



**AUTISTIC MINORITY INTERNATIONAL**  
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## About Girls and Women on the Autistic Spectrum

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I am Laetitia Sauvage, I have a mild form of autism. I represent “Alliance Autiste” and “Autistic Minority International”, two NGOs for the support and defence of autistic persons.

I am Monique Blakemore who formed the UK's self advocacy network “Autism Women Matter” and is an independent autism advocate.

Autism is a neuro-developmental difference common to 1:100 of the general population. But women are discriminated from accessing a correct diagnosis through a gender bias in diagnostic tools. Feminine autism has special features that make it difficult to recognise, as those women can be affected by a hidden impairment, struggling to recognise their own needs and rights. Autism thus impacts a woman throughout her life from accessing an education, fulfilling her intellectual potential in employment, discrimination against her as a mother and vulnerability to abuse.

### **1) Difficult Access to Diagnosis and Frequent Misdiagnosis**

Currently the gender ratio is 4 males for 1 female, though professionals now speculate that the correct figure could be 2.5 males for 1 female. Autistic women go through life not understanding themselves as individuals ; realising they are on the autistic spectrum can be life-changing. The feelings of being different, not quite fitting in and continual rejections were not their imagination but the result of undiagnosed autism. This can be a defining moment in their lives.

Autistic girls and women frequently receive very late diagnosis, often in adulthood, that is preceded by incorrect labels of depression, psychosis, anorexia and suffering from phobias and/or schizophrenia. These wrong diagnostics can be even more dramatic as they not only prevent establishment of appropriate support, but also frequently lead to inappropriate medication. This can include confinement in institutions that do not offer appropriate care.

### **2) Specific Social Integration Difficulties and Problems in the Workplace**

Women can struggle to access employment and retention in the workforce. Their social communication difficulties hinder the ability to comply with the professional field codes, which are not solely valued by the job skills, but the ability to be ‘amiable, cheerful and dynamic’, to participate in the life and culture of the company and to be ‘corporate’. Many, unable to withstand this pressure, suffer burnout or even dismissal, not for their lack of skills, but for their social inabilities. Autistic people are an underutilised human resource with only 15% obtaining fulltime employment with few reasonable adjustments in job selection, interview skills and transition into work. As women, they may also be mothers and carers of autistic children and the development of entrepreneurial skills may help women to utilise their strengths and talents towards financial independence. With recognition of their disability and the provision of reasonable adjustments in the workplace, professionals could avoid failures and help promote social inclusion of autistic women.

### **3) Vulnerability to Abuse**

Autistic women face multiple forms of violence, including financial, domestic, sexual and systemic breach of their human rights. They are not adequately protected. An autistic woman may struggle to recognise ill intent of others, misread tones of voice and body language, not see hidden meanings in language. They encounter discrimination in accessibility issues with communication, sensory and physical barriers. Training is required from all government, charity and private sectors including hospitals, counselling services, justice system and education facilities to ensure that autistic women are not being excluded from services that other women, who may have other disabilities, have access to.

### **4) Motherhood**

There are many fantastic autistic mothers who are intuitive to their child's needs. Many are terrific problem solvers and advocate well to meet their child's needs and there are other autistic mothers who need support in that role. But, there needs to be recognition of the differing parenting styles and some reasonable adjustments for families.

A negative stereotype of autistic parenting exists that, for a mother, can be a hindrance to her accessing formal diagnosis and supports. The negative stereotyping, failure to provide reasonable adjustments and failure to recognise the needs of autistic women, is forcing families into unnecessary processes of child protection and may even lead to forced adoptions away from autistic mothers, depriving them of their children. This fails to safeguard mother and child and their right to family life.

It must be said, frequently parents will homeschool their children when they have tried to access supports without success and bypass the educational system completely. Their children are often the most underdiagnosed and under support children in terms of systemic supports due to a failure of the system to include parents and therefore access appropriate levels of supports that the child may otherwise be entitled to.

### **Conclusion**

All of these problems, which are not unique to France or the United Kingdom, are exacerbated in countries where Autism Spectrum Conditions are less well known, leading to stigmatising behaviour, rejection and even more severe exclusions.

'Re-Thinking Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality' makes sense for us, the autistic women, who constitute an invisible minority with an undiagnosed status, vulnerabilities and ignored difficulties. However, for us to find our place fully in society and regain our status as women in our own right, it is essential to raise awareness and actively work to promote better recognition, better acceptance and better support for autistic females.

### **Contacts – For more Information**

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