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Women and port operations

Port embarkation and disembarkation, whether for passengers or, more importantly, for merchandise, is arguably one of the most vital port functions, and for centuries this has been done with human strength.

Stevedores would carry sacks, chests and bundles on their shoulders or on their heads using nothing more than a hook or a bolster (a cushion that was worn over the body before the weight was loaded).

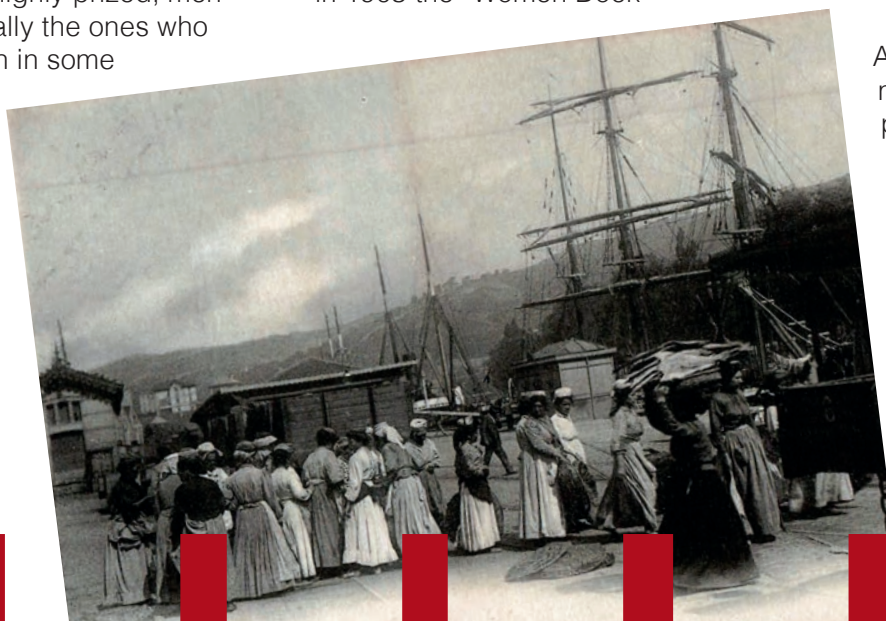
Since this was a job where physical strength was highly prized, men were traditionally the ones who did it, although in some ports, such as those in the Basque Country, women played a major role. At the beginning of the 17th century, most of the ship loading

and unloading work at Bilbao was carried out by *cargueras* (female dockers) and *sirgueras* (female towliners) at much cheaper rates than those paid to the men. By the 19th century, several Basque newspapers criticised the harsh working conditions faced by women working in the ports, and in 1903 the “Women Dock

As early as the 17th century, a large part of the work of loading and unloading ships was carried out by women on the docks of Bilbao

Workers’ Society” was founded in Bilbao to campaign for their work to be respected.

As stevedoring work became more reliant on machinery, physical strength became less important in the 20th century, and new skills were required to integrate women into trades that were still heavily male-dominated. Nowadays, the number of women stevedores in the Port of Barcelona stands at around forty-five, while the number of men exceeds



one thousand. Until the last century, the highest concentration of women employed in loading and unloading ships was in the Basque Country, today, 80% of women stevedores work in the Port of Valencia.

Basque women were also trailblazers in handling tugboats, and some records from the 17th century describe how the women-led tugboats fought among themselves to tow a ship. There are now some very young women, such as Sara Sarbosa from Barcelona, born in 1987, who do this job in ports such as Barcelona.

Piloting is also one of the most typical port professions, as the pilot steers the boats in the port and takes them to the mooring area or to the mouth of the harbour to avoid accidents between vessels. In Spain, the first woman to work as a pilot was **Macarena Gil**, born in Huelva in 1978, who is part of the Pilots Association of the Port of

Algeciras. This port ranks among the most important in Europe when it comes to freight and passenger movements with African and American ports.

The arrival of women in nautical schools in 1987 gave them access to positions of command such as maritime captaincy. The first woman to assume the position of maritime captain, which is the highest maritime authority on land, was **Carmen Santano Losada** in 2009 in the district of Palamós, followed by **Núria Obiols**, maritime captain in Tarragona since 2011. The current head of Maritime Rescue in Barcelona is a woman by the name of Eulàlia Pujol.



Carmen Santano and Núria Obiols were the first women to become maritime captains in 2009 and 2011 respectively

