Situation of women in prison and impact of the imprisonment of parents on social and family life

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The European Parliament adopted, by 492 votes in favour to 24 against with 37 abstentions, a resolution on the situation of women in prison and the impact of the imprisonment of parents on social and family life.

The own-initiative report was tabled for plenary by Marie **PANAYOTOPOULOS-CASSIOTOU** (EPP-ED, EL) on behalf of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality.

Prison conditions: Members call on the Commission and Council to adopt a framework decision, on the basis of Article 6 of the EU Treaty, on minimum standards to protect the rights of prisoners, and asks the Council to circulate and promote the application of the Council of Europe's prison rules for the greater harmonisation of prison conditions in Europe, including the consideration of the distinct needs of women, and to set out clearly the rights and obligations of male and female prisoners.

Parliament asks the Commission to include in its annual human rights report an evaluation of respect for male and female prisoners' fundamental rights and of special prison conditions for women.

Among other things, Member States are called upon to:

- incorporate gender equality into their prison policies and detention centres;
- take greater account of women's specific circumstances and the often traumatic past of women prisoners, in particular through awareness-raising and appropriate training for medical and prison staff and the re-education of women in fundamental values;
- adopt the necessary measures to ensure the safety of staff and all prisoners by putting a stop to the situations of violence and abuse to which women and people from ethnic and social minorities are particularly vulnerable;
- set an investigatory committee and permanent monitoring systems for an assessment of prison conditions, in order to be able to detect any aspects of discrimination still affecting women in the prison system;
- incorporate gender mainstreaming into data collection wherever possible to render visible the problems and needs of women.

Recalling the 'specific nature' of women's prisons, Parliament insists that security and reintegration arrangements aimed at women be put in place. It also stresses the need to take measures to ensure that the distinct needs of women prisoners in terms of hygiene in penal institutions are better taken into account. In terms of maternity, pregnant women should receive antenatal and postnatal care. MEPs believe that the imprisonment of pregnant women and mothers with young children should only be considered as a last resort.

Maintaining family ties and social relations: Parliament recommends that alternative penalties to imprisonment should be favoured to a greater extent, particularly for mothers, provided that the sentence imposed is short and the risk to public safety low. In particular, Member States are called upon to:

- increase the number of women's detention centres and to spread them more evenly across their territory so that it is easier for women prisoners to maintain family ties;;

- encourage penal institutions to adopt flexible rules concerning arrangements for the frequency, duration and scheduling of visits;
- make it easier for families to stay in touch, in particular imprisoned parents and their children, unless this is counter to the children's best interests;
- create separate cells for mothers and their children, which are removed, where possible, from the ordinary prison environment;
- guarantee free legal assistance for all prisoners on matters relating to imprisonment, which, in the case of women prisoners, should be specifically geared to family law in order to address issues relating to fostering, adoption, legal separation and gender violence, etc.
- provide psycho-social treatment to ensure the best possible preparation for the separation of women prisoners from their children and to lessen the negative impact.

Social and professional reintegration: Members recommend that Member States should adopt the measures necessary to ensure that all prisoners, male and female, are offered the chance of adequately paid and varied work, without any segregation on the basis of gender or any other form of discrimination. MEPs consider it a matter of priority to ensure that, in each detention centre, male and female prisoners, who so wish, have access to personal guidance and mentoring for the planning, realisation and completion of their personal development and social reintegration.

Lastly, Member States are called upon to invest more resources, including through the application of Community financial instruments such as the European Social Fund and PROGRESS, for the development in prisons of lifelong literacy and education programmes and vocational training adapted to job market requirements and possibly leading to a qualification.