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## Press Release

Center for Continuing  
Academic Education  
(ZWW)

### **Lower recidivism rates through improved education programs for female inmates in European prisons**

#### **Completion of the EU-funded FEFI – Finding Education for Female Inmates project on educational options provided for female inmates in various European countries**

Women's prisons should be places of learning with a clear focus on the needs, problems, and relevant educational and qualification requirements of female inmates. This is one of the core conclusions of the multi-lateral FEFI – Finding Education for Female Inmates project, in which academic and practice-oriented organizations based in Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Italy, France, Malta, Belgium, and Turkey have been collaborating since November 2013. As part of its GRUNDTVIG program, the European Union contributed a total of EUR 400,000 over the past two years towards financing the FEFI project that was coordinated by the Center for Continuing Academic Education of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU). The goal was to develop new measures for providing education and qualifications based on the results of a survey of the requirements and needs of female inmates and prison staff. A further objective was to develop recommendations with regard to formal and informal forms of training that would facilitate the successful reintegration of female prison inmates in society.

In all the countries involved, women are an under-represented group in penal facilities due to their low rate of imprisonment, which ranged from just three to seven percent of the total prison populations. The evaluation of the survey of 440 female inmates and 133 prison staff by FEFI partners clearly illustrated that female inmates have very specific needs. Their low numbers make it difficult to form thematic groups, the more so as the duration of prison sentences varies. Many female prisoners have experienced some form of abuse in the past; many also suffer from psychiatric problems or are addicted to drugs or alcohol. They are separated from their children and in some countries have automatically lost custody on imprisonment; many experience low self-esteem due to their lack of education and their failure in their role as mothers. They are mostly unaware of their strengths and weaknesses. All of this makes it more difficult to formulate a generalized or vocational-based training plan for female inmates when compared to male prisoners, as the appropriate educational programs are generally not provided by the institutions or the prison staff. The survey results also showed that there are cultural divergences between the participating northern and southern countries in terms of the provision of personnel and facilities and the duration of prison sentences.

The FEFI partners have since used these findings to develop new concepts for the education and training of female inmates.

The educational measures derived from the survey findings were adapted to the relevant situations in the various countries. They essentially focused on a systematic approach to the three aspects of measures designed for inmates, measures designed for the staff, and measures related to the structural conditions of female imprisonment. Most of the measures developed in the countries took the form of programs intended to appeal directly to female inmates, as this was deemed most important. However, during the implementation of these programs it became clear that the other two topics needed to be taken into consideration, too. Especially the programs in Malta and in Germany concentrated on this holistic approach.

The FEFI partners and their efforts place an emphasis on the process of resocialization, which in turn focuses on the female inmates and their needs. Thus prisons need to develop into centers of education and learning, where female inmates are provided with the programs and support they need to acquire the personal, social, and vocational skills they will need on release. In order to improve the chances of reintegration, a jointly coordinated approach is needed in which all prison facility stakeholders – from social services through security personnel to management – participate, including the female inmates themselves. The latter require support in all aspects of life, including health, family, training, finding a place to live, etc. Educational and other assistance measures need to be holistically designed and be open to the input of the inmates. "Only those concepts on reintegration into society that acknowledge that learning is a continuous process and that are created in part by the inmates have any chance at all of long-term success," emphasized Project Manager Iris Thimm-Netenjakob of the Center for Continuing Academic Education at JGU. The center has been involved in several European projects dealing with the subject of education in prison since 2008 and continues to promote professional dialog on this topic at a national and international level.

In order to achieve successful resocialization of former female prison inmates and thus reduce their participation in criminality over the long term in Europe, one of the fundamental recommendations made by the FEFI partners on the conclusion of the project was to propose that it is essential to place the needs of female inmates at the center of their learning process and to organize women's imprisonment so that social reintegration and a continuous process of learning and training become possible. For this purpose, prison staff must also be appropriately sensitized and suitably trained so that they are able to motivate female inmates and support them during their participation in educational, rehabilitation, and work programs.

Through the named measures and proposals, the FEFI project attempts to demonstrate how approaches to teaching and education in prison facilities can be successfully designed and implemented. The FEFI partners consider it essential to create enhanced and effective holistic educational concepts for female prison inmates at both the national and European levels. However, these long-term concepts also need the corresponding financial and personnel investments.

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