

# TACKLING INEQUALITY IN THE TRANSITION FROM PRISON TO SOCIAL AND WORKING LIFE

## FROM PILOT ACTION TO A SUSTAINABLE NETWORK SUPPORTING THE RESETTLEMENT OF FEMALE OFFENDERS

Dramatic overcrowding, staff shortages, outdated buildings and the lack of an adequate infrastructure – these issues dominate public discussion about the changes that are needed in prisons throughout France. Notwithstanding increased efforts to modernise the penal system, custodial concerns tend to eclipse the equally important issue of preparing ex-offenders for their re-entry into social and working life. An EQUAL Development Partnership, EUROP@CTE, provides a new impulse for action on the reintegration of ex-offenders and it also has a particular focus on promoting equal opportunities for female prisoners.

### WOMEN IN PRISON – A FORGOTTEN MINORITY?

In France, as in many other countries, significant weaknesses continue to exist in the educational and training provision for prisoners and in the services, which are supposed to assist them in their transition to the outside world. Two thirds of the 60.000 inmates in French prisons have not obtained any formal qualifications and 30% are illiterate or have reading problems. However, as the teaching force working in the 188 penal institutions is equivalent to only 400 full-time posts, not all prisons have enough qualified staff to respond to the educational needs of their inmates. Vocational training opportunities are very limited, mostly to short basic courses. Less than 5% of the prison population is involved in a formal training programme leading to a qualification and only 7% participate in some form of vocational preparation or training. Moreover, inadequate planning and preparation for release is an obvious weak link in the integration chain. Considerable variations exist in the extent of prisons' cooperation with external partners such as local employment agencies, social services, employers' federations and voluntary organisations that can facilitate a successful transition to post custodial life.

If these deficiencies have a damaging impact on the resettlement of ex-offenders in general, they have an even stronger effect on the reintegration of women, who represent only 3 to 4% of the prison population. Female offenders are detained in 61 of the 188 French prisons in accommodation that separates them from male prisoners and a further three penal institutions are reserved exclusively for women. The resources available for the education and training of female inmates and their pre-release programmes are proportional to the percentage of women amongst the total number of detainees but the per capita cost ratio tends to be significantly higher for working with these smaller groups of women. As a result, the women's sections in many prisons cannot offer opportunities that are similar to those that are open to male inmates, nor programmes that are specially designed to address women-specific needs. Thus, female offenders face a double exclusion because, during their period of detention, they have little support to prepare them for a new start on their release, and during the process of resettlement, they are exposed to persistent gender inequalities in training and employment and to domestic constraints that can hamper their chances of finding or keeping a job.

However, an EQUAL Development Partnership (DP), EUROP@CTE, is adopting a proactive stance to increasing opportunities that are on offer to female prisoners in the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur Region of southern France.

### MOBILISING ACTORS FROM THE THE WORLD OUTSIDE PRISON

The [EUROP@CTE](#) project began in 2002, during EQUAL Round 1. It aimed to forge a strong partnership of local or regional organisations and the penal institutions that could improve the preparation of ex-offenders for release and assist their reintegration into society and the workplace. During the second Round of EQUAL, this cooperation has been continued but with a

new focus on defending the social and individual rights of women detained in custody and on responding to their particular needs and problems ([EUROP@CTE 2](#)).

The French Union of Holiday and Leisure Centres ([Union Française des Colonies de Vacances](#), or UFCV for short) was one of the key partners in the first phase and is now leading the EUROP@CTE 2 DP. At a first glance, this may appear to be a curious choice of an organisation to pilot education and training initiatives in prisons. However, "*UFCV has a long tradition as an association for community education, since its creation in 1907. The vision behind all our social, educational and cultural activities is that all individuals, young and adult, should be enabled to take responsibility for their own lives,*" explains Jean-Luc Salmon, the regional UFCV management representative and coordinator of the DP. He adds that "*we have a strong commitment to the social and vocational integration of disadvantaged groups and very good links with other actors working in this field.*"

The overarching goal of EUROP@CTE is to ensure that prison inmates can tap into the full range of support from public services and private associations that is available to assist their reintegration. "*This ambitious objective can only be met under two prerequisites,*" stresses Jean-Luc Salmon specifying that "*firstly it is essential that all relevant support services agree to cooperate in a real network, in which their activities can effectively complement each other so that they can offer pathways to reintegration that respond to the individual situation and needs of each prisoner. Secondly, the process of reinsertion must start **within** the penal institution. We know that lack of preparation for normal life outside the prison, or a 'dry release' as we call it, is one of the main causes of the high rates of recidivism in France. Therefore the services offered through our network must span the final period of custody and at least the first months after release*". The DP considers that the concept of partnership, which is one of the building blocks of EQUAL, has provided strong arguments for ensuring the active commitment of relevant stakeholders who have the capacity to meet these prerequisites by engaging in a process of active cooperation.

EUROP@CTE has brought together key actors from the public and the private sector, including the regional prison administration, the probation service, employment agencies, NGOs and other associations that offer individualised guidance and support to particularly disadvantaged groups, and organisations responsible for the planning and delivery of training programmes. This partnership has made it possible to establish multi-disciplinary teams to guide ex-offenders through the different types of public and private services that can accompany them on their way back to freedom. These teams also have the flexibility to ensure that prisoners can use the period of detention actively and more effectively to develop the social and vocational competences that they need for a successful passage from prison to civic life.

## **CONSOLIDATING AND MAINSTREAMING THE EXPERIENCE FROM PILOT ACTION**

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The work of EUROP@CTE is based on an assumption that there is a considerable hidden and unused potential, which can be harnessed to create better opportunities for ex-offenders. The DP believes that this potential resides both in the services that already exist in the region but also in the good practices that have been piloted and validated elsewhere. Thus, a priority for action was analysing gaps in the provision for reintegration, and identifying, adapting and delivering possible solutions that are transferable to prisons in the DP's area.

As the DP was anxious "*not to re-invent the wheel,*" exchange with its transnational partners has been important since the beginning of its work. In EQUAL Round 1, EUROP@CTE was involved in the [MIKIRI](#) Transnational Partnership (TP), together with DPs from the [UK](#), [Germany](#), Portugal and Sweden, from which it gained particular experience related to the use of e-learning and information technology (IT) in prisons. In Round 2, EUROP@CTE cooperates with partners in two TPs. The first is [Women - Now!](#), involving DPs in the UK, Poland and Slovakia, which has a particular focus on the socio-economic integration of women who have a criminal record. The second TP is named [HIDAK](#), the Hungarian word for bridges, and involves cooperative exchange with DPs in Austria, Germany, Hungary, the [Netherlands](#), Poland and the UK on approaches to increasing prisoners' skills, preparing them for work and offering them continued support in the community and in the workplace.

One of the innovative aspects of the DP's activities lies in its approach to disseminating validated good practice amongst all actors involved, particularly those working in smaller structures that often don't have easy access to information on relevant European experience. An additional

element of the work in EUROP@CTE 2 is the mobilisation of new network resources to develop insertion pathways specifically addressed to female ex-offenders, which can reduce the gap between the opportunities for male prisoners and those that exist for women.

### **A wider Range of Opportunities in Prisons and a better Articulation with External Services**

The introduction of new practices into the prison system implies that a number of barriers related to compliance with security concerns and prison rules have to be overcome. Another important factor is the work overload of members of staff in penal institutions who are involved in preparing prisoners for release, as on average in the DP's area, there is one "case manager" for each 100 inmates. Initially, in order to test the feasibility of its approaches, EUROP@CTE chose to pilot its new practices in the prison of Marseille-Les Baumettes. This is the largest prison in the region with 1600 inmates including 160 women.

This positive experience has been transferred to other penal institutions in the region and the DP's practical activities now focus on:

- Providing better access for all inmates to information on employment and training opportunities and guidance on the use of such information, often by using IT;
- Broadening the range and improving the quality of training opportunities including pre-vocational programmes and basic skills development, as well as courses leading to a recognised qualification. About 120 detainees are involved in training activities at any one time. A new feature of this enlarged offer is the introduction of training on the use of IT media and tools, which also provides access to a virtual but secure, internet circuit. In Les Baumettes, two multi-media centres are now in place and the use of new communication technologies has become an integral part of the programmes that are offered in the prison by the national education authorities;
- Individual assessment and validation of skills and competences;
- Special action to help women access vocational training and maintain close links with their families;
- Training for the staff of prisons and the employment service, with a particular emphasis on the use of IT. The public employment service has tripled its resources for work within the penal institutions, by raising the staff/client ratio from one half-time post to the equivalent of 1.5 full-time posts per 1000 detainees.

Outside the penal institutions EUROP@CTE provides:

- Individualised integration pathways offering participation in public employment programmes (chantiers d'insertion) and personal guidance that responds to social problems and to needs related to health, housing or finance;
- Contact with potential employers and help in dealing with public administrations and services;
- Training for the staff of agencies that are involved in the integration chain including probation officers who are responsible for guiding the resettlement process.

### **Priorities for Future Work**

The EUROP@CTE team believes that, after several years of development work, firm foundations have now been laid for a sustainable network which mobilises the arsenal of re-integration services<sup>[1]</sup> and promotes equal opportunities for female offenders. The next step will be the formal adoption of a Convention drafted by the DP, that will bind organisations and authorities in the field of criminal justice, employment agencies, specialised NGOs and the social partners to continued collaboration. *"In our view, the fact that all key actors are ready to sign this agreement reflects a new mentality which supports our approach to multi-agency cooperation"* explains Jean-Luc Salmon. He is convinced that this network will operate well beyond the end of funding from the EQUAL Community Initiative.

The existing network offers a pool of experience that can assist the reform of the prison system<sup>[2]</sup> and benefit other regions of France. EUROP@CTE is already in contact with the Rhône-Alpes, Bretagne and Alsace Regions that want to use or adapt its approaches. This transfer is greatly facilitated by the fact that the strategic partners<sup>[3]</sup> involved in the DP represent regional branches of certain national services and via their networks, the methods and approaches of EUROP@CTE can be disseminated throughout the whole country.

A website on validated good practice in Europe is currently under construction (<http://www.europacte.org>), including an interactive data base for use by all partners in the network.

The DP is also involved in the European Programme for [Mainstreaming](#) the outcomes from EQUAL's work related to the re-insertion of ex-offenders. The most recent milestone in this programme was the [EQUAL Policy Forum on \(Ex\)-offenders](#) that was held in Warsaw, on 21 and 22 June 2007. EUROP@CTE contributed to the [Passport to Freedom Conference](#) in Lisbon, in October 2006, which brought together 55 DPs to gather evidence of successful practices, which formed the basis for [recommendations](#) presented at the Policy Forum in Warsaw. Moreover, the DP illustrates practical responses to some of the recommendations of the Council of Europe in this thematic field.[\[4\]](#)

However, despite its achievements the DP sees considerable scope for further improvements in the management of ex-offenders' transition to normal life. One aspect is the designation of a single contact point for access to the services that are available through the network. Another priority for action relates to offering assistance to prisoners serving a short term sentence of less than a year or people who are on remand. These target groups were not involved in the work of the DP up to now. And finally, a number of lessons learned from cooperation with transnational partners have not yet been implemented in the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur area, such as new forms of post-release peer networking amongst female ex-offenders that were successfully piloted by one of the DP's partners in the UK.

### Three Important Conclusions and Recommendations from EUROP@CTE

The operators in the EUROP@CTE team emphasise that:

1. *"Our network has demonstrated how the penal system can use existing re-integration services to better prepare prisoners for release. Current legal regulations provide for specific measures in this field but they are hardly ever reflected in practice. The management in each prison decides on inmates' participation in pre-release programmes and should actively involve external services in decisions on release and be more confident in drawing on their expertise;*
2. *Through mobilising and networking external actors, EUROP@CTE has opened up significant and sustainable new resources for transition management that help to make up for staff shortages affecting the prisons' capacity to prepare ex-offenders for release and that offer assisted pathways to re-integration into employment and the outside world;*
3. *Our involvement in an active transnational exchange of validated experiences from EQUAL has provided benchmarks for our activities and approaches. Information on such experience and new developments must continue to be available if innovative projects are to be able to identify, and stimulate the transfer of, good practice that has the potential to improve the delivery of existing services, in many other Member States."*

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Links to EQUAL database description:  
[EUROP@CTE](#) - [EUROP@CTE 2](#)