

Latin America/ Mexico

Street of the Shrimp Ladies

Women shrimp traders in northwestern Mexico have organized to defend their interests, though problems persist

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When one looks at travel brochures or web pages highlighting the tourist attractions of the Mexican port city of Mazatlán, located in the state of Sinaloa (in Mexico's northwest coast), one hears about ecotourism, gift shops, restaurants, nightlife and hotels. One also finds women shrimp traders included among these "attractions." At any time of year—but especially during the coolest months, December through May—tour buses packed with Canadian or American tourists stop by the Street of the Shrimp Ladies so they can look at the shrimp and talk to the women, even though few of these tourists speak Spanish.

Women shrimp traders are such a lively part of the local culture that a play depicting their work and their social life was staged at the Mazatlán Cultural Institute. Working people all over Mazatlán and nearby towns and rural communities are aware of their contribution to the fishing sector and the local economy. Yet for local fishing authorities and the government, they are nearly invisible.



When I started my research, I found an almost complete lack of statistics or written information about them. Besides scattered and limited information, there was no other documentation of the lives lived or jobs

performed by these women. Much of the information that I am presenting here, therefore, comes from first-hand observation, oral interviews and a questionnaire that I designed and administered while conducting anthropological field research during the summer of 2004 in Mazatlán.

Here I will discuss the preliminary information elicited by the questionnaire and by oral interviews. The questionnaire's primary goal was to collect basic sociodemographic information that would allow me to draw a more detailed and accurate portrait of women shrimp traders. The questionnaire asked women their age, marital status, number of children, years working as a shrimp trader, and what immediate problems they face. Over a one-month period, I was able to orally administer the questionnaire to 22 out of the 40 women working in the Mazatlán marketplace.

After the completion of questionnaires, I conducted semi-structured oral interviews with the same women who answered the questionnaire. The purpose of these interviews was to collect information on the history and settlement of the fish market, economic and social networks, and household and family relations. The results obtained from the questionnaires and interviews follow.

The average age of the women I questioned is 41, the youngest being 18 and the oldest, 70. Most of the women begin selling shrimp when very young, usually while accompanying their mother or another female family member. Once they learn the trade, they usually start their own shrimp business, either at once or when they get married and start a family of their own.

Forty-five per cent of the women are married and 32 per cent are single mothers. Many of the married women said that they often feel like single mothers because their husbands refuse to help them sell shrimp, take care of the children, and perform domestic chores. Others said that they work not only to support themselves and their children but also their husbands. The lives of both single and married women are permeated by constant work, since when they finish at the marketplace they need to rush home to make dinner, do the laundry, and help their children with school homework.

Most of the women interviewed have children, the average being four. Women with small children (12

years or younger), 41 per cent of the total, must face the daily challenge of finding someone to help them with childcare while they are at the market. Mostly, they rely on relatives, friends or older children to help take care of the young ones. For all but one of the women questioned, shrimp selling is the only income-generating job they have, so they cannot afford to miss a day's work.

The average respondent has been selling shrimp for 19 years. Most of the women started selling shrimp young, as street peddlers going house-to-house and asking people if they wanted to buy shrimp. Sometimes they stationed themselves on a corner of a street and sold their shrimp from there. Neither approach was particularly stable or comfortable.

It was precisely because of this lack of a secure, comfortable space in which to sell shrimp that a number of women decided to get organized 25 years ago. They invaded the street now known as the Street of the Shrimp Ladies and set up shop. At first they faced opposition from government authorities who claimed that they were making the street crowded, dirty and smelly. But with the support of students from the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, they organized protests, sit-ins and hunger strikes until the authorities finally decided to leave them alone.

They later organized a shrimp-sellers' association that is still active. This association has a directorship composed of a president, a secretary and a treasurer. The main object of the association's members is to have more power within the overall political and economic structure of Mazatlán. The association also functions as a support group in which women share their daily challenges, problems, aspirations and accomplishments.

Despite the association's support, there are still many problems that the women must face, both at the marketplace and at home, in order to perform their jobs and attend to the needs of their families. Most of the women I spoke to talked very openly about their problems. The following were most commonly mentioned:

- Too much competition—all the women are selling the same product to the same clients, which generates conflicts and rivalries.
 - Commuting to Mazatlán takes time and energy—some must travel two hours by bus daily.
 - Lots of time spent sitting or standing in the heat and sun.
 - Long hours—the great majority of the women begin their workday at four in the morning, when the retailers and wholesalers come to supply the women with shrimp and other seafood products, and end around seven or eight at night.
 - Haggling—clients do not want to pay the price women ask, and always look for a way of getting cheaper prices.
 - Shrimp that are not sold must be beheaded so they do not go bad, but then sell for less because they weigh less.
 - The income they obtain is never enough to cover the basic needs of their families.
 - There are no economic alternatives—no other work. This is especially crucial during the offseason, because the only shrimp available for sale then are those produced on shrimp farms, which bring a lower price.
- Most of these problems are difficult to deal with within the women's association. The pressure to sell shrimp on the same day that the suppliers bring them, lest they go bad, generates animosity and competition among women. Other conflicts, such as the lack of other income-generating activities and the low income obtained from shrimp sales, are related to the structure of the regional Mexican and global economies. Women also mentioned, however, that shrimp trading provides them with benefits that other occupations do not. Among these are freedom, independence, a source of income, and the ability to be their own bosses.
- Last October, at least 1,000 people became intoxicated after eating shrimp in the southern Sinaloa region, including Mazatlán. The intoxication was initially attributed to the use of Purina pet food in shrimp fishing. In response, the government implemented a moratorium on the inshore shrimp fisheries until they could verify the cause of the intoxications. This had a tremendous impact upon the local economy; people stopped consuming shrimp. The shrimp traders feared that they were losing their livelihoods.

Women shrimp traders in Mazatlán and nearby rural communities organized a protest, demanding that the health authorities conduct a study to determine the source of the intoxication. Due to pressure from them and the fishermen, the local health department conducted a more rigorous study and discovered that the intoxications were caused by the presence of a bacterium, *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, in the Huizache-Caimanero lagoon system, one of the most important sources of shrimp in the southern Sinaloa region. This discovery allowed women to take preventive measures, such as not selling shrimp caught in this lagoon.

This is not the first time that women shrimp traders in Mazatlán have organized around an issue that affected all equally, once again proving that Mexican women have the capacity and the knowledge required to generate collective action in defence of their livelihoods and the well-being of their families.

This is, however, the first time that women shrimp traders have appeared in the news—not for breaking the law, but for getting together to make their voices heard. At last, women shrimp traders are becoming visible in the eyes of government officials.

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