

From compassion to revolt: women volunteers talk

Men make up a majority of both prison inmates and prison staff. In contrast, external people working in prisons, who do not form part of the prison structure, are more often than not female. They carry out a variety of roles: from public servants in some countries (teachers and health workers) through to volunteers. Many of them work for associations that have been entrusted tasks by the public authorities.

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Genepi is a student association that coordinates the work of around 900 volunteers who provide more than 5 800 hours of workshops in prison.

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Genepi's offices are located in a building in the 19th district of Paris. Its rather bland exterior is immediately reminiscent of an administrative building home to the peripheral services of some ministry or other. As we arrive for our interview, we are struck by the nameplates on the letterboxes. They all refer to the prison world or its context: support for reintegration, victim assistance, probation services... headings all recalling different areas of the prison world but which are a far cry from the voices of those we are about to interview. Our interviewees all work within the context of an agreement with the French Ministry of Justice but their actions are in no way intended to legitimise the functioning of the prison system.

Genepi: an acronym evoking the freedom of a wild plant

Genepi is a student association that coordinates the work of some 900 volunteers. Divided into 37 local groups spread across the country, the volunteers provide more than 5 800 hours of workshops in prisons. Established in May 1976 following major uprisings in French prisons, the association was initially intended as a way for privileged students to contribute to a humanisation of the prison environment. The project was supported by Lionel Stoléru, advisor to Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing, that compassionate yet somewhat aristocratic former President of the Republic. No matter. On 10 August 1974, the newly-elected President Giscard visited a prison in Lyon keen on having a photo opportunity shaking a prisoner's

hand. He stated at the time that "prison should not simply mean the deprivation of one's liberty". No president elect has ever spoken so clearly since. A law-and-order ideology and innumerable powerful statements about "zero tolerance" to all and sundry have become commonplace in electoral propaganda. These days, you generally get elected by promising to build more prisons.

Genepi's first volunteers came from France's elite universities, like École polytechnique or Sciences Po, centres of excellence focused on the reproduction of France's economic and political elite. At that time, it was more as future employers that these students were carrying out their mission, one that would make them aware of the professional reintegration of former inmates. The intention was clearly a paternalistic one. Lionel Stoléru, the association's founder, saw it as students who were making a success of their lives reaching out to the rather less successful prisoners!

To begin with, Genepi was the acronym of the *Groupement Étudiant National d'Enseignement aux Personnes Incarcérées* (National Student Group for the Teaching of Inmates). In 2014, a members' assembly decided to abolish this name, which no longer reflected the association's true identity. Its members are no longer solely students although, in practice, the vast majority of them still are. Genepi furthermore no longer sees its mission as one of teaching, which assumes a transfer of knowledge, and nor is its work still solely focused on prison inmates. Quite the contrary, an essential part of its work now consists of raising "outside" society's

Prison offers a mirror into all forms of social inequality.

awareness of what goes on inside prisons. The association retained the acronym but now focuses on the freedom innate in its original meaning. The genepi is a tenacious flower that grows in the hostile environment of the Alps at heights of more than 2 000 metres. When macerated or distilled, it produces an invigorating liqueur, slightly bitter and much appreciated by mountain dwellers.

Over time, a great deal has changed. While Genepi has contributed a great deal to prison inmates, these latter are now helping to give new meaning to the association's work and to its volunteers' awareness. At Nanterre prison, a few years ago, it was the inmates who were giving Arabic lessons to Genepi students! Sometimes, long-term prisoners and persistent re-offenders reflect critically on the social processes that result in discrimination, marginalisation, insecurity, crime and incarceration. They have the time to read, to discuss among themselves. This can lead to a political awareness that fuels Genepi's work. From a starting point of compassionate intervention, the volunteers gradually decided to frame their action within a different context. This has not been without tension with the

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1. In France, civic service is intended for 16 to 25-year-olds. It enables them to work in not-for-profit associations. Their salary is partly covered by the State budget.

authorities, who take a dim view of the anti-establishment dimension of their work and are now reluctant to renew the agreements signed with the association.

A political voice "outside"

Eloïse, Genepi's communications officer, summarises this development. "We have gradually moved towards a more critical position with regard to incarceration. You cannot ignore the social determinants of prison. Our aim these days is to create a horizontal link with the prisoners. We learn as much from them as they do from us. We are seeking to make their political voice heard "outside". We want to decompartmentalise the prison institutions. We have to enable their voices to reach people they would not usually reach. French prisons are holding 70 000 men and women but these people are not simply deprived of their liberty: they are also far from their families and friends, living in overcrowded conditions and subject to double, triple or quadruple sentences if you consider the different aspects of their lives. To this must be added the migrants being held in administrative detention centres awaiting deportation although we refuse to organise workshops in these centres to avoid being complicit in the State's racism."

Clémence began working as a volunteer in 2012. She is currently doing her civic

service.¹ She is responsible for communications and advocacy. She explains her route into the role: "I began as a volunteer in 2012. I ran visual arts workshops in Villepinte for six months. The inmates really appreciate art workshops as they give them a few moments of respite from the daily grind. Then I began working with migrants. I came back to Genepi this year. You can't talk of discrimination or social justice without addressing the issue of prisons. Prison offers a mirror into all forms of social inequality. Even in an artistic workshop, the dynamics can be ambiguous. On the one hand, I can see how much the participants are enjoying it. The administration, however, are seeking to use it more as an incentive. It's all part of their carrot-and-stick policy. We have to deal with that while remaining faithful to our principles. We don't allow prison staff to be present in our workshops. And we refuse to accept surveillance cameras in the room. The trust this builds means we don't have any problems with the prisoners. We never ask them questions about their past. If they want to tell us about their lives, that's fine. But we don't insist on knowing. Unfortunately, we are unable to influence administrative decisions concerning who accesses our workshops. The prisoners find out about us by word-of-mouth. They ask to participate but the final decision is down to the prison's management. Some prisoners are discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or because of the crime they

have committed, particularly if it relates to crimes of a sexual nature. There is also often favouritism. Participation in a workshop is not a right but a favour. Those known as DPS in the administrative jargon (*détenus particulièrement sensibles* / particularly sensitive prisoners) are automatically excluded."

— Can you recall any story that particularly struck you?

Clémence: "Yes, the story of a young boy of North African origin. His father had left. His mother was having to cope all alone, in addition to holding down three jobs. There were seven brothers and sisters in all. He had few choices open to him in terms of finding a decent job. So he started dealing on a small scale. After his first prison sentence, he became a bigger dealer. He's now on his fourth or fifth sentence. He's been in and out of different prisons..."

Margaux was elected to the association's secretariat at the last General Assembly.

— What does an artistic workshop offer the prisoners?

"There are many different forms of artistic activity. These workshops enable them to express themselves, often by referring directly to the prison world but sometimes by distancing themselves, as in a workshop we ran with Brazilian transgender prisoners who drew brightly-coloured tropical landscapes. Not everyone is happy to draw or paint. We also make collages out of magazine cuttings. There are so many things that can be better expressed without words. On top of which, French isn't always their first language. In an Ile-de-France prison, we ran a photographic workshop. This created bonds between the prisoners. It was also the only opportunity they had to see outside people without surveillance. There are many forms of artistic expression: sculpture, collage, comic strips, photos. We have even created silhouette frescoes on paper. The workshops enable them to discuss their prison conditions, respect for rights, appeals and possible actions."

Eloïse returns to the profile of their volunteers. "We are primarily women. This has never created any problems with the male

Making inmates' voices heard in society

One of Genepi's activities is the publication of a magazine. *Passe-Murailles* ("Walking Through Walls") is a collection of articles written by volunteers and inmates. There are also contributions from alumni and others more loosely associated with the group. The aim is to keep a much-needed discussion on the prison world alive by sharing lived realities rather than myths and clichés. Each issue explores a particular theme. The latest (No. 76, March-April 2019) explores the inflation of crimes and sentences in the Criminal Code. It describes this overdose of repression, which is unfortunately not restricted to France. Other editions have considered the undercurrents running through the "fight against radicalisation", psychiatry in prison, alternative sentencing, and the "model prisons" that various European countries are planning on building. You can also read the "text book on impunity", which explains how the powerful - whether economic/political elite or the police - protect themselves. Despite financial difficulties, the magazine is sent free of charge to all prisoners that request it. Each edition is available in hard copy and pdf. You can view a list of issues and purchase them at: <https://www.genepi.fr/boutique>

inmates. We don't generally exchange personal information with the prisoners although there are exceptions. There are sometimes tensions with the prison staff, who don't always appreciate our presence. This is generally manifested in dismissive or sexist comments. The main problem is the significant turnover within our team. We have to conduct training on the justice and prison system and on prison conditions every year for the two-thirds of new volunteers. Many prisons have been built in the middle of nowhere, without easy access via public transport. For a two-hour workshop, you sometimes have to spend half a day getting there: on the metro, then walking through the mud to the bus terminus for a once-an-hour suburban bus to take you to a prison in the middle of nowhere. Not to mention the time it takes to get through the security checks on the way in. The way we work is very collegial and assemblies decide our overall direction. I would say around one-third of volunteers are studying law, another third psychology, and the rest different subjects. The student world of today is very different to that of 40 years ago. Many students now understand what insecurity is, having to take jobs here and there, social injustice. This activity transforms us. It leads to more and more political questions being asked. We discuss things among ourselves. Then we go back to our universities with everything this work has taught us. Sometimes, this transformation is a profound one. One of our volunteers dreamt of being a lawyer. On seeing how harsh the judicial system was, she decided against it. She wouldn't have felt at home."

— What differences do you see between men and women in prison?

All three speak out to respond that women prisoners are particularly invisible and

neglected. They often carry the burden of violence in their bodies. Men are generally supported by their partners, they come to visit and offer assistance. For women, this is less common. When a woman goes to prison, her partner tends to disappear into thin air. There are only two women's prisons in France (women's detention centre in Rennes and prison in Versailles). They are both in the north of the country. This means it is virtually impossible to visit if the family does not live nearby. In other prisons, there are women's quarters set aside within the male prison. All movements take place in isolation from the men, using footbridges and always under the supervision of guards. Given the levels of under-staffing, the women have to wait, and that wait can be endless. As a result, daily life becomes harder, more arbitrary. The possibilities of going to the sick-bay, the visiting room, to workplaces are all restricted. There are often fewer work activities on offer than for men. They primarily involve knitting, sewing or cleaning. Most of these women have been abused in their previous lives to the extent that, for some of them, prison almost seems like a refuge. The crimes they have committed are often related to the violence of the family structure. Women who have killed their violent husband, for example, or their children because they were unable to face up to their responsibilities. They may also have been complicit in their partners' crimes, sometimes passively, sometimes more actively.

The conversation with Eloïse, Margaux and Clémence is a long one. They clearly felt they were speaking on behalf of more than just themselves. Their voices in this bland meeting room were also those of a population whose plight rarely makes the front page. One last cup of coffee, smiles all round, and the interview is at an end. On re-reading our notes, we can see that our interviewees spoke almost as one person. Each person's words blur into the next to such an extent that it is difficult to know who to attribute each sentence to. This re-reading also more clearly highlights the links between this association and the plant whose name it bears. A bitter taste can be a tonic that jolts us awake. This, then, is the surprising path of an association that has built reciprocal relationships with the most precarious population in our society. ●

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