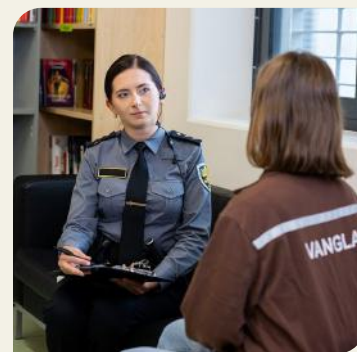


# Report: EPTA online Cross Border Training: Working with Female Detainees

3 OCTOBER 2025



## Introduction

On 3 October 2025, we hosted the EPTA Cross-Border Training on Working with Female Detainees, facilitated by the Training Institute of the Dutch Custodial Institutions Service.

The training focused on supporting women in prison. This interactive session explored gender-responsive practices in prison staff education and provided a platform for exchanging training approaches and experiences across Europe.

## About the Trainer

### Marieke Wildeman

Marieke has been working at the training institute in the Netherlands since June 2025. She primarily focuses on training programs for staff working in youth prisons. In addition, she is involved in the development and delivery of training for professionals working with incarcerated women.

Before she provided parenting support to imprisoned mothers. Thereby, she has gained experience working with this specific group. Prior to this, she worked for over ten years in higher professional education in the field of pedagogy.

## Context of the Training

In the Netherlands, women represent a small portion of the prison population and are housed in three facilities. Even considering these small numbers, they developed a **mandatory three-day training** for all staff working in women's prisons.

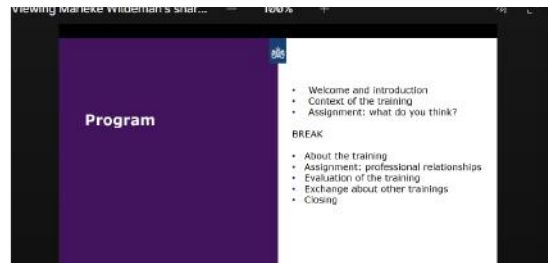
This session presented the creation and implementation of that training and is especially relevant for training academy staff and professionals involved in working with female detainees.

## Introducing the Training

The session opened with an introduction that invited participants to reflect on three guiding questions: **why they were interested in the topic of female detainees, what characteristics are typical of women in detention, and whether staff working with female detainees receive any specialised training in their country.** This framing encouraged a personal and professional exchange, allowing each participant to share their background and insights.

Participants from several countries contributed to the discussion, revealing a **wide range of practices and gaps in training.** Irish participants, for example, described their dedicated training program embedded within its female prison. Their staff are trained to recognise female detainees as a vulnerable cohort, which influences operational decisions. Other examples include Spain, which does not offer a dedicated training programme but seeks to integrate a gender perspective into its general training, and Georgia, which includes a brief session on female inmates within its broader training curriculum.

Throughout the conversation, participants used words such as “vulnerable,” “emotional,” and “mothers” to describe female inmates. There was an emphasis on the **importance of acknowledging gender differences in incarceration,** and that it is essential not to overlook the distinctions between male and female inmates. A trailer for a documentary was also shown, which concluded with the observation that women’s prisons are too often modelled after men’s prisons, reinforcing the need for gender-specific approaches



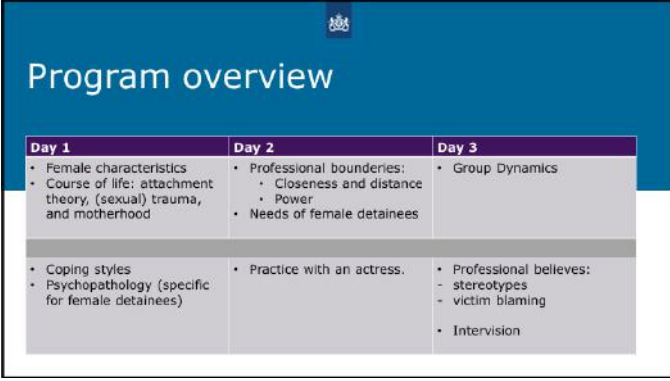
## First Activity in Breakout Rooms

In the first breakout session, participants explored three provocative questions: should men work in women’s prisons, is it harder to work with male or female detainees, and is training on working with female detainees unnecessary. The consensus was that women in detention have distinct needs and experiences, including histories of trauma and separation from their children, which must be taken into account. While some participants expressed concern about male staff working in women’s prisons, others argued that it is important for female detainees to interact with men, as they will eventually return to a society where men are present. The group agreed that training is not only necessary but crucial to ensure that staff are equipped to respond appropriately to the unique challenges posed by female incarceration.

## Details about the Training

The Dutch training program was presented as a model of best practice.

It is a three-day course that uses **case studies** to maintain a **practical focus**. The curriculum covers **physical, psychological, social, and criminological aspects of female detainees**. It also examines the life course of women in detention, with particular attention to **attachment theory and motherhood**. The training acknowledges that women tend to experience longer periods of abuse than men and that over **70%** of female detainees in the Netherlands are mothers, often serving as the primary caregiver. The program also addresses **psychopathology**, noting that men are more likely to suffer from antisocial and narcissistic disorders, which are typically emphasised in general prison training. In contrast, women often present different psychological profiles, and the training is tailored accordingly. **Professional boundaries** and **power imbalances** are discussed and **practiced** with **actors** to simulate real-life scenarios. The training also explores group dynamics among female detainees and encourages staff to reflect on **stereotypes** and how these may influence their attitudes and behaviour.



Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Female characteristics</li><li>Course of life: attachment theory, (sexual) trauma, and motherhood</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Professional boundaries:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Closeness and distance</li><li>Power</li></ul></li><li>Needs of female detainees</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Group Dynamics</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Coping styles</li><li>Psychopathology (specific for female detainees)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Practice with an actress.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Professional believes:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>stereotypes</li><li>victim blaming</li></ul></li><li>Intervision</li></ul>

## Second Activity in Breakout Rooms

The second breakout session focused on **the nature of relationships between staff and female inmates**. Participants discussed both the advantages and disadvantages of forming close bonds. On the positive side, many female inmates lack family support, and the rapport they build with staff can be deeply meaningful. Women tend to share more personal information than men, which can aid in rehabilitation. In some cases, it was mentioned that female detainees express to prefer for prison life because they feel they have nothing left outside. Participants agreed that it is not a question of closeness but of professionalism—staff must build trust while maintaining appropriate boundaries. However, there are risks. There is the potential for inappropriate relationships to develop. In some cases, participants expressed that female inmates may test boundaries through provocative behaviour or attempt to extract personal information from staff. One participant shared that some women have approached staff in public to thank them for their support, illustrating the emotional depth of these relationships. Another participant noted that if staff put up barriers, inmates will respond by putting up even stronger ones. There was also concern that some women may imagine relationships with staff that do not exist, further complicating the dynamic.

## Evaluation of the Training by Staff

The training program in the Netherlands was **evaluated positively**. Staff reported significant improvements in their ability to respond to female detainees, particularly in understanding their psychological needs.

The training helped staff feel more confident and better prepared. Suggestions for improvement included simplifying the language used in the training, incorporating more practical examples, and providing ongoing peer support within prisons. Participants appreciated the opportunity to practice scenarios with actors and valued the chance to exchange experiences with colleagues from other disciplines and institutions.

## Conclusion

The session concluded with a powerful reflection: **“By acknowledging the difference, you create equality.”** This statement encapsulates the core message of the training and discussions—that recognising the unique needs and experiences of female detainees is not a matter of special treatment, but a necessary step toward genuine equity in the prison system.

