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Scheldt Pilot



EMPA

Gender equality is a popular topic nowadays, so lately, I have often been asked how I think we should encourage more women to go to sea.

If women want to go to sea, they can and will. In Europe, at least. But keeping them at sea that's a whole other story. Women should be given equal chances to pursue a career at sea so they can stay motivated. Due to the lack of equal treatment, many women get disappointed and stop sailing even before they can prove themselves. Equal treatment and understanding should be enough to achieve this goal. And not only for women.



This is my story, the story of Kim Ossieur, a sea pilot on the Scheldt Estuary (Belgium) since 2009.

I have been asked many times by seamen why I pursued a career at sea, here goes.



As a child, I was a member of the Sea Scouts for girls in Antwerp, and I really had the time of my life among these 'sea guides.' Other hobbies included sailing and deep-sea diving, deepening my passion for the sea. So, my parents weren't surprised when, at 18, I told them that I wanted to attend the Nautical College. My mum is my biggest fan (and still is). As one of the first female officers in the Belgian army, she was very understanding and supportive.

After graduating from the Maritime Academy Antwerp in 1998, I became a cadet/apprentice on chemical tankers. The long sea passages across the oceans allowed me to practice what I believe to be the most fascinating part of

seafaring: astronomical navigation. A few years later, I took the opportunity to work for a dredging company, which exposed me to different vessel types. I learned manoeuvring with various vessels and propulsions (old and new) there. My job in dredging also gave me the chance to explore ports and cities all over the world, something that's quite exceptional nowadays.

I won't lie; in every company, the start was difficult. But over the years, as I gained life and work experience, and whilst rising in rank, it became easier and more enjoyable. Many nice reminiscences and friendships that I will cherish for the rest of my life are the result of my days at sea.

After 10 years at sea and with an STCW II/2 Master licence in my pocket - and under social pressure ('Isn't it time to think about children?', 'no man wants a wife at sea among other men') - I stopped sailing rather suddenly. But to my shocking surprise, it was hard to find employment ashore.



I managed to find a job at MRCC Ostend, an interesting and important aspect of the maritime industry. But I missed being on board vessels and navigating. Luckily, a few months later, the Belgian pilotage started hiring new pilots, so beginning in 2009, I started as a trainee Pilot. It's a decision I never regretted.

In Belgium, all the Pilots (except for the dock pilots) work for the Flemish Government. Approximately 330 Belgian Pilots operate on the river Scheldt and serve Belgian coastal ports. We are divided into four teams because of the long passages from the sea to Gent or Antwerp. Coastal Pilots operate from Wandelaar Pilot station to the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend. Seapilots embarking vessels at Wandelaar Pilot station or Steenbank Pilot station pilot the vessels towards Flushing, where River Pilots take over on vessels bound for Antwerp or Canal Pilots take over the vessels bound for Gent.



Of these 4 teams, only the sea pilots don't work from home. We have six days on duty in Flushing, the Netherlands, and 5 days off at home. This suits me very well. The clear line between work and home feels like sailing aboard ships: you work onboard and are free when home.

None of my (few) female colleagues, who are Belgian Sea

Pilots stationed in Flushing, have children. Nor do I. That is an obvious 'disadvantage' of working in the team based in Flushing. And whilst a major reorganisation of Belgian pilotage is currently in the planning stage, it has become apparent that these and other items affecting women are not considered. It's still a man's world ... with men thinking in traditional ways. Women care for children and the home; men provide the income, or at least most of it.

Unfortunately, topics like safety, environmentally friendly and sustainable shipping or mental welfare are still considered 'typical female topics' according to most of my colleagues or management and, thus, not very popular. When I try to draw their attention to these issues during work meetings, my colleagues' responses are rather condescending.

Hopefully, this will change. More women are applying for the job, and I sincerely hope this could be a game-changer, especially if they stay in the job! It would definitely be nice to have more female colleagues. The conversations among us are different and much less driven by testosterone. There is also a supporting understanding among each other: we all walked (or fought) the same path to get here, creating a silent bond among us.



Since last year, I have been teaching local and international regulations to trainee Pilots, which has become a passion of mine. Teaching maritime regulations was already a job I did on the side, but doing so to apprentice Pilots is the most rewarding job ever. Broadening my horizon and finding a way to decompress, I trained to become a certified veterinary assistant through e-learning. Once in a while, I now work as a volunteer for the Wild Bird Sanctuary in Ostend. My dream is to combine all these passions: provide awareness concerning environmental issues through environmentally sustainable navigation. Who knows ... one day?