times when women engaged in salting, drying and selling fish in rural markets. Currently, while women are involved in all activities along the fish value chain, their roles are mainly in post-harvest and administrative activities. Most studies talk about women's work in low payment employments but not in influential positions. Women's participation in the fishing industry as business leaders is not common.

The Mercado del Mar is the largest wholesale fish market in Mexico, after la Central de Pescados y Mariscos La Nueva Viga in Mexico City. The market is located in Zapopan, a suburb of the city of Guadalajara, which is the second largest city in the country with around 4.5 million inhabitants. The creation of the fish market corresponds to the new design of suburban commerce, where shopping malls developed in the 1960s, and this new model of commerce became common in the 1990s. During this time, Zapopan and Guadalajara's metropolitan area experienced rapid growth. Guadalajara has a rich trading heritage, and continues to play the role of capital and commercial centre in the region.

The Mercado del Mar was established in 1982, and today is one of the largest fish markets in Mexico, particularly for the

amount and variety of shrimp traded. Around 80 per cent of fish from the Pacific Ocean side of Mexico passes through this market. It is possible to find more than 350 fish varieties traded in the market throughout the year. There are no formal statistics on daily sales volume, but fish traders estimate a trade of between 500 to 1000 tons per day.

Guadalajara's trading heritage also explains the strong presence of women fish traders in the management of the Mercado del Mar. The market is organized as an association, headed by a management board, with a president and an administrator, both of whom are women and have vast experience in fish trade. Around a third of the fishing business in the market is owned and run by women. Moreover, an estimated 85 per cent of wholesale and retail establishments in the market are administered by women.

The fish trading businesses are family run, many into their second and even third generation in this trade. Most traders are coastal people. Their parents were fish traders in their native towns, who moved into the city to expand their business. The most common picture is of women managing the trading business, while the suppliers are relatives, including fathers, brothers, uncles, or husbands. The women business leaders either started the family business, developing from small-scale fish trade to the present market based business, or inherited the business from their parents and learned how to manage the trade since they were young.

Dona Rosa, the market's president, started her own fish trade around 40 years ago. She used to manage the business administration with her husband, but after being widowed, had to take the challenge of managing the business on her own. Today she manages a wholesale and retail business in fish, and also a few restaurants in the city of Guadalajara.

Dona Lola, inherited the family fish trade, and had been in the business since she was 18 years old. "My grandmother used to sell dry salted fish every Sunday in my home town, and my father used to export fish. This is how the business started." Now in her 70s, Dona Lola is a respected figure in the trade, and one of the board members in the market administration. She also has different fishing businesses in the city of Guadalajara.

Opinions among fish traders in the market were divided as to whether succeeding in business represented an extra challenge for women, or if it was only a matter of personality and education, with gender not being so relevant. According to Acela Sosa Torres, the

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market administrator, “I think that success or failure is mainly due to each one’s training and education, and the way of being, the character, of each person. Successful women are very well organized, hard workers and with a strong character. Also, perhaps their sensitivity to be able to deal with every type of personality is what has brought them here.”

In contrast, some other businesswomen felt it was particularly difficult for women to succeed in the trade. In the beginning they had to struggle for respect and to gain a position in the market. Said Xochitl Trujillo, “This being a man’s business, in the beginning, women in this market faced many problems. It was difficult for me to gain respect.” According to Carmen Ortega, “You have to assert your rights in order to gain respect.”

There is a gender division of labour in the market, with the heavy work mostly done by men, and the processing, administrative and selling activities dominated by women. It is however possible to see some women loading tracks or carrying heavy packages. In the retailing section, the owners believe that it is better to have saleswomen, because most of the customers are housewives and are more comfortable being served by women. In the wholesale section, some think that it is better to have a woman in charge of accounting and collecting the bills, because they are more efficient. Arcelia de Anda, a wholesale fish trader explained, “Those in charge of collecting the bills from my clients are women because if we send men, customers do not pay them. But the girls are better treated by them.”

Thus, women play multiple roles in the market, as managers, sellers, cleaners, packing the fish, and even loading big packages of fish. This situation of women in multiple roles has become more common in the last ten years.

Many women in Mercado del Mar felt that their work and success was key to the new respect and freedom they got. According to Marina Galindo, “When you have gained your position you are equal to the other businessmen”. The women pointed to the market president being a woman as having added to their own respect and acceptance in the trade.

Many recognized that working and having their own money empowered them, and gave them a new respect within their homes. “It is different having your own money, and not having to depend on your husband. If you don’t have your own money, and he does not want to give you money, you just have to tolerate it and keep your head down.”

Some women said that even after having gained a position in the market, they continued to have the sole responsibility to manage their households and take care of children. It was a struggle, to balance business with their home responsibilities. Women had to put in that extra effort, getting up even as early as 3.30 in the morning. But despite the obstacles, these women had constructed successful businesses and achieved a respectful position in the fish trade. They considered their own stories as successful examples of women’s empowerment. ❏

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