

## SPEECH BY MME BLEUET (FR)

### CONFERENCE CONCLUSION “ Finding Education for Female Inmates” Project

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I would like to say hello to our European partners who are listening in. I will talk generally about women in French prisons, especially with regard to the Bordeaux inter-region which I manage. I will also touch on the question of personnel in the women’s sections and in particular the organisation of activities, especially the problems relating to education and training courses.

There are not many women in prison in France, two thousand one hundred and twenty-two (2 122) as at September 1st (*first*), or a little more than 3% [*three percent*] of all prisoners. But they are often imprisoned for serious criminal offences.

One of the features of this female population is its great heterogeneity in terms of:

- age: all age groups live together in the women’s sections (12% [*twelve percent*] are under 25 [*twenty-five*], 9% [*nine percent*] are over 50 [*fifty*]) and all age groups are represented.

- the penal situation : Sentences vary from a few weeks to a few years, from less than 6 [*six*] months to more than 10 [*ten*] years, or even 20 [*twenty*] years.

- family circumstances : This is a particularly sensitive issue for female inmates.

Depending on whether or not they are in prison for domestic affairs, whether they are single or not, whether they have children or not, whether they feel they have abandoned their young children because they are in prison, whether they have been subject to or committed domestic violence. There is also the situation of mothers with young children accommodated in nursery facilities until their children are 18 [*eighteen*] months old and who, because of this, find themselves far removed from any educational component. Being in a nursery facility for several months can be experienced as being in isolation since, although the mother remains with her child, she is cut off from prison activities which she cannot take part in.

- There is also heterogeneity in the level of education. Amongst these women, 13% [*thirteen percent*] are illiterate, 22% [*twenty-two percent*] are non-native French speakers but about 10 % [*ten percent*] have reached university entrance level, or higher.

However, all the women have one thing in common: they have a very poor image of themselves.

In the inter-regional prison services for which I am responsible, there were 134 (*one hundred and thirty-four*) female inmates as of September 1st (*first*) in small sections of 5 (*five*) to 39 (*thirty-nine*) places and in only 7 (*seven*) institutions out of 20 (*twenty*).

There are no specific institutions for these women and no prison is authorized to take in female minors.

As far as surveillance goes, there are specific constraints in women’s sections. In France, the principal is to prohibit male personnel in female sections and, for example, that poses the question of surveillance at night where the small number of female wardens means they need to be called on to do heavier duties; there is also the question of preventing suicide: it is not always possible to maintain a female inmate in the women’s section if there is a high risk of suicide.

In this context, the activities offered to female inmates are essentially organized around vocational training, education and social and cultural activities.

Pre-professional and professional training programmes are offered, such as: cleaning agents, waitressing, weaving, basic skills in house painting.

Female inmates also have the possibility of joining general education classes (French, maths, computing technology) mostly in a single class, that is to say all levels included together.

In addition, female inmates are offered sporting, social and cultural activities such as board games, sewing and cookery classes, workshops on self-esteem

The paradox of organizing activities in female sections consists in offering at the same time multiple activities but with inadequate funding

For example, activities may have to compete through lack of premises and through the small number of female inmates but who have a plethora of choices.

In order to improve the management of female prisoners, for a number of years now France has been implementing a limited process of having a mix of men and women in prison, made possible by a law passed in 2009. Prior to that, prisons in France had always been single gender only. The law dated November 24th 2009 allows henceforth for a limited amount of mixed gender activities such as education, vocational training or social and cultural activities.

The aim is to encourage activities for women, often imprisoned in very small and isolated units, who have difficulties of access to activities generally organised in men's sections, since an article in the French Code of Criminal Procedure Code indicates that no communication is possible between male and female inmates in the same establishment. Having a mix of inmates also means that female prisoners can also be invited to take part in occasional activities such as a concert, conferences, one-off events.

Apart from a better use of means between men's and women's sections, having a mix of inmates places the women back in the ordinary context of social life.

Lastly, I believe it is essential to bring to the fore the skills of these female inmates.

They do have real skills which they don't realize themselves, or don't consider them to be skills. I'm talking about cookery, for example, but also housekeeping, home help, cleaning, and of course education.

As an example, I can for instance mention a cookery workshop at the prison in Pau *[south-west France]* which lead to the production of a cookery book. Cookery is an activity open to all female inmates, including those who are not speaking French but who are rich in their diversity.

It's with the success of this activity that I would like to conclude.

Thank you for your attention.