

“I’ve Gotten So Much Better than I Used to Be”

Recovering Identity through Relationships

Reading the transcripts of my three interviews with Chicken Wing, I was struck by the amount of laughter that peppered our conversations. After serving 21 years in prison, the 55-year-old Black mother of four adult children clearly was loving life. Indeed, the photographs she took for our PEI documented the joy she described feeling in what to many people would be unremarkable everyday activities, like getting a cup of coffee at Dunkin’ Donuts, riding the bus to work, and eating breakfast at the Billy Goat Tavern and Grill for four dollars and some change. She commented that the cheap breakfast was a notable improvement over the “slop” she had grown accustomed to in prison. Chicken Wing appeared in several of the photographs and was beaming in each one, including a photograph of her boyfriend and her at a church event on Christmas night just a week and a half prior. They were nestled together, their arms wrapped around one another. The three poinsettias in front of which they were seated and the fluffy Santa hat perched atop Chicken Wing’s head left no doubt this was a festive Christmas celebration. But the real feeling in the photograph came through in their wide smiles and what I perceived as an excited yet content look in their eyes. Chicken Wing’s smile was so big that her nose was scrunched up, creating a few wrinkles between her eyes. I asked Chicken Wing what the picture revealed. She immediately replied, “Happiness. ‘Cause I’m happy with him.” They had been dating almost the entire time Chicken Wing had been home from prison, since meeting at a 12-Step meeting. Chicken Wing explained, “We were in a AA meeting. And he gave me that look. And that was it.”

Chicken Wing explained how their relationship had grown over the past seven months. In response to my question asking what she valued about this relationship, she replied:

Just how we do things together all the time, you know. Really I never had a relationship like this. Even when I was in the street, I never had a relationship where I felt that we love each other at the same time. It's always I love you more or he love me more. We never was, you know, right there at the same time with it, like me and him, we love each other right at the same time. We like bein' with each other. We like talkin' to each other. You know what I'm sayin'? We like eatin' together. We like doin' things together. Like they had dancin' under the stars this summer downtown. We went there for the steppin' set. We had a good time. He videotaped it. We had a good time down there. We do a lot of things together. We go to the show. We just do a lot of things together that I never had that type of relationship with another man before.

Chicken Wing marveled at how different this relationship was. The sense of togetherness, mutual care, and fun she was enjoying had been absent from past relationships that had been characterized by her partners' infidelity and physical violence.

Chicken Wing held herself responsible for those past issues. She made a direct link between her sense of self and her previous partners' abusive behavior, noting how her insecurities and character flaws compelled her to act in ways that strained relationships with her partners. She explained:

Chicken Wing: I had real low self-esteem . . . I was glad somebody wanted me that was nice looking, you know. I never thought I was nice looking . . . I didn't like myself back then. You know, so I was always more into them than they was into me.

CR: So what, I mean, what type of problems or issues did that cause?

Chicken Wing: That caused a lot of problems, because I was like needy. You know what I'm sayin'? Don't nobody want no needy woman. You know? I argued a lot. If they wanted to go somewhere, I argued. I'm jealous-hearted. You know, like I'm sayin', because I never thought I was pretty. I never thought I looked good enough. You know. But now I do . . . But today I feel good about me. I like me. You know, back then I didn't. So I can see why the men really didn't like me. 'Cause I didn't like myself!

Chicken Wing explained how her changed behavior in her current romantic relationship reflected a deeper change in her identity: "God said He would make your latter years better than your first years, and I believe that now, because my latter years are better than my first years. And I was in the world! I'm a better person now since I did 20 years." When I asked her how she was a better person today, she responded:

I just can feel it. I just know I am. How I treat people, how I talk to people . . . I *give* now. I was selfish back then. You know, I was a taker. I'm not like that now. I don't

mind volunteerin' for somethin' now. Back then I would've never did that! I don't mind sharin' what I got now. Back then I wasn't like that. I was just out for myself. I'm not like that today . . . It's better . . . to be a giver, it's better.

In Chicken Wing's mind, since she no longer was a "needy," "jealous-hearted" woman who lacked self-esteem, she finally was able to enjoy a relationship with a man who treated her well and loved her for who she was. She explained this relationship only was possible after she became a new woman and learned to love herself. Stressing this point, she commented, "I'm not that *person* no more. I'm not the Chicken Wing that went to prison . . . He got the *best* Chicken Wing. He didn't want that Chicken Wing before I went to prison, so he got the better Chicken Wing. He got the best deal."

The photographs of Chicken Wing and her boyfriend and her reflections on their relationship were additional sites of identity work. As much as she was demonstrating how deeply she valued this unique relationship and the joy it had introduced to her life, Chicken Wing also was verbally and visually presenting a new identity. To do so, she used a similar narrative technique she and other women in this study used to discuss other parts of their identities: appearance, employment, domesticity, and mothering. She drew a clear boundary between her past *criminal-addict* self and her present *rehabilitated* self, and she used the familiar touchstones of the 12-Step logic, specifically independence, sobriety, and faith, to establish that boundary. Chicken Wing was no longer dependent on a man to have a positive view of her self, because, as she asserted emphatically, she liked herself today. She recognized her many positive qualities, which existed independently of what any man thought of her.

Chicken Wing further made clear that this positive, independent self was anchored in her sobriety and faith—commitments she and her boyfriend shared. They had met at an AA meeting and were both "in recovery from drugs," as Chicken Wing put it. They also had begun a formal process to attain recognized leadership roles within their church, which demonstrated their commitment to serving God through helping those in need. As Chicken Wing had commented, God was fulfilling His promise of making her "latter years better than your first years." For Chicken Wing, her new relationship, life, and self were signs of God's work and affirmation she was on the right path.

Chicken Wing's photographs and reflections centered an additional gendered marker of recovery—romantic relationships—that constituted the rehabilitated woman controlling image.¹ For the women who participated in this research, romantic relationships were the least salient part of their personal transformation processes. Unlike employment and domesticity, romantic relationships were optional. Whereas all of the women who were mothers discussed their relationships with their children, many women did not discuss current romantic relationships as part of our interviews. Still, the way women who mentioned

relationships talked about them was telling. For these women, relationships were an important site of identity work. Romantic relationships were not an essential part of the rehabilitated woman image, but they could only be achieved through personal transformation.

Romantic relationships that were free of drug use, coercion, infidelity, and abuse brought women in line with conventional notions of femininity. Despite significant changes in work and family relationships over the past several decades, women continue to shoulder the primary responsibility for care work in the United States, in practice and ideology. Similar to intensive mothering ideals, women's social value often is connected to romantic relationships, specifically marriage.² Failed relationships, particularly heterosexual relationships, often are read as reflections of women's inability or refusal to prioritize their partner and devote themselves to the work required to maintain the relationship. In contrast to the cultural trope of the happy, unencumbered bachelor, a single woman faces presumptions about her unsuitability for marriage, a sign of gender deviance since it violates deep-rooted social norms. These social expectations constitute the ideological scaffolding that supports systemic gender inequality.

Race and class shape these gendered social expectations about relationships. As discussed previously, normative femininity is a privileged social category defined in opposition to those whom it excludes. Similar to the ways slavery, colonization, and immigration policies have systematically denied women of color's mothering, these dehumanizing systems also have systematically disrupted loving interpersonal relationships. Criminalization is one vehicle through which these "enduring legacies" persist, systematically fracturing communities and relationships.³ Violent practices of family separation rely on the ideological justification controlling images provide. If women of color and poor women are not real women, then they lose any claim to the protection and reverence the social roles of mother and wife extend to socially privileged women. A host of race-specific controlling images paint women of color as inherently sexually deviant and promiscuous. As such, these images justify sexual violence against women of color by constructing them as unrapeable. These images also label women of color as incapable of and uninterested in maintaining a mutually respectful loving relationship with a romantic partner. While women of color are framed as incapable of such relationships, they also are blamed for not having them. Moral panics over the so-called breakdown in family value are laid at the feet of women of color.

The added layers of stigma associated with drug use and criminalization further cast criminalized women not just as social deviants, but also gender deviants. Sociologists and criminologists who study criminalized people's postincarceration processes have identified romantic relationships as noteworthy factors that support desistance.⁴ Social bond theory posits that prosocial attachments help people feel more connected to others and create disincentives for continuing participation in criminalized behavior, since people have something to lose. Along with

education and employment, relationships consistently are noted in this research as a significant social attachment. Research that incorporates an explicit gender focus suggests relationships are particularly important for women.⁵

For the women who participated in this study, relationships worked on an individual and ideological level. Individually, women frequently contrasted current relationships or imagined future relationships with past abusive relationships, much like Chicken Wing did. Ideologically, relationships characterized by mutual respect, trust, love, and sobriety countered controlling images of the “Jezebel” and “crack ho” that present Black women as inherently sexually promiscuous and immoral. The “crack ho” image, in particular, suggests a link between Black women’s drug use and immoral sexuality, invoking images of an unclean, unhoused woman who trades sexual favors for drugs. Depending on the context, the image is employed for cheap comic relief or to stoke fear and condemnation of depraved Black femininity. Either way, the image justifies the violence and derision leveled against these always already deviant women, whether by an intimate partner, community member, or state actor.⁶ In short, women’s depictions of their romantic relationships were a way to demonstrate their personal transformation regarding drug use and criminalization and contest controlling images.

Because relationships were such an important site of identity work, I conceptualize them as part of the rehabilitated woman controlling image. As with previously discussed gendered markers of rehabilitation, my intent here is not to critique women’s relationships. The absence of physical, sexual, and emotional relationship violence is an unqualified positive aspect of women’s lives. This absence should have been a given, and the fact that women had to work so hard to cultivate lives free, to various degrees, from this violence was telling. The feelings of fulfillment and being appreciated that women described were undeniable positive developments in their lives, as was the confidence women exuded when reflecting on a decision to end a relationship or to remain single. In analyzing women’s depictions of their relationships, my goal is to show how romantic relationships fit into a larger cultural script about what criminalized women’s recovery and rehabilitation should look like. It matters that women did not talk with me about having multiple sexual partners or, for the most part, romantic relationships with women. The similarities in the ways women talked about their relationships suggest they were engaging a cultural script about how relationships should be.

For the remainder of this chapter, I continue to use the previously established clean/dirty and fear/joy framework to examine women’s relationships as identity work that furthered overall processes of personal transformation. Romantic relationships were yet another gendered and raced way women created rehabilitated identities that brought them joy and affirmed their dignity. In the second half of the chapter I discuss women’s reflections on their friendships with other criminalized women. These reflections revealed how, throughout their incarceration, women relied on other women to survive the daily stresses of prison life and do

their time. Similarly, postrelease, women found a sense of community as they connected with other formerly incarcerated women and helped one another manage the challenges and setbacks they encountered. Women grew stronger in their own personal transformations as they did the work of recovery and reentry with supportive peers. I present romantic relationships and friendships together since both provided affirmation of women's value and dignity. Both mirrored back to women positive images of their selves as good people who were deserving of love and care, despite their past mistakes. That recognition of one's inherent worth was nurtured through deep personal connections and mutually affirming relationships.

TAKING THE TIME TO GET IT RIGHT

A common point women made when talking about positive romantic relationships today was the importance of not rushing into things. They shared a recognition that it would take time to build a stable relationship with a partner they could trust and be sure they both were invested in the relationship for the right reasons. Similar to the way women viewed their personal transformation as a work in progress, they indicated the need to be attentive to their relationships and address potential problems as they arose. Taking time to get to know a partner and ensure their priorities aligned was an important part of this relationship work.

Ann Williams, the 44-year-old Black mother of six who had taken the photograph of the dining room table at *Starting Again*, reflected on the slow process of building from a friendship to a relationship with a man she had met about a year ago at a 12-Step meeting. She hoped they would become "significant others" and explained, "I'm believin' in it, but it takes time. 'Cause you got to get to know each other. I always, in my relationships, I had never get to know the person. I just got into the relationship. So now, that's somethin' new for me." For the past year, they had been getting to know one another by "spendin' time, talkin', we call, we talk to each other every day on the phone. If he ain't called me, I'm callin' him. Every mornin' we talkin' and say good things to each other on the phone. We go out and we spend time. He helps me, I help him. A friend."

Like Chicken Wing, Ann made an explicit contrast between her past and current approaches to relationships and how that change was making things better today. She used similar language to describe establishing a strong foundation for this relationship as she had when discussing rebuilding her relationships with her children. Taking the time to physically be present, honestly talk, and actively listen to another person were new ways Ann was trying to establish genuine connections with people about whom she cared. She suggested that in the past, she had not invested in the relationships in her life. But that was the old Ann, who was distracted by drugs and periodically removed from her loved ones' lives by incarceration.

Like Chicken Wing, Ann attributed this new relationship to her sobriety and to God. She reflected on how her friend also wanted to take things slow. He told her he was not ready to be in a relationship, in part because he was living with his parents and could not financially provide for Ann. She welcomed this explanation, noting, "I was like, 'Wow, I was sayin' to myself, 'God, this must be the man sent from you.' 'Cause all other guys I had they didn't think all the good stuff like that. So I'm like, okay I don't wanna mess this up." She reaffirmed her hopefulness for their relationship: "All I gotta do is just keep doin' what I'm doin' and it's gonna fall into place . . . I think we think the same way. We on the same level. We both know what we want." Ann trusted things were happening for a reason, and she attributed the noteworthy turning points, like her most recent incarceration, and positive developments, like her growing relationship with her children, in her life to God's work. As long as Ann remained committed to working her recovery, she believed this friendship would grow into the relationship she desired. As pillars of the 12-Step logic, sobriety, faith, and personal responsibility were discursive resources Ann could use to make sense of her past, have hope for her future, and find joy in the required work to get there.

As hopeful and joyful as Ann seemed, she still noted the threat of falling back to her past life and past self, suggesting that concern remained a constant presence in her life. She did not just contrast the nature of her current friendship with past relationships in general; she made a specific distinction between this friendship and her past relationship with her children's father. She reflected on her vigilant work to prevent that past relationship from upending the progress she had made. When I asked Ann what problems she had faced since her release, she replied, "My kids' father. He's actively usin' . . . me and him used together [in the past] . . . he was everything to me. Like, everything. I thought I couldn't live without him, like everything. We did everything together." Her entire life prior to her last incarceration had centered around him, and while Ann did not blame him for her own problems with drugs, she recognized that his use had encouraged her own. Being "on the same level" as her current romantic interest, who also was working the 12-Step program, encouraged Ann's commitment to working her own recovery. For example, Ann explained how she was following the 12-Step directive to avoid "people, places, and things" associated with her past use: "It's different now, I don't hang out no more . . . as my thinkin' done changed. I don't go up there . . . kick it with them thinkin' I can still. No. I can't do that." Ann added that when she saw people with whom she used to get high, she just would "keep it movin'. 'Cause this ain't what I want no more. And I ain't lookin' down on you 'cause I ain't sayin' I arrived . . . I ain't exempt neither. I can easily be right back there again."

Even though the father of Ann's children was the person perhaps most strongly associated with her past drug use, she could not avoid him. All six of her children lived with him. In order to have a relationship with her children, she had to

engage with him.⁷ As such, Ann took care to limit the types of interactions she had with him and set firm boundaries on their relationship today. During a recent visit with her children at their father's home, Ann brought a case manager with her so she would not be alone. "That's like me goin' to a drug area and I'm clean," she commented. "I'm not gonna set myself up no more. I don't care, I'm just not. When you know better you just do better. So, if I go over there . . . I have to take some people with me. I got some people that I can just take with me inside. Used my tools. I'm learnin'. Use your tools. Don't go in the fire by your[self] . . . My life is on the line."

Ann suggested the precarious nature of her recovery and rehabilitation. It would have been easy to reunite with her children's father and have her family living under one roof immediately. But she identified that option as "moving backwards," and that direction would lead back to "hurt" and "trauma." She added, "Why would I go back? And that was like even when I was with him, I didn't really, it was pain, I didn't wanna be with him for real. It was always strife, argument, everything, so. I'm not confused about that." She identified her certainty about that decision as an indication she was on the right path. In the past, "I would've just stepped out there and went back to the usual. So I know there's growth."

Ann's thoughtful considerations revealed the connection between her romantic relationships and her identity.⁸ The nature of these relationships reflected how strong she felt in her newfound sense of self. Her ability to define the terms of these relationships in ways that felt safe and aligned with her personal goals reflected her growing independence and confidence. The nature of these relationships also reflected how strong she felt in her recovery. Her past *criminal-addict* identity was wrapped up in her past relationship with her children's father. Her *rehabilitated woman* identity made possible and was reaffirmed by her current friendship that, with enough time and care, had the potential to develop into a mutually supportive romantic relationship. By rejecting and redefining her relationship with her children's father and by asserting her hopes for her current romantic interest, she presented herself as a woman who had learned from her past and was committed to her ongoing personal transformation. Her relationship work was one and the same as her identity work. Through all of her identity talk, Ann credited God with the progress she was making and noted the importance of trusting God's plan. Again asserting she had moved on from her children's father, Ann explained, "See God, He do things in a divine order . . . And I don't even have that second thought. Nah, I'm not even fittin' think that. Why would I go backwards?"

Ms. Fields, the 47-year-old Black Afro-American woman who had explained recovery as working through the 12 Steps from start to finish repeatedly, also discussed how renegotiating her relationship with her ex-husband was a critical piece of her overall personal transformation process. As with Ann Williams, the 12-Step logic provided Ms. Fields with guidance on how to do so. Across our three interviews, Ms. Fields repeatedly referenced the 12 Steps as a framework she was

using to make sense of and guide her life. Within the first 15 minutes of our first interview, Ms. Fields plainly explained, “My whole reliance right now, you know, first on God and the program of Alcoholics Anonymous has helped me really see the truth in my whole addiction, which caused me to go to jail, lose my family relationship, lose my marriage, lose me goin’ back to school, lose my housing.” Ms. Fields departed from Ann, however, in that she was trying to reunite with her ex-husband and hoped they eventually would remarry. She believed her independence, sobriety, and faith would make that goal possible.

According to Ms. Fields, she had “manipulated” her ex-husband and used him for his money in the past when she was using drugs. Now, with just under four years of clean time, she explained she was capable of being a better partner to him because “I know how to love today . . . And I’m not that person who I was. You know. And I would not now do anything to hurt anybody deliberately, you know, I just won’t do it now . . . I’ve been transformed.” Ms. Fields said her ex-husband was interested in remarrying only after she could show him she had changed, particularly through her participation in AA and NA. He attended Al-Anon meetings, she explained, and “he heard that after a person works 12 Steps, that they have, you know, really allowed God to go in and, you know, let them see who they really are . . . so that’s what he’s waitin’ on.” Working through the full 12 Steps would reassure her ex-husband that she “won’t resort back to the old way.”

When I asked Ms. Fields how she felt about his stipulation, she said it gave her “hope” for their future and agreed she needed to work more on improving herself before becoming his wife again. She elaborated, “I do really want to be married, but I want to be able to be marriage material.” Ms. Fields clarified how she would know when she was marriage material:

One would be for me to have my own finances because I used to depend on his money so much and take all of his money. Yeah, I need to have my own money. I need to be able to bring somethin’ to the table. You know, school will allow me to do a lot of that . . . School teaches me so much discipline. And see once I do 12 Steps, it’ll allow me to do a balance. This is your space, this is your husband’s space, you know. Now if he lets you do all that stuff you do, ’cause you know you work, you go to school, you sponsor women, you praise dance, you holy ghost dance, you be with your sponsor, you go to all these meetings and all that, then you can’t invade on his . . . So, those [12] Steps’ll teach me how to be a wife, how to be a friend, how to be a neighbor, how to do everything . . . I’ve gotten so much better than I used to be. That’s why I can see that I’m getting to be, I can be that material. You know. It’s still gonna take some work.

Ms. Fields explained that only after she had attained foundational components of the rehabilitated woman controlling image—appearance, employment, and domesticity—would she be able to have a genuine relationship with her husband characterized by balance and mutuality.⁹ As she described, her past self was undisciplined and disordered, qualities that had undermined her marriage. The 12-Step

logic imposed a rigid structure and was helping her cultivate a disciplined, ordered self. As she saw it, those developments would make her a better wife. The success of her new marriage would reflect the changed person she was working so hard to become.¹⁰

ASSERTING AGENCY

Discussing positive romantic relationships in relation to personal transformation was not the only way women incorporated relationships into their identity talk. For some women, ending a relationship or not starting a relationship reflected their new self. Denise, the 45-year-old Black mother of five who had come to see Judge Hopkins as “Heaven sent,” shared perhaps the clearest example of this dynamic. In our final interview, Denise seemed conflicted when recalling breaking up with her boyfriend earlier that day. She explained he had hepatitis C, which he had contracted years prior through intravenous drug use. He had pressured Denise to have unprotected sex with him. She reluctantly complied and was worried not only about possibly contracting the disease but also about why he pressured her to do something that could harm her. She explained:

Sometimes I be wanted to tell him, “I don’t wanna be with you no more, because if you love me like you say you do, you wouldn’t have unprotected sex with me.” Now I don’t put the whole blame on him because I’m partially to blame, too . . . But I’m just saying, had I had any type of life-threatening disease and I know somebody say they care about me, and I know what I’m going through, these liver transplants, taking all this med[ication], if I loved you I don’t wanna see you go through that . . . So I had to try to tell myself, “Denise, he don’t love you, because if he did, he wouldn’t, not under any circumstances would he put you in harm’s way.”

His response when Denise ended their relationship reassured her she had made the right decision. Denise recalled:

The things that he was saying to me, it just really just told me he don’t care. He was like, “You know what? You know, you still the same dope fiend ass lady you was before you came into the program. You ain’t shit. You ain’t got shit. You never was shit. You ain’t never gonna be shit.” And I’m just sitting up here like, “Damn. You know, if he really cared about me, he wouldn’t say nothing like that to me.”

Although Denise expressed she wanted to get married someday, she determined this man was not whom she wanted as a lifelong partner. Their relationship echoed past relationships in which partners had abused and taken advantage of her. In previous interviews, Denise shared detailed accounts of the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse she had survived. She recalled how trapped she had felt in these relationships and how she would leave small, folded-up handwritten notes to God, asking Him to show her a way out, hidden in the pockets of her clothes in her dresser drawers. Denise’s current boyfriend’s abusive behavior took

her back to that time and to her *criminal-addict* identity. She commented, “I ain’t been talked down like that since I was sober.” She made a decision that prioritized her well-being and protected her *rehabilitated* identity. Ending this relationship reflected the new woman she had become.

In thinking through how she knew she made the correct decision, Denise recalled the many risks she faced in the past when she was using drugs, engaging in sex work, and partnered with abusive men. She described how lucky and grateful she felt that she had not contracted HIV or another serious disease throughout her drug use, and she attributed her relative good health to God. When deciding whether to end the relationship, she had thought to herself:

“But you sitting here, you throwing your life on the line after God done blessed you so many times. You know, you think you invincible. You know, that you exempt from the whole world. Everybody else can get this and get that, but God done blessed you so much. Girl, you covered in the blood of Jesus.” You know, and I really struggle with that because I don’t wanna keep putting myself in harm’s way.

Denise’s reasoning recalled Nyla’s imagery, discussed previously, of being under “God’s umbrella” and “in the light” while in her sobriety versus being outside “of His protection” and “in the darkness” while in her addiction. Even though Denise was not using drugs, the relationship with her boyfriend exposed her to the same risks she encountered when she had been. She noted, “I didn’t catch this shit when I was in my addiction, and now I’m sober. I’m still doing some crazy, dumb shit when I should be able to think clearly now.” It also is noteworthy her boyfriend’s hepatitis C status was the result of his past drug use, and stigmatized diseases such as hepatitis C and HIV often are associated with dirtiness. Although selflessly caring for relationships and nurturing partners align with conventional notions of femininity, this relationship could not be a marker of a “clean” *rehabilitated woman* identity. Rather, it pulled Denise back toward a “dirty” *criminal-addict* identity she still was working to leave behind. In this case, the absence of a romantic relationship reflected positive developments in Denise’s identity work.

Carmel, a 44-year-old Black woman who had been living at Growing Stronger for about nine months at the time of our interviews, also reflected on how *not* being in a romantic relationship was a sign of her new self. Throughout our three interviews, Carmel discussed how powerless she had felt to end her heroin and crack use. She commented, “I just thought I was gonna just die getting high. I wanted to stop, but, you know, it was like the feeling wouldn’t let me, or I just, I couldn’t stop usin’ it. No matter how I tried, I could not stop.” For approximately seven years during that time, Carmel had been in a relationship with Joseph. During our PEI, she reflected on a photograph she had taken of a building where they had lived together. Throughout their entire relationship, Carmel had used drugs. Joseph also had used for most of that time, with some periods of recovery.

According to Carmel, her ongoing drug use had made it difficult for Joseph to maintain his own recovery. Looking at the photograph of the building, she recalled:

He always thought that I would clean myself up, you know. I didn't wanna think about cleanin' myself up. I was in my own world and hey, you in yours, you payin' the rent, or whatever, so I'm gonna do what I wanna do up in here. And I would come in there and go in the kitchen and close the door to the bathroom and sit there and just, get high. You know, when the stuff ran out I would go in the room and I would bug Joseph for more money, you know, and he was like, you know, "I'm not giving you no more money," or whatever, and I start cussin' him out. You know, getting mad because he wouldn't give me more money to buy more drugs with. So I went outside the building, around to the front of this building, like right there, this is the front entrance of it. And, you know, I got to know the guys out there that was sellin' drugs. So, they let me work. They let me sell the drugs. I would take the drugs back around the corner to the house and take 'em upstairs and I be hiding them in the house where Joseph you know, he was even on parole, and that wasn't good for me to have drugs in the house and he on parole. You know, and he would never say nothin'.

As Carmel told it, she had caused many of the problems in their relationship. While describing what their relationship had been like, she commented, "I didn't wanna be a good woman to him, because I didn't know how to stop using drugs. You know, even when he was on drugs, he still was a good person and a good man to me." She elaborated, explaining how Joseph had taken care of her financially, was patient with her, and encouraged her to better herself, such as by going to school to finish her high school diploma. She summarized, "He always wanted the best for me. I can't even say he disrespected me, cursed me, abused me. He just didn't do none of that to me, you know. He was always somebody I could depend on."

According to Carmel, her ongoing drug use coupled with a death in the family eventually pushed Joseph to relapse. Together, their drug use escalated, and they both began selling drugs. They stopped paying their rent and lost their apartment. Each moved in with different family members. It was just a matter of time before they each were arrested on separate drug charges, Joseph first and then Carmel. Carmel participated in the women's drug treatment program at Cook County Jail and then was released on probation. Joseph was sentenced to prison and had been released a little over a week prior to Carmel's and my second interview. They had seen each other twice already, for the first time in two years. They had met privately for dinner and talked for a few hours. Having just been released, Joseph needed essentials, like his state ID and help with transportation. In a role reversal, Carmel was able to provide for him. She gave him a few bus cards, cigarettes, and some movies. "All the help he done for me . . . I shared what I have with him," Carmel said. Two days after their dinner, Joseph accompanied Carmel and some of her family members to church and then joined them for a meal at her aunt's home. Carmel shared two photographs of her and Joseph from that day. In both

photographs, their arms are wrapped around one another, in a sideways embrace, and broad smiles are plastered on their faces. Carmel commented, “I can see the happiness in the picture, for both of us.”

A lot had changed in the two years since they had been together, so it was not a matter of simply picking up where they had left off. Carmel explained they were at the beginning of a new process of getting to know one another. She elaborated, “He don’t know me. But I know him sober, and I know him clean. But he don’t know me . . . He don’t even know the person I am. And he said it. He said, ‘You totally, you know, like a stranger.’ And I know I am . . . You know it like put him in a state of shock or somethin.” Carmel was so different from the woman Joseph had known throughout their seven-year relationship that he was uncertain how to interact with her. She commented, “I had to tell him it’s okay to hug me. He wouldn’t even hug me . . . ’cause he didn’t, he don’t know how I would’ve reacted.”

While Carmel still cared for Joseph and was happy to see him again, she did not want to resume their romantic relationship. Commenting on her different feelings for Joseph today, she explained, “But I can’t see us bein’ together. I don’t see it, and I see us bein’ friends.” She stressed she was focused on her own plans, a focus that even was reflected in their getting together on a Sunday and attending Carmel’s church. I asked Carmel why they met at church rather than at a restaurant as they had a couple of days earlier. She replied:

‘Cause I wasn’t gonna let him distract my goals and my plans that I had been doin’ for me. He either could’ve waited ’til I got out of church and I would have met him somewhere or he could’ve came and joined church because that’s what I do every Sunday. And that’s my schedule . . . I’m not turnin’ around my schedule for him or nobody.

She had not contacted Joseph throughout the following week, because she was busy with her schoolwork. Carmel was focused on maintaining “the new me,” and the foundational components of her new identity were her relationship with God, sobriety, school, and independence. She was not going to let a relationship, even a supportive one with a “good man,” disrupt the structure she had put in place to nurture her recovery.

These findings offer important nuanced insights about the connection between romantic relationships and identity for criminalized women. Romantic relationships did provide an important “hook for change” that could facilitate identity transformation.¹¹ But at times that transformation was reflected through *not* being in a relationship. Furthermore, being in a relationship was far less important than the meaning women attached to those relationships. The ways women negotiated, understood, and talked about romantic relationships provided opportunities to affirm the rehabilitated woman identity. These relationships were a significant site of gendered identity work to the extent women made them so. Thinking and talking about these relationships provided women with an opportunity to reflect on their personal transformation processes and take stock of the progress they had

made. Whether talking about past partners or potential romantic relationships with new partners, women consistently framed the nature of their relationships as a reflection of their selves. Women associated chaotic, contentious, and outright abusive relationships with their *criminal-addict* identities. They were self-critical of what they had contributed to these relationships and, at times, identified problems in the relationships as reflections of their own personal flaws, such as Chicken Wing's self-described jealousy or Ms. Fields's self-described manipulation. For women who now were enjoying mutually fulfilling romantic relationships, they described those relationships as possible because of the deep identity work they had done.

Additionally, much like personal transformation, romantic relationships were a dynamic process characterized by movement forward and backward.¹² The women in this study revealed that such movement was interconnected. As a marker of the rehabilitated woman, romantic relationships moved between the familiar poles of fear and joy, "dirty" and "clean," and dependence and independence on the spectrum of criminalized women's identity work. Women discussed reuniting with partners who had been part of their past drug use as a risk that could lead them right back to the *criminal-addict* identity. Relationships with new partners that mirrored dynamics in past relationships posed a similar risk. For some women, any romantic relationship was too risky, as it could divert focus from their attention on their continued self-improvement. In this framing, women's overall personal improvement—as evidenced by markers like sobriety, commitment to the 12 Steps, and employment—allowed them to experience the joy of romantic relationships free of exploitation, coercion, and abuse. Whether women decided to commit to, end, or abstain from a relationship, the decision was theirs alone, reached after careful consideration about what they might gain or lose. Those decisions reflected growing autonomy and confidence in one's self.

There likely was not one single discourse that shaped women's evolving views on relationships.¹³ Along with parenting classes and 12-Step meetings, however, domestic violence and healthy relationship classes were a regular part of programming available to criminalized women in jail, prison, and community settings. Recovery homes, including Growing Stronger and Starting Again, frequently hosted relationship groups on-site. Some women also were required to attend domestic violence counseling as part of probation or parole conditions or Child Protective Services (CPS) cases. Ranisha, the 34-year-old Black woman who gave birth to her youngest child while detained at Cook County Jail, initially did not understand why her CPS caseworker required her to participate in domestic violence counseling, because she did not think she had experienced domestic violence. After participating, though, she learned "a lot of it did apply to me, you know, mentally and emotionally, so I mean I learned and I benefited from it." When I asked for an example of how she benefited, Ranisha replied, "As far as like

being controlled emotionally, or mentally . . . I know how to set boundaries with that. You know, I know just what I'm not gonna accept period. You know, no ifs, ands, or buts about that. I know that."

Based on the reflections of Ranisha and other participants, these classes seemed to provide education about warning signs of abusive behavior and encourage women to have a strong enough will to reject such behavior. Additionally, these classes seemed to stress to women they did not deserve to be abused, real love did not hurt, and they were not alone. Manipulative, exploitive, and violent relationships were signs of a disordered life where women were not in control. Such relationships also made women vulnerable to further surveillance and judgment, from the criminal legal system and CPS, and even reincarceration.¹⁴ Asserting self-worth in relationships was one way for women to gain control over their lives. This connection between a healthy self and a healthy relationship might help explain why participants did not necessarily identify partnering with a man as a sign of accomplishing femininity. Developing a relationship that was free of coercion, violence, and drug use—or remaining single—was the paramount concern. This conceptualization of a healthy relationship could be deployed by women who identified as lesbian or bisexual, despite service providers potentially holding discriminatory views.

CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY: "NOT BEING THE ONLY ONE"

Women frequently reflected on friendships they developed with other criminalized women, throughout their incarceration and after release, as important relationships that provided critical support and reaffirmed their humanity. These moments of connection were particularly important given that incarceration was a deeply isolating experience. Women were separated from their family members, friends, and communities, as the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) shipped them to distant locations in central and southern Illinois to serve their prison sentences. Keeping to themselves was a common survival strategy women practiced to avoid problems with correctional officers and other incarcerated women. Despite frequent references to conflicts that erupted among women in jail and prison, women also focused on the care they received from and offered to other women. A sense of community emerged as women shared resources and strategies on how to get by, and that community, both literal and abstract, extended beyond the prison walls.

Ann Williams and Sharon, the 44-year-old African American mother who had helped her son secure a spot at a men's recovery home after his release from prison, were just two women who noted the critical support they received from other women throughout their multiple prison sentences. Ann stressed how alone she

had felt while incarcerated, because she had no family members on the outside to put money on her commissary account. The other women helped her, though, by letting her know that she could submit a request with one of the correctional officers for a care package and by sharing their items. Birthdays could be particularly painful, with no cards or gifts arriving from loved ones on the outside, but Ann fondly recalled the last birthday she spent in prison:

They went out of their way and showered me and made a card. See, they say the little things can touch your heart, and . . . I was thinkin', you know, what they gon' do? They made that day really special for me! And I still to this day got that card . . . they sung happy birthday, they made food for me . . . we had like a little grab bag, and then they had little stuff on my bed. I went and took my shower, and I came back, all my little treats and stuff was on my bed, my card. It was really nice. I really enjoyed that . . . they really made me feel loved and excited and happy . . . that was a great experience for me.

The community of love and support Ann experienced carried her through particularly difficult days and helped her make it through her sentences.

Although she described herself as someone who kept to herself, Sharon also reflected on the relationships she developed while in prison. She discussed growing close with one woman, who ultimately died after correctional officers ignored her pleas to see a doctor for her asthma. Sharon recalled being “heartbroken” by the woman’s death: “I was so hurt because when I first came on the unit with this young lady, she didn’t know me, and she walked right up to me and just start, she had a care package, she didn’t even know me, she gave me food, deodorant, and stuff . . . and ever since, we became close.” Like Ann, Sharon stressed how important these moments of connection were in prison and how something as seemingly simple as giving someone deodorant was a humanizing act in a deeply dehumanizing place.

As women left prison, they also developed friendships with other women with whom they lived at recovery homes. In fact, women commonly learned about recovery homes from other incarcerated women who recommended which places could offer the most help. During one of our interviews, for instance, New Life referenced the staff member who was working at Growing Stronger’s front desk. She commented, “My friend Monique . . . she was in there [prison] with me, and when she left, she said ‘I’m goin’ to Growing Stronger, New Life, and it’s a beautiful place.’” Once Monique was released and moved into Growing Stronger, she wrote to New Life in prison and told her all about it. New Life continued, “She was like, ‘Girl, Christmastime, they gave me so much stuff, and we’re so clean here you won’t even think it’s a recovery home.’ And it’s like it never left my mind, Growing Stronger.” As discussed previously, New Life now considered Growing Stronger and its staff a pivotal source of support that was helping her maintain her sobriety, deepen her faith, and strengthen her relationship with her children. She had Monique to thank for connecting with that community.¹⁵

While women noted conflicts and tensions that arose in these communal living spaces, they highlighted how women helped one another. A theme that emerged across women's photographs was the sense of connection they felt to other criminalized women, frequently represented in pictures of housemates and recovery home activities. Sharon, for instance, took photographs of a close friend at Growing Stronger:

She's a sister that I always wanted . . . She's down to earth . . . she talks to me, because like my real sisters never talk to me and . . . on a daily basis she asks me what's wrong with me. She . . . calls me on a regular basis, asks me how I'm doin'. Even when I take my weekend pass, she calls and checks on me. And my real family don't do that, but she does it . . . and it makes me feel good and it makes me feel loved . . . She talks to me about anything, and I can talk to her about anything and it stays there. It don't go anywhere.

Red, the 41-year-old Puerto Rican woman whose photographs of Starting Again presented in chapter 3 symbolized God and the 12 Steps, similarly took a photograph of a couple of residents at Starting Again to show the impact they had on her life. She described how much she appreciated one resident who voluntarily cooked for everyone in the house and explained that the women depicted in the photographs were "here like me" and symbolized "a second chance in life, you know, that I'm not alone, 'cause I'm really not alone with them . . . They don't let me be alone." Prison fundamentally changes the nature of family relationships, structuring when and how incarcerated people can be in their loved ones' lives, if at all. The consequences of those changes persist long after release. Friendship networks helped fill in the holes prison had "punched" into women's care networks.¹⁶

Denise also used photographs to show the togetherness she felt with fellow Growing Stronger residents. During our PEI, she commented on a photograph a friend had taken of Denise standing next to a Michael Jackson impersonator. In the photograph, Denise and the man stand side-by-side, posing playfully for the camera as they wait for the red line L train. The man wears a version of Michael Jackson's iconic red and black leather jacket, adorned with multiple zippers, Jackson's trademark black fedora, and a sparkly, silver glove on his right hand. Denise stands to his right, mimicking his body language. Both lean slightly, with their right hips jutted out and their left legs slightly bent. Their right arms are raised, the man seemingly waving at the camera with his single gloved hand, and Denise making a peace sign with her purple-gloved hand. Denise looks stylish in a cropped black leather jacket, cozy gray turtleneck sweater, light gray jeans, and black snow boots. She flashes a bemused smile, while a full smile extends across the impersonator's face. Next to the impersonator is an advertisement for Coors Light that reads, "GET ON THE RIGHT TRACK," a noteworthy irony since Denise and her friends were on their way to a 12-Step meeting. Looking at the photograph, Denise commented, "I just seen an opportunity . . . to get some entertainment, you know, 'cause they say that you can have fun in recovery, so I caught myself creating some."

Similarly, Moon, a 40-year-old African American woman, shared photographs from a bowling trip Pastor Geraldine had organized for Growing Stronger residents. "I haven't been bowlin' since I was a kid," Moon said. She laughed while flipping through photographs that showed several of the Growing Stronger residents, including Moon, in action as they bowled, posing for the camera, and cheering on each other. In one image, a woman has fallen down on the alley, after a presumably failed bowling attempt. In another, Moon watches her ball roll toward the gutter. In several images, Moon plays to the camera, looking over her shoulder and striking a quick pose before hurling the bowling ball down the lane. In one, she has stopped mid-approach and strikes what looks like a dance move from a musical, both arms outstretched, holding a bowling ball in one, and dipping forward as if she's about to touch the floor with her free hand. The images leave no doubt it was a fun trip, as all of the women are smiling and laughing in each photograph. In one photograph, Moon and New Life stand back-to-back, posing for the camera. New Life holds her bowling ball in front of her chest, as if she's getting ready to take her turn. Moon leans back onto New Life, her bowling ball resting on her left thigh. When I asked Moon what the picture showed, she replied, "That picture shows us happy at the bowlin' alley . . . it's just like a sister thing . . . it was like a come together and like a fun thing. It's like she's [Pastor Geraldine's] teachin' us to have fun in our new life."

In the context of what the women had been through and the many challenges they continued to face, these moments of silliness and joy took on added meaning. The photographs evoked a sense of freedom associated with being able to get lost in the moment, having fun with a street performer or revisiting a childhood activity. Such activities were not possible while women were incarcerated, and they likely were improbable while women were in the midst of their drug use, typically struggling with poverty, homelessness, and routine violence. Photographs that may have seemed unremarkable at first glance actually conveyed significant meaning about women's lives and identities. These joyful moments reflected women's rehabilitated identities. Denise and Moon, for instance, explicitly connected these moments to their sobriety. Furthermore, women's rehabilitated identities were nurtured through relationships. Being part of a community provided a sense of acceptance that largely had been absent from women's lives and assured women they were deserving of love, support, and a second chance.

Women also used photographs to document more formal group experiences. Carmel shared a photograph of her classmates and her at an adult high school where she took classes and eventually earned her high school diploma. Reflecting on the photograph, Carmel said, laughing, "They mean a lot to me because we struggle, all of us struggle . . . We're trying to stay clean. All of us in this picture are recovering from alcohol and drugs and prison, coming out of prison and stuff. That little group right there." She explained how school was a collective experience that promoted connection: "There's no one in there arguing and fighting and stuff like that. Everybody is a help to one another, and we worked so hard . . . We give

each other hope and strength . . . ‘Come to school tomorrow, you’re gonna get it. We’re gonna get this graduation and stuff. We’re gonna graduate together.’” The students were not just committed to their individual success; they were committed to their collective success. Carmel clearly valued the community she found at school and the opportunity to both give and receive encouragement and support. The students’ shared life experiences—positive and negative—created a bond that strengthened their commitment to their personal transformation processes.

Some women noted the importance of connecting specifically with other women who had similar life experiences. Denise shared a photograph from a Growing Stronger event where alumnae spoke about their accomplishments since leaving the recovery home. She said the photograph revealed “recovery. Everybody in here is sober and got a new start. That’s why I asked to take it. I said, ‘These are all my . . . sisters.’” Nyla similarly noted the importance of being connected to women who personally could understand what she had been through and the challenges she continued to face. Referring to Women Helping Women, the month-long peer health education group where we had met, Nyla said:

I felt a part of a group of women, I was around a group of women . . . I don’t want to get to the point where I don’t want to talk about stuff . . . I don’t want to get to the point where I shut down. I don’t want to get to the point where I start believin’ the lies again . . . and I truly don’t want to get to the point where I feel that I’m inferior, I’m less than . . . I don’t measure up, and I’m not worthy.

Nyla implied the tenuous nature of her rehabilitated identity and how being alone could undermine the positive sense of self she was working to maintain.

Through her photographs, Moon documented her participation with other Growing Stronger residents in a One Billion Rising event.¹⁷ She described how much she enjoyed the afternoon:

We danced and celebrated ourselves . . . we don’t have to be quiet and sit back and take it . . . it was just like a good thing to do with a bunch of women . . . we’re not the only ones, even though we’ve been to prison and rehab, and . . . drug abuse and stuff. It was women there that wasn’t been through that, but they been through the traumatic part like rape and . . . beat up and . . . just abused period. And they was all there celebrating the fact that you don’t gotta take that anymore . . . It was wonderful. I’ve never . . . seen anything like that. So it was wonderful to see so many women comin’ together just to celebrate being a woman, you know . . . We got rights and stuff like that, so it was like a feminist sort of thing . . . It was all women . . . together on one accord, to celebrate freedom . . . especially freedom of not being the only one. That’s what was the most important thing to me . . . Not being the only one who’s gone through some of these hard experiences.

Like Denise and Nyla, Moon stressed the collective nature of her recovery, not only from drug use but also from violence, as the critical factor that was helping her move forward. She knew she was not alone, and this knowledge provided her with a sense of power and strength. Formal events like this one and informal

events like bowling provided Moon with critical reminders of her self-worth and her connection to a larger community, both literal in the sense of her Growing Stronger sisters and abstract in the sense of the countless women around the world who were survivors like Moon.

Importantly, the sense of community women began to develop spanned the prison walls. Once released, women did not forget about the women they had left behind. Women frequently expressed concern about specific friends, as well as the thousands of women, in general, who remained behind bars fighting to survive the daily cruelties of prison. Ella, the 46-year-old African American woman who successfully had her record sealed and now worked at Growing Stronger, commented on the women she met in prison who were serving life sentences: "For some people to know that they're never leavin' there, I don't know how I would deal with that. I think for me knowin' that I had a out date made it better for me, because I knew each day that I'm in there, I'm gettin' closer to my out date. But if I knew that this was it for the rest of my life, that's a lot to swallow." Similarly, Ida, a 49-year-old African American mother of three adult children, empathized with women who remained in prison. She noted, "I've got to meet a lot of young ladies at Dwight, a lot of young ladies in Lincoln . . . and a lot of them have shared their stories with me . . . and they say, 'You know what? You can go back home to your family, we can't.' Some of us girls that's locked up in prison, will never come from behind those bars."

Through communicating with one another in prison, women learned there was more to people's stories than the charge for which they had been convicted. Ann Williams described slowly getting to know the other women with whom she was incarcerated and "understanding [them] . . . getting that connection, feeling them . . . There's some women in there ain't never gon' leave . . . And just looking around and seeing . . . we all made bad choices and mistakes. You know, but we still good people." Rather than distance herself from the "lifers," Ann related to them, using "we" to refer to their common experiences of criminalization and imprisonment. Regardless of their "mistakes," they all are "good people."

Ella, Ida, and Ann Williams revealed how the effects of incarceration linger long after release. In addition to the well-documented collateral consequences of incarceration, these women suggested how the experience of incarceration shaped their beliefs and values. Now that they knew about the thousands of women incarcerated throughout the country, many of whom shared similar life experiences, they could not forget them. They were transformed by these women's stories. Even though they no longer were physically bound by the prison, its presence loomed. Ella suggested as much with a photograph (figure 21) she took of the window out of which she looked during her daily shifts at Growing Stronger. Now an employee who took joy in supporting Growing Stronger residents, Ella had lived at Growing Stronger upon release from her last incarceration approximately seven years prior. The window served as a daily reminder of how far she had come. Ella wrote a poem to accompany the photograph:



FIGURE 21. Ella's window (Photo credit: Ella).

Looking out that window so many days, so close but yet so far away.
 Well, not today.
 Because I'm finally looking and seeing from the other way.
 Appreciate and celebrating just being free.
 The window that I used to look from and see was when I was in the penitentiary.
 Now that I'm free, it's really made a big difference for me.
 I thought that I appreciated the gift of life, right? Nope. Wrong.
 I appreciated being able to smell the flowers, the grass, and looking at the trees.
 Being able to open up a window or a door or going to the store.
 In the penitentiary, it's called commissary.
 And it's only done once a week.
 That's if you have money and you fill out a commissary sheet.
 Today I can truly say that I'm grateful for whatever comes my way.
 If it's a bad or a good day, it's ok, because I'm out here living and not locked up
 in a way.

While Ella's reflection on the window centered on freedom, I was struck by the way the window also provided an ever-present reminder of her incarceration. The window's connection to Ella's daily work to keep women out of prison added yet another layer of meaning for me. With women continuously cycling through Growing Stronger, some moving on to their own apartments but others returning to past lifestyles and eventually prison, the window symbolized how "reentry" is a liminal space with porous boundaries. Prison was not a past experience. It was a constant presence.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Women's memories of others with whom they had been incarcerated and their friendship networks with other criminalized women and survivors of gendered violence fostered a growing awareness of how their individual stories connected to a larger social story about women's incarceration. Through its efforts to punish, reform, and monitor criminalized women, the state paradoxically brought them together in jail, prison, and recovery homes, creating opportunities for a collective consciousness to grow, despite the individualizing focus of the 12-Step logic. As women began to view their situations as part of a collective experience and not just an individual problem, they began to critique how the criminal legal system operated. If they could be transformed, why could not other women who still were locked up? If they benefited from drug treatment and supportive services, why did prison have to be so harsh? Women's embrace of the 12-Step logic and their commitment to personal transformation did not foreclose critiques of the criminal legal system as unfair, racist, and needing reform. In fact, the opposite occurred. Because this personal work happened in community, it fostered such critiques.

Corrine, the 63-year-old African American woman with a master of social work degree, described the tension she felt between accepting personal responsibility for her past behaviors and being critical of how little support she received to deal with what she had described as years of trauma that was the underlying cause of her ongoing drug use and criminalization. She remembered "having good desires and intentions after serving time to go home and do the right thing . . . and not finding that the community support was . . . there for me. Or the family support." Now, as a social worker who worked for a women's treatment program within Cook County Jail, Corrine walked a fine line daily between encouraging women's individual change and recognizing the odds were stacked against them. Her goal with her work was:

To educate and empower and to give women hope that . . . their lives can change with some determination and strong willpower and footwork. However, even in promoting that, it's sad because women often do not have the adequate resources once they leave the jail. And that's a big impact on them succeeding in their reentry process back into the communities, and when I mention the resources I'm thinking more of housing, safe living environments . . . many of them will be forced to return right back to their communities, but also without the skills that they need in order to be successful in their reentry process.

As a result, Corrine saw the same women return to her program and described jail and prison as a "revolving door." Rather than blame the women, Corrine recognized "the state today plays a big part, because they have removed funding . . . for rehabilitation for these women, and . . . the money is just not there for services." Based on her own criminalization experiences and now working with criminalized women, Corrine developed a structural critique of the criminal legal system.



FIGURE 22. “Having fun being kids” (Photo credit: Moon).

She suggested a personal commitment to change was not enough; systemic change also was needed.

Women’s critiques also centered on how racism and economic inequality structured the criminal legal system, specifically whom the system targeted and how the system treated them. Moon, for instance, discussed the unequal life chances children faced based on whether they were born into rich or poor communities. She noted that children who lived in well-resourced communities benefited from private educational programs, while children in underresourced communities were left to struggle on their own, as she had as a child. Reflecting on a photograph she took while attending a basketball game at a local university, Moon described how hopeful she felt for the young people she saw in the stands (figure 22): “I was like, man, now that’s what’s up, showin’ these little kids that it’s more to life than just the block, you know?” She was happy someone was encouraging these young people to see ways their lives could be different from what they routinely observed in marginalized communities.¹⁸

Moon was so moved that she had approached the adult chaperone for the youth group and told her:

“Take the kids and let them see like the Black colleges, Morehouse and stuff like that. Let them see Arkansas, Pine Bluff, Mississippi State, let them see that there are Black

kids doing other stuff, too, besides the 'hood" . . . It gave me a good feeling to see all these kids in a good place. No funeral. No Ceasefire [a local community-based antiviolence program]. This was a game. They were there having fun being kids, and I like that.

By mentioning historically Black colleges and universities and noting the importance of Black youth having positive Black role models, Moon indicated how Chicago's racially and economically segregated communities created structural disadvantages for young people. She also recognized that structurally disadvantaged communities largely supply the Black and Brown bodies that fill Chicago's jail and Illinois's prisons.¹⁹ Moon described prison as "a modern day slavery" and noted that when she started getting in trouble with the law, she always encountered White people in positions of authority (i.e., state's attorneys and judges), who reinforced her grandmother's warnings throughout her childhood that White people did not want her to succeed. Moon explained, "It made it seem like [what her grandmother said] was true, because they didn't send me to . . . rehab, they didn't send me nowhere to like get . . . help. They sent me to jail . . . And jail wasn't the answer."

Olivia, the 49-year-old Afro American woman who talked about judges' consideration of past convictions when determining sentences as a type of "double jeopardy," similarly critiqued the criminal legal system's racism. She referenced the image of Lady Justice, whose blindfold represents fairness and balanced scales represent equality, and called it inaccurate. Olivia said in an accurate representation "her blindfold is crooked. It's not actually straight . . . and then the scales [are] not balanced. They're uneven. That's not fair. That's what justice is." A crooked blindfold, Olivia elaborated, would symbolize how the criminal legal system treats defendants differently based on their "nationalities," "class," and where they live: "In the city, they have a real high conviction rate. And if they have somebody from the suburbs, they've got a better chance of giving them probation or rehab or something, as to where us in the city, they want to send us straight to the penitentiary." According to Olivia, the courts "figure the people in the suburbs, the middle class and upper class, they come to the city to get their drugs or whatever. OK, but they're grown like me. Them the choices they made. You can't be mad at the city for it, 'cause they're doin' what they want to do." Olivia expressed an intersectional analysis in which "prejudices" based on race, class, and place intertwined to result in more punitive sanctions for low-income and poor people of color who live in the city.

Tinybig, the 51-year-old Afro Native American Indian woman who had shared photographs of *The Life Recovery Bible* and a 12-Step meeting directory, represented this disparity with a photograph she took of news trucks parked outside of the Chicago Police Department Headquarters (figure 23). She had gone here to request a copy of her criminal background, which was required to begin the expungement process. It happened to be the same day local news outlets were reporting on Chicago reaching the tragic milestone of its 500th homicide for



FIGURE 23. Chicago's 500th homicide of the year (Photo credit: Tinybig).

the year. Tinybig took the photograph because “it’s interesting how some features or events show up on the news and some don’t . . . Like a lot of times in the Black community . . . or even [the] Hispanic community, it may not come across the news where somebody died of an overdose, of a bad heroin purchase. But in the suburbs, it may.” Tinybig explained this uneven news coverage reflected the way society devalued the lives of people of color. If she had died while on the streets, she said, “it may not be broadcast, but because it might be a political figure’s daughter, a judge’s daughter, an attorney’s daughter, it’s all over the news.” Similar to Olivia’s analysis, Tinybig recognized certain lives mattered more than others and how this social reality played out in the criminal legal system.

RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

Women’s personal experiences and relationships with other criminalized women fostered a number of insights about the system. First, many women understood how racism, bias, and inequity were embedded in and perpetuated by the criminal legal system. Second, they recognized how commonly criminalized women were survivors of gendered violence. Third, they developed an analysis of how the untreated trauma resulting from that violence often contributed to the behaviors and circumstances that kept women entangled in a wide carceral web of surveillance,

judgment, and punishment. These insights undergirded women's efforts to challenge the system in subtle individual ways and explicit collective ways.

At the individual level, women sought recognition of their personal transformations and attainment of the rehabilitated woman identity from authority figures, such as judges, parole and probation officers, recovery home staff members, and treatment providers.²⁰ Doing well in recovery homes, drug treatment programs, and reentry programs; holding a job, however low-paying and unstable it was; securing an apartment, even if it was a single-room occupancy (SRO) unit where children could not live; and *not* getting in trouble again with the law were ways women resisted the criminalization of disadvantaged communities. Women's resilience *was* resistance, because it subverted one of the carceral system's main functions—to maintain existing social hierarchies. As scholar-activist Angela Davis argues, the state responds to social problems by criminalizing and imprisoning poor people and people of color. This response attempts to “disappear [social problems] from public view,” while leaving systems of inequality intact. “But prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings . . . vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities.”²¹ Neoliberal policies that deregulated the economic market, facilitated deindustrialization, and allowed corporations to exploit a global labor pool contributed to growing wealth inequality and social stratification. The resultant economic and social insecurity felt by the middle class contributed to support for harsh law-and-order approaches to maintain social control.²² As Davis summarizes, “The massive prison-building project that began in the 1980s created the means of concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus.”²³

Given this historical, social, and political context, women's abilities to complete parole and probation, pass drug tests, maintain their stays at recovery homes, move into their own apartments, attend school, and find employment mattered. Women's resilience made them visible, as they refused to allow the criminal legal system to disappear them. Furthermore, as documented throughout previous chapters, women's personal transformations helped them feel better about themselves and establish meaningful relationships with children, family members, romantic partners, and friends. Women grew to love and accept themselves and felt they were in a better position in life. Their attainment of the rehabilitated woman identity did not come without complication, but the access it extended to reclaiming humanity and dignity in a fiercely unforgiving world should not be downplayed. By not just surviving the state systems that bear down on their lives, but actually finding ways to make these systems benefit them, women reinterpreted and resisted these systems in everyday ways that were significant.

Women's resilience and individual success also made it possible to participate in more overt collective forms of resistance aimed to bring about broader changes in the criminal legal system that would improve all women's experiences. Three women discussed being part of class action lawsuits, one for illegal shackling

during childbirth and two for illegal strip searches (one at Cook County Jail and one at Lincoln Correctional Center). Correctional officers had conducted strip searches with groups of women, rather than individually, while male correctional officers were present. In addition to wanting restitution for the state violence she endured throughout her 21-year prison sentence, Chicken Wing hoped the lawsuit would bring about broader change:

I hope they stop that, you know. Men ain't supposed to be looking at us, and they was talking about women and looking at our bodies, and we have to squat and all this, stand up there for like 15 minutes, you know, and all that. You can't put on a pad or tampon, you know, it's just disrespectful . . . they should stop that . . . they should sue their butts off. And the warden should get fired behind that.

The lawsuits were one way women collectively attempted to hold the state accountable, reduce the violence of incarceration, and institute reforms that would benefit criminalized women broadly. Such efforts were bigger than individual redress and healing. They demanded recognition of gendered violence that often remains invisible and institutional change.

For the five women who were employed at programs that provided services to incarcerated or formerly incarcerated women, their employment allowed them to turn their personal experiences with the criminal legal system into valuable information that benefited others. Women who worked in these jobs stressed how much they enjoyed giving back and being able to help other women who were in situations similar to those they had overcome. Corrine, for instance, reflected on her work at Cook County Jail:

I listen to myself sometimes when I'm talkin' to the ladies and tellin' them how important it is in raising your children, building that trust, and the love and the nurturing, and so I share with them there's nothing like a child being with their own parent. Because I'm seeing a repeat of everything that I've done on a daily basis when I talk to those ladies. "Well, my mom got my kids and, you know." And I see these ladies that go right back out there, come right back in and many of them never even touch base with their children and stuff, and so the work that I do today is still a healing process for me. And even more so when I feel that I have had an impact on somebody's else's life . . . even if it's just startin' to think about takin' a different route in their life. It's very rewarding for me.

Ella also commented on the joy she felt from observing Growing Stronger residents' personal transformation processes:

I love welcomin' the ladies when they come and then continuin' on to show them that you are loved. You know. People need to know that. People need people . . . Some of 'em will tell ya, "I don't need nobody!" You know, but it start changin' somewhere down the line, and it really gets to me like when they don't even realize they have changed, but then one day they'll see it and be like, "Oooh! I remember!" Or like when another lady come in, and they used to be in a bad way, and they greet them,

too, you know. “Ooh. You’ll love Growing Stronger . . . Welcome to Growing Stronger!” And I’ll be like, “Mm. This the same one that was kickin’ and screamin’. Now, ‘Welcome to Growing Stronger! You’re gonna love it. What room you in? You need a big sister? I’ll be your.’” And I’ll be like, “Oh, wow.” You know. So, yeah, Growing Stronger helps.

Through their work, both Corrine and Ella refused to allow the carceral system to disappear other women. They drew upon their own success to create humanizing experiences for women as they moved through the system. They offered knowledge and support in an effort to help women avoid recriminalization. Even though their efforts were not always successful, Ella and Corrine continued to do the daily work of resistance.

Five women spoke of their advocacy and organizing efforts to bring about larger change in the criminal legal system and social service field. Chunky, the 56-year-old Black woman who critiqued the negligent health care in prison, discussed her volunteer work with an organization that provided direct legal services to incarcerated women and advocated for criminal legal reform policies at the state level.²⁴ As part of its policy work, the organization organized formerly incarcerated women to work on legislative campaigns. This organizing work included strategies, such as lobbying trips to Springfield to meet with state legislators, public demonstrations, petition drives, and meetings with officials within the criminal legal system. Chunky talked about a recent trip she made with the organization to the Illinois women’s prison where she had served time and her participation in a meeting with IDOC officials to advocate for better living conditions at the prison. Chunky specifically talked with the officials about the need for better health care services and to lower the fee women had to pay to see the doctor. In some cases, the fee prohibited women from seeking needed health care which they had a right to receive. Chunky asked, “So what? So now we into crime and punishment instead of corrections? What? You’re punishing me already, I’m away from my family, I’m away from my kids, I’m away from everything.” She also informed the officials of the need to “change your guards, ‘cause I think you know you got some guards here that is not right.” She recalled the racist insults correctional officers used and their gossiping about incarcerated women during her imprisonment. “It felt really good,” Chunky said, to speak her mind and give input to the wardens and deputy director. “They took our suggestions, and they wrote them down. They were duly noted, and we felt like . . . it wasn’t wasted. They were actually communicating with us. That was a good feeling . . . I felt hopeful.”

Iris, the 49-year-old White woman who was trying to secure visitations with her two teenage children, also talked about her advocacy work with this organization, specifically a lobbying trip to Springfield to encourage support for a bill that would allow people to petition the court to seal certain nonviolent felony convictions four years after completion of their sentence. Although the bill would not benefit Iris directly, since her felony conviction was for one of the excluded offenses, she valued the opportunity to contribute to a “good cause to improve

people's life conditions, to give them chances, to be of service, and just get outside of myself and do something for a good cause." She also benefited from the lobbying experience because "it empowers me, and it motivates me. Because I have a voice! You know, and the voice needs to be heard."

Julia, the 51-year-old African American woman who took a photograph of her certificates on her windowsill, also gained lobbying and organizing experience with another organization that led a successful campaign to end felony convictions for prostitution in Illinois. When I was at Growing Stronger for an interview one day, Julia proudly showed the organization's newsletter to me. It featured a picture of her, as well as a short bio explaining her contributions to the campaign. Julia and I remained in contact after I completed data collection, and she periodically sent text messages to me, updating me on how she was doing. She had been working at the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) in an apprentice program for people with felony convictions and cleaned buses and garages. The temporary position paid minimum wage. Julia always spoke positively about the job and expressed her gratitude for the program. In one of her text messages, though, she said she planned to start a campaign to increase apprentices' pay. Tinybig also remained in contact after data collection and worked in the same CTA program. While stressing she liked the position, she also expressed frustration with the heightened surveillance apprentices experienced in comparison to the permanent employees, as well as the insecurity of the temporary position.

Reflections such as these indicated women saw themselves as part of a collective group of criminalized women who had experienced unjust treatment while incarcerated and remained subject to discrimination long after their release. While women were concerned with their individual well-being, they also expressed a commitment to helping other criminalized women. Even when a campaign or policy change would not benefit them directly, as in Chunky's and Iris's cases, the reform was important because it would offer protection to other women who shared a similar social experience. As women encountered barriers, they experienced the limits of personal transformation and the double bind of the rehabilitated woman identity. As such, many participants recognized the need for broad social change.

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows how romantic relationships and friendships nurtured attention to the necessity of social change. While women still used the 12-Step logic, with its clean/dirty dichotomy and moral implications, to make sense of relationships, these relationships did more than provide evidence of women's rehabilitated identities. Women received affirmation of their worth and dignity from partners and friends. That affirmation provided a solid base from which women demanded more from and better treatment by individuals, social services, and the criminal legal system.