

Stories of inspiring women in STEAM:

# Domitila de Carvalho

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**Project Title**

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# Domitila de Carvalho, A fearless trailblazer





# Early years, first trial, and loving family

Quite a long time ago, more than 150 years in the past, in the land called Portugal, a little girl named Domitila was born. She had two siblings she could play with and loving parents that took care of her.





Unfortunately, her father who worked as a primary school teacher got sick not long after she was born and sadly died when Domitila was just one year old. Even though something sad had happened, the family stayed very close. They helped each other, and Domitila's mother did everything she could to give her daughter a happy and bright future.

Domitila didn't just love her family, she also loved learning new things and always wanted to know more. Her curiosity and wish to learn grew bigger every day. Domitila was a very good student and got excellent marks at school. But most of all, she wished to keep learning after school and study at a university.



# Where to? To the university! But how? With the help of a letter!

But things were a bit different in the past: things we nowadays take for granted seemed impossible to reach, while, on the other hand, things that seem strange to us now were perfectly normal at the time. For example, school and learning: in the past, only boys were really allowed to continue their education and go to university. Girls were expected to stay at home and have children, but not learn a profession. At school, girls learned reading, writing, and a bit of maths...and lots of needlework, like knitting, sewing, and embroidery. This may sound silly now, but it was perfectly normal for that time.



## **Question for children:**

**Can you imagine? Going to school to learn how to knit instead of learning about places, countries, animals, plants, other languages, and other interesting subjects.**



After attending high school Domitila was supposed to stay home, find a husband, start a family, and do all the housework a woman was expected to do at that time (that probably included sewing and knitting). Domitila, however, did not like those options all that much and had a different plan for herself in mind; she wanted to continue studying at a university.



That kind of thing wasn't exactly forbidden, but no one had ever thought a girl would want to do it. A girl at university!? Luckily for Domitila, she had great support from her mother and her high school teacher! Together, they wrote a letter to the Dean asking for Domitila to be allowed to attend the university.

The Dean was not sure what to do, as this was the first time ever a girl had asked to attend a university. To Domitila's great delight, he accepted it, but only under one condition: she had to wear black, plain clothes and look just like the boys.

For many, that might have seemed strange or even unfair. But Domitila was overjoyed. She said right away, "Yes, I'll do it!" And so, Domitila became the first woman at that university.

That was just the beginning, because later she helped change many things for girls and women.



### **Question for children:**

**How do you think Domitila felt like when she received the news? Do you think she was excited or do you think she was also a bit scared at the same time because she was entering an unknown territory for her and for all Portuguese women?**



# New world, new opportunities, new friend

For Domitila, it wasn't easy being the only girl among so many boys and teachers. Sometimes she must have felt lonely, unsure, or sad. But she did not let fear get the best of her. But nevertheless, her bravery, determination, and cleverness prevailed, and she was able to walk through all these obstacles so that other women who came after her had it a bit easier. She always knew that education was the key that would allow her to open doors that would otherwise remain closed.



After some time, she managed to integrate into this all-male environment, and she successfully graduated firstly from Mathematics, a bit later from Philosophy, and some years later from Medicine, becoming the first Portuguese woman with a doctorate, the highest degree in education. After she achieved all that, she even became friends with Queen D. Amélia, an actual queen, the last of Portugal! They exchanged letters for many years, updating each other about what was happening in their lives and discussing current affairs.



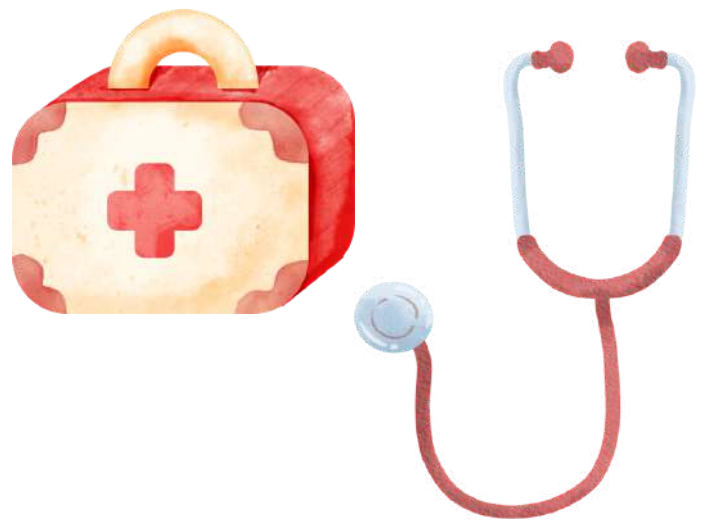
### **Question for children:**

Isn't her path amazing? At first, she did not even know if she would be allowed to study, and now, she has not one but three degrees from three different subjects and even has a queen for her friend! Education really was the key that opened her many doors!



# Physician – checked, teacher – checked, principal – checked!

The first door she entered was as a doctor, taking care of mothers and children who got sick with a common disease at that time, called tuberculosis.



## **Explanation for children:**

**This disease is super contagious, and mostly causes problems with breathing because it affects the lungs. Many people died from this disease.**

Although she liked her job very much, she also wanted to try other things. Domitila knew how hard it had been for her to get the education she wanted. But she didn't give up, and she made it! She was proud to become the first woman in Portugal to teach maths - and it was at the very first school just for girls. While studying mathematics, she realised how helpful mathematical thinking can be for solving real-world problems, and that it's not just dry theory. She wanted her students to learn and understand that, too!

Later on, she even became the head of that school, but she never stopped teaching, because she loved showing children new things. Maybe her love for teaching came from her dad, who had been a primary school teacher himself.

Education was very important to Domitila, especially making sure that girls could learn just as much as boys. Back then, people often thought that “Girls don’t need to learn much.” But Domitila completely disagreed! She believed that boys and girls should have the same chances in school and in life. Because when girls are allowed to learn a lot, they can make their own choices about what they want to do in life.



### **Question for children:**

**Do you agree that boys and girls and all children for that matter should have the same opportunities in life?**





# Making changes, improving lives

Although Domitila never married nor had children as was expected of her (although she might as well enjoy knitting as far as we know), she fought for women's rights and children's welfare. She took her first-hand experiences she had from being a doctor and a teacher and introduced some much-needed changes into the school system.



One of the issues she tried to address was hygiene. People of that time were not as aware of the importance of good hygiene as we are now. Informing people about the importance of hygiene would mean that fewer adults and children get sick, and many deaths could be avoided. All that could be achieved with only some water and soap!



### **Question for children:**

**What do you do when you come from the playground and want to eat something? Wash your hands, of course! Do you know why is it important to wash hands?**





# Superwoman

To do even more good for people, Domitila even entered the world of politics. She became one of the first three women (again first at something) elected to an important decision-making position in Portugal. A doctor, a teacher, a principal, a politician, a list that does not seem to end but amazing Domitila was able to add another thing on there - a writer! In addition to being part of all of these different fields, she also found time to write and express her artistic side! It seems like she did not sleep at all or maybe lived at least three lives!



*a doctor*  
*a teacher*  
*a poet*  
*a politician*  
*a principal*

Domitila was brave and often the first to take new paths. Not much could be done to stop her, she always found a way to get to where she wanted to go. Her determination to make the world a better place for all and to offer more equal opportunities for girls made it easier for others who came after her.

Young female students had a great role model in Domitila; she showed them and others that education and knowledge are something that women are capable of achieving just as much as men are. It is always easier to walk on the path that was already walked on before, and Domitila has paved the way in many areas.





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