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# The Autonomy of Young Blind Women in the Face of Institutional and Family Constraints in Metropolitan France, Early 20th Century

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## Résumé

Historians of the contemporary period have so far shown little interest in the lives of blind women, except in the case of Thérèse-Adèle Husson or Hellen Keller(1). Living in societies that promote the sexualisation of the female image, blind women find themselves in a complex situation, where injunctions to body beauty are strong and their capacities are denied on many levels, notably that of motherhood.

This paper focuses on the autonomy of young blind women in metropolitan France at the beginning of the twentieth century (1900-1939), in a context where they are subjected to the injunction of celibacy because of the promotion of eugenics. We study a wide range of individual trajectories of blind girls, from different social classes and geographical origins, who attended institutions in the provinces or in Paris, oriented towards musical education (INJA) or crafts. At that time, blind girls were mainly destined for the music profession - which was fairly valued socially - but also for the craft trades (brushmaker, chairmaker, pearl-maker) and sewing. The associations for the protection of young graduates play a central role in placing young blind women as teachers or workers in other institutions. Those who become teachers often earn a meagre salary, but are provided with room and board in exchange, while being obliged to remain permanently within the institution, with a very restricted freedom. A number of blind female workers marry other blind workers and become mothers.

This study is based on the cross-referencing of multiple administrative archives (departmental archives), institutional archives (archives of the National Institute for the Young Blind, archives of the Institut du Val Mandé, etc.), as well as the consultation of the digital press. These sources allow us to better understand the role of social supports (the family, educational institutions and associations) in the social and geographical mobility of these women. We will also look at the way in which these women, who are often victims of discrimination, deploy their agency and their desire for fulfilment and emancipation within the framework of strong institutional and family constraints. The sources make it possible to capture attempts at emancipation, such as refusing to attend classes in order to go on cultural outings, refusing a job offered by the institution's management that is far from the family and pays little, refusing to be housed within the institution, but also the desire to obtain a social promotion or to teach outside the framework of special education. These sources shed light on the situation of blind women who received economic or practical support from their parents

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\*Intervenant

and remained in the family home, contributing to certain craft activities. The sources also provide information on the case of blind women with no institutional support, who make a living from small jobs (street musician, etc.), sometimes helped by their husbands or children

(1) For example, Catherine Kudlick, " Modernity's Miss-Fits: Blind Girls and Marriage in France and America, 1820-1920 ", in Rudolph Bell and Virginia Yans (ed.), *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 201-218.