

# Empowerment through filleting

**Women's labour adds value to the fish supply chain in Petatán, Mexico, and brings independence and hope to their lives**

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Located in the central-western part of the country, Lake Chapala is Mexico's largest lake, and one of the many fishing villages bordering the lake is Petatán, with a population of only 423 inhabitants. However, what makes Petatán special is that most fish caught in Lake Chapala—tilapia and carp—as well as other water bodies in the region is processed here. There are no official statistics for how much fish is filleted and packed in ice every day, but Petatán houses the second largest fish processing industry in the region. The fish filleted here goes to El Mercado del Mar, the second largest fish market in the country, from where it is distributed to restaurants, smaller markets and other parts of the country.

In Lake Chapala, like in other parts of the world, women dominate many aspects of the fisheries production chain. They participate in the sale and capture of fish, but their main role is fish processing. In Petatán, all the fishers are male while women are experts in the filleting of fish. Since it is located between the lake and a mountain and has no arable land, Petatán's economy revolves around the fisheries.

The women of Petatán have entered the labour market for two main reasons: first, the town depends on middlemen who buy fish only if it is already filleted and packed in ice,

making women's processing work an essential part of the value chain; and second, when fish catch volumes are low, the women's income becomes crucial for household subsistence.

Most women began to learn how to fillet fish at the age of eight or nine years, and it is not rare to see little girls going to fillet after school. The average education level in Petatán is primary school, after which there are no further education avenues. Although for some girls, filleting might be a pastime, the money earned being used to pay for entertainment, including video games, for others, the income goes straight to helping their families survive. The sight of women filleting alone or in groups in their courtyards or in processing plants is a common one.

This activity offers many advantages to women. On a good catch day, working fast, a woman can fillet up to 150 kg of fish over a span of ten to twelve hours. They are paid 3 pesos (USD 0.18) per kg, which adds up to a total of 420 pesos per day (USD 24.7). Most women work from Monday to Saturday. Considering that in Mexico, the minimum wage is 70 pesos per day (USD 4), this is good income in a rural community.

Women are free to arrive at work and leave whenever they want. This is not an issue with the middlemen who pay them to fillet fish on a piece rate. The piece rate nature of work means that women are under pressure to put in long hours to earn good money, making it difficult to balance domestic work with income generating activities. In fact, domestic work comes after a filleting journey.

Moreover, this job requires prolonged periods of standing, which causes extreme fatigue and can lead to chronic problems of back, leg and body pain. Women under pressure to produce more may miss meals, and drink less water to avoid having to go to the toilet. They are therefore prone to many forms of ailments. The women do not have any employment benefits. They have no social security protection, and do not receive any support from the government. Middlemen do not provide them even with first-aid-kits. This is due to the fact that this work is mostly done informally, without registration. Women are therefore excluded from fishers' organizations, ignored by creditors and by governmental development programmes.

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Women filleting in Petatán, Mexico. The sight of women filleting alone or in groups in their courtyards is a common one

Despite these disadvantages, women opt for this employment. It contributes to the household income and the money earned is spent on buying necessities for themselves and their children. They feel independent and empowered by being able to earn their own money. One woman said, "Now if our husbands want to leave us, we wouldn't care because we can work and be independent." However, there was a tone of resignation in these answers. The lack of real options was clear when women said that they prefer processing fish than going

to work in the fields in neighbouring villages, as one of them said, "Filleting is anyway the only job that we have ever done".

Fish processing has given Petatán an important place in the Lake Chapala fisheries. By being able to add value to the fish, despite the disadvantages and poor labour conditions, women now have an opportunity to earn an income and to become independent and empowered. Little wonder then that the women of Petatán have come to be known as the bravest in the region! ❖