Gisele Pelicot’s ex-husband jailed 20 years in France mass rape trial

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Gisele Pelicot arrives at the courthouse in Avignon on December 19, 2024, as the verdict is expected in the trial of her ex-husband, with 50 others, accused of drugging her and orchestrating multiple rapes over nearly a decade. - A court in the French southern town of Avignon is trying Dominique Pelicot, a 71-year-old retiree, for repeatedly raping and enlisting dozens of strangers to rape his heavily sedated wife Gisele Pelicot in her own bed over a decade. Fifty other men, aged between 26 and 74, are also on trial for alleged involvement, in a case that has horrified France. (Photo by Clement MAHOUDEAU / AFP)  
  
A court on Thursday sentenced a French man to 20 years jail for committing and orchestrating the mass rapes of his now former wife Gisele Pelicot with dozens of strangers, but her children expressed disappointment at what they saw as overly-lenient sentences for the other men convicted.  
  
The convictions of all 51 defendants and their sentencing brought to a close a three-month trial that has horrified France, resonated across the world and turned Gisele Pelicot into an icon of female courage.  
  
Dominique Pelicot, who had already confessed to the crimes, was earlier found guilty by the court in the southern city of Avignon. His 50 co-defendants were also convicted by the court, with no acquittals.  
  
They received jail terms of between three and 15 years — less than what prosecutors had demanded. Two of these defendants had their jail terms suspended.  
  
The three Pelicot children “are disappointed by these low sentences,” said a family member, asking not to be identified, adding that there was “no question” of any of the children wanting to speak to their father after the conviction.  
  
Tension was palpable in the courtroom at the start of the hearing, where a heavy police presence was deployed.  
  
Many defendants arrived with their bags packed ready for prison. One of them was in tears as he hugged his companion before entering the courtroom.  
  
“Mr Pelicot, you are found guilty of the aggravated rape of Gisele Pelicot,” said the presiding judge of the criminal court in Avignon, Roger Arata.  
  
Delivering sentence, Arata said Dominique Pelicot will not be eligible for parole until he has served two thirds of his sentence.  
  
– ‘Justice for Gisele’ –  
  
Dominique Pelicot, 72, has admitted to drugging Gisele Pelicot for almost a decade so he and strangers he recruited online could rape her.  
  
His lawyer did not rule out lodging an appeal of the verdict.  
  
“We’re going to use the 10 days which we have to decide whether or not to appeal this decision,” Beatrice Zavarro told reporters.  
  
Gisele Pelicot, 72, has become a feminist hero at home and abroad for refusing to be ashamed, waiving her right to a closed trial and standing up to her aggressors in court.  
  
Alongside her ex-husband, 50 other men aged 27 to 74 have been on trial, including one who did not abuse her but raped his own wife with Dominique Pelicot’s help.  
  
Earlier Thursday, Gisele Pelicot arrived at the courthouse smiling and cheered by crowds of supporters and feminist activists waiting outside.  
  
They chanted her name and slogans like “Justice for Gisele” and “Shame has Changed Sides”.  
  
On November 25, prosecutors requested the maximum sentence against Dominique Pelicot for aggravated rape.  
  
It was widely expected that Dominique Pelicot would receive the full 20-year term but considerably more uncertainty had surrounded the sentencing of the other defendants.  
  
The prosecution had requested 10 to 18 years in prison against the 49 defendants also charged with aggravated rape. One of these accused is on the run and being tried in absentia.  
  
One more accused — facing the lesser charge of groping — had risked up to four years in prison.  
  
Thirty-two of the accused have attended the trial as free men while the others, including Dominique Pelicot, were remanded in custody.  
  
– ‘World has its eyes’ –  
  
“Rape affects women all over the world, that’s why the whole world has its eyes on what’s going to happen,” said Ghislaine Sainte Catherine, one of the members of the Amazons of Avignon feminist collective.  
  
Gisele Pelicot’s children David, Caroline and Florian arrived half an hour earlier, entering the courtroom alongside a group of men accused of raping their mother.  
  
“We came with our things for prison,” said one of the defendants, pointing to the sports bags on the ground.  
  
The case has sparked protests and drew fresh attention to male violence in France.  
  
Rights activists hope that the trial will lead to change in society.  
  
“It’s time that the macho, patriarchal society that trivialises rape changes,” Gisele Pelicot said in November.  
  
Her pictures dominated the front pages of major French papers on Thursday.  
  
“A verdict for the future,” said left-leaning Liberation. “Merci madame,” said L’Humanite, while La Provenance declared “the moment of truth”.