

“I Feel Good about Myself Now”

Recovering Identity through Employment and Appearance

Ella and I were in a celebratory mood when we sat down for our third interview at Growing Stronger. Along with Sister Mary, one of the staff at Growing Stronger, I had accompanied Ella the previous day to court for her scheduled hearing to have her criminal record sealed. Ella had been eagerly awaiting this day. In our previous interviews, she had explained in detail the steps she had taken over the past eight months to navigate the record sealing process. She had begun our PEI with a photograph of her rap sheet, which she had retrieved from the Chicago Police Department's headquarters. The pro bono attorneys who staffed the expungement help desk at the Daley Center needed to see Ella's complete police record in order to advise her on the record sealing process. The first page of the rap sheet included Ella's mug shot from one of her earliest arrests (figure 10).¹ Looking at the photo, Ella explained:

Wow. Yeah. I know physically I look different. Mentally I was different, too. I was much smaller. Right now, I'm in a size 20. Right there, I was in a size 3. So it's a big difference. I don't think I look what you would say happy here, which most people don't goin' to jail. But I'm just sayin' sometimes you can tell if a person have an inner peace . . . people say I have a kind spirit, and a lot of people tell me it's like I have an aura about me, that I come off nice. I'm sure I still have that, but you can see, at least I can, the trauma and stuff in my face, in my eyes. I don't look happy. And it's not just from goin' to jail. My spirit was damaged in a lot of areas, and I used to try to cover that up with drugs instead of dealin' with it.

Ella's reflection resonated with the personal transformation theme that emerged across interviews, as women contrasted their past *criminal-addict* identities with their *rehabilitated* identities, and acknowledged the deep healing work required

CRIMINAL HISTORY REPORT

ACCESS AND REVIEW

CONVICTED FELON

IDENTIFICATION SECTION

POLICE DEPARTMENT

3510 S MICHIGAN AVE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60608

FEMALE

4'11"

177 lbs

EYES : BRO

HAIR : BLK

COMPLEXION :

DATE: JUN 11 2008

SIGNATURE: [Signature]

CPD photo

CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT

RECORDS DIVISION

Date Used

Dates of Birth Used

Social Security Numbers Used

FIGURE 10. Rap sheet (Photo credit: Ella).

for women to move forward from the violence that characterized many of their lives prior to and during incarceration. Ella's reflection added nuance to how this transformation process occurred. Specifically, her focus on her appearance and what it revealed about her internal state drew attention to the markers of recovery women used to distinguish their past and current selves.

Walking into court for her hearing to have her record sealed, the 46-year-old African American mother of five could not have looked more different from how she appeared in the mug shot. Her braided hair was neatly styled into a bun. Her skin had a healthy glow. Her eyes were vibrant. Her face frequently broke into an easy, genuine smile. All together, these features communicated a warm, open, caring personality that made Ella one of the most respected and trusted staff members among the Growing Stronger residents whom I interviewed. When the court clerk called Ella's name, Sister Mary and I accompanied her to the front of the courtroom. We stood with Ella before the judge, one of us on either side, as he quickly flipped through the stack of paperwork that included certificates of program completion and letters of support written by various people who had been part of Ella's rehabilitation process over the past seven years since her release from prison. Ella had worked diligently for nearly a year assembling the collection of documents she hoped would attest to her good character. The judge seemed more

interested in hearing from Sister Mary and me, whom Ella introduced as her boss and her friend, respectively. He asked each of us to say a few words. Sister Mary spoke first and described Ella as one of Growing Stronger's stars and an excellent employee. Ella had stayed at Growing Stronger as a resident following her release from prison. Now, as a staff member, she supported newly released women who were in the beginning stages of their recovery and postincarceration processes. It was undeniable that Ella had come a long way.

Sister Mary mentioned the more detailed letter she had written that was included in the stack of documents before the judge. The legal aid attorney who was assisting Ella interjected to note the stack of certificates Ella had provided. The judge said documentation was good, but sometimes the "personal touch" was more important. He then asked me if I wanted to say anything. I did my best to hide my surprise. The judge had no idea who I was and certainly did not know I had only known Ella for about two months. I knew in this context, however, that my Whiteness and middle-class appearance were more compelling than the nature and length of my relationship with Ella. I said I echoed what Sister Mary had shared and added that Ella was an amazing woman who had overcome a lot and was determined to keep going. The judge nodded. He turned his attention back to the stack of documents Ella had provided and asked her some cursory questions before posing a significant one: What helped you turn your life around? Ella clearly and confidently explained that a well-known local drug treatment program for women, Growing Stronger, and God were the key factors that allowed her to change her life. The judge smiled with satisfaction and granted Ella's request to seal her criminal record.

On the drive back to Growing Stronger, we reflected on what had just happened. Ella commented she was happy Sister Mary and I had been in the courtroom with her, because the judge had wanted to hear from us.² Sister Mary asked Ella how she wanted to celebrate. Ella replied that she could not drink and she was working on her diet, so maybe with a smoothie. When we arrived back at Growing Stronger, staff and residents shared in Ella's good news. Sister Mary had someone take a photograph of the three of us that later was displayed on the "Accomplishments" bulletin board. Ella seemed genuinely happy and proud, smiling, laughing, and answering questions from residents and staff about the process. One coworker asked whether she could have her own record sealed even though she had a battery charge. In her characteristic honest and encouraging way, Ella replied that it was hard but not impossible to seal a record with a battery charge. The celebration continued the next day, when Sister Mary brought flowers and a congratulations sign for Ella, as well as ingredients to make smoothies.

To begin our third interview, I asked Ella if she had any reflections about what had happened at court the previous day. She said she "still was on cloud nine, elated about the whole situation." She quickly added that she had read over the paperwork the court provided and had a better understanding about the difference

between sealing and expunging one's record. Since her record was sealed, not expunged, it remained in the system and could still create limitations in certain situations. She gave the examples of trying to get a job working with children or in a hospital. In both situations, a potential employer could still access her record. Ella wanted to become a social worker and work with youth, so she was going to have to pursue expungement. Additionally, she had three cases on her record that, due to their classification, did not qualify for sealing. Those cases thus remained visible to anyone who had the ability to complete a background check, such as a landlord or potential employer. Ella explained she would have to seek clemency from the governor in order to have those cases removed. Yesterday's court hearing was a win, but it was not an end point. Ella had more work to do. Even after explaining these limitations, Ella asserted, "Man, I feel good."

Ella's mug shot photo, experience in court, and reflections on both revealed the tension that existed between her agency and the judgment she continued to face. Despite the persistent influence of her past criminalization and drug use, Ella found joy in demonstrating her rehabilitated identity. She was "elated" knowing the judge recognized her as a new woman. Her neat, clean appearance communicated her sobriety, and her employment communicated her stability. On paper and in person, Ella did not just look like someone who had stayed out of trouble with the law for the past seven years; she looked like a strong woman who was thriving. In this context, Ella's appearance and employment worked as gendered markers of her rehabilitation. The image captured in the mug shot of a gaunt, dull, disheveled, sad figure swimming in a wrinkled T-shirt several sizes too big—and all of the racist, sexist stereotypes it evoked—might as well have been a different woman.

In this chapter and the next two, I examine women's personal transformation as a gendered and racialized process. Within the context of the interlocking stigmas associated with criminalization, drug use, and race, women drew upon gendered markers of recovery across five areas in their daily lives: appearance, employment, domesticity, mothering, and relationships.³ Although normative femininity was not an available social status, the women who participated in this project used femininity creatively and adeptly to demonstrate their ongoing rehabilitation and claim dignity in the face of intersecting oppressions and ongoing judgment. Women's identity shifts represented a balance between independence and nurturing others and were grounded in sobriety and faith. As Ella summarized for the judge, drug treatment, God, and Growing Stronger—a faith-based recovery home that focused on both—helped her become the woman she is today. I also show how these identity shifts emerged in relationship to racist controlling images of Black femininity and explain how women's identity work reflected a new controlling image that has emerged in the era of mass incarceration: *the rehabilitated woman*.

The rehabilitated woman image refers to a formerly incarcerated woman, most likely a woman of color, who has successfully transitioned from prison to the community. It entails a healthy physical appearance, legitimate employment, stable

housing, being there for one's children, and, if involved in a romantic relationship, it is one that is mutually beneficial and free from abuse. Demonstrating this new identity required fluency in the 12-Step logic, with its focus on the intertwined relationship between faith and sobriety and lifelong commitment to personal transformation. Despite this rigid framework, women experienced joy and were motivated by the pleasure they felt as they became the women, mothers, lovers, and friends they wanted to be. The story of personal transformation encompassed much more than judgment, uncertainty, and fear.⁴ Still, there were drawbacks to the rehabilitated woman image. As discussed in chapter 2, controlling images are racist, dehumanizing tropes, such as the "welfare queen" and "crack ho," that reduce women of color to stereotypes and provide ideological justification for punitive policies and structural arrangements that perpetuate social inequality.⁵ Like all controlling images, the rehabilitated woman image ultimately justified inequality by ignoring structural factors that contributed to women's criminalization in favor of blaming individual women as inherently deviant and responsible for their personal troubles and for society's ills.

Through working the 12 Steps, deepening her faith, and staying out of trouble with the law, the rehabilitated woman showed it was possible to make it on the outside. This success was important. Staying out of prison and building a stable life free from drug use and gendered violence were undeniably positive developments for the women in this study. Yet, this success also reinforced the personal responsibility rhetoric and moral judgment inherent in the 12-Step logic. It supported responsibilization processes that hold individuals solely responsible for the consequences of decades of systematic disinvestment and marginalization. Similar to how the "welfare queen" controlling image provided ideological justification for welfare reform, the rehabilitated woman controlling image provided ideological justification for lifelong surveillance and normalized the degraded social status criminalized women occupy in a society where they never can fully overcome the moral judgment that follows them long beyond the end of their formal sentence. Thus, criminalized women faced a lifelong double bind: succeed and inadvertently provide validation for an oppressive system, or fail and be swallowed up by that system.

This chapter focuses on the first two components of women's identity work: employment and appearance, both of which were rooted in deep-seated ideologies about gender and race. I begin with employment and appearance because they represent dimensions of independence. Dependence is a contentious, multilayered term in feminist and carceral studies. It is instilled with gendered, racial, and moral meanings. In their influential article "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon explain the historical shifts in the political, economic, sociolegal, and moral/psychological meanings of the term. They conclude the meaning of *dependency* has shifted from a description of social relations to a description of "inherent character traits

of individuals or groups” and today “designate[s] . . . an anomalous, highly stigmatized status of deviant and incompetent individuals.”⁶ With this new meaning, “postindustrial culture has called up a new personification of dependency: the black, unmarried, teenaged, welfare-dependent mother . . . a powerful ideological trope that simultaneously organizes diffuse cultural anxieties.”⁷

Dependence is a pervasive discourse that organizes criminalized women’s lives and structures the criminal legal system. Sociologist Jill A. McCorkel examines how the carceral state today frames dependency as the source of women’s criminality in a way that differs from its assessment of men. In this framing, men’s criminality reflects a reasonable effort to gain money or respect and is a threat to public safety. Women’s criminality, on the other hand, reflects a deep internal problem, like lack of self-respect, self-esteem, and self-empowerment, and is a threat to social mores.⁸ As sociologist Susan Sered summarizes, “If men . . . are punished for being too aggressive, women are berated for being victims.”⁹ Dependence not only suggests an inability to take care of oneself. It also suggests a disordered self, still lacking in self-respect, self-esteem, and self-empowerment, and therefore still susceptible to criminality. As such, the punitive and rehabilitative interventions women experienced throughout the criminal legal system took on a moral tone.

As dimensions of independence, appearance and employment were foundational to all the identity work women did and therefore to women’s overall personal transformation processes. Women’s self-described improved, healthy appearances communicated their recovery from drug use, in other words, that they no longer were dependent on drugs or alcohol and therefore were “clean.” Employment held the promise that women would not have to depend on other people or institutions for their day-to-day survival. With each component of the rehabilitated woman controlling image (appearance, employment, domesticity, mothering, and relationships), I highlight the tensions between women’s past and current identities, the vulnerability associated with their past identities, and the joy women experienced in performing rehabilitation.

To do so, I build upon two frameworks: Julie Harris and Karen McElrath’s clean/dirty dichotomy and Kelly Moore’s fear/joy spectrum.¹⁰ Harris and McElrath explain how abstinence-based models, like the 12 Steps, construct recovery as an all or nothing identity project and impose a strict “clean/dirty” dichotomy that effectively erases additional, “incremental” identities by recognizing only two subject positions: “clean” or “dirty.”¹¹ Relapse wipes away days, months, and even years of living a clean life, returning people to a dirty identity. Moore argues that neoliberalism demands the continual production and improvement of the self, with fear and uncertainty constituting one set of motivators for change and pleasure, excitement, and fun constituting another. Focusing on exercise regimens, Moore examines how women face social expectations to show enjoyment of their self-improvement—a gendered emotion work that accompanies the physical work of producing a “healthy” and “fit” body. Taking pleasure in this never-ending

TABLE 1 Criminalized Women’s Identity Work

	Criminal-addict identity		Rehabilitated identity
Social status	Dependence	←————→	Independence
Feeling	Fear	←————→	Joy
Recovery status	Dirty	←————→	Clean
Controlling image	Welfare queen Crack ho	←————→	Rehabilitated woman

production and “enjoy[ing] being between the now and the future state” is a gendered component of neoliberal embodiment.¹² I bring together these two frameworks to show how criminalized women feel fear *and* joy as they used gendered markers of rehabilitation to navigate the clean/dirty dichotomy and, in the process, manage the controlling image of the rehabilitated woman.

Table 1 summarizes the social context and lived experience of women’s identity work. Women were constrained by dominant discourses (e.g., dependency, the 12 Steps, and controlling images) and also creatively engaged these discourses to claim dignity and affirm their rehabilitation. Identity work occurred on a spectrum, as women made progress and experienced setbacks in their rehabilitation processes, yet the institutions and people who had control over their lives typically recognized women as fitting in one of two categories at any given moment: either clean or dirty, crude designations that reduced women’s complex experiences and identities to simplistic labels.

Below, I first provide contextualizing points on sociological understandings of identity; controlling images that denigrate women of color, specifically Black women; and the criminal legal system’s work to contain and produce racialized gendered subjects. This context illuminates the layers of marginalization with which criminalized women contended and the available discourses upon which women drew to construct new, credible identities.

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

In the symbolic-interaction tradition, the self is an inherently social product. Individuals do not possess a core, innate identity; rather, one’s identity only exists through social interactions.¹³ Social theorist George Herbert Mead theorized the self as being formulated and reformulated through the ongoing negotiation of one’s sense of who they are in relationship to the self that is mirrored back to them by others.¹⁴ Sociologist Erving Goffman analyzed social interactions as a stage upon which individuals perform different roles, using tools such as dress, body language, and facial expressions to manage others’ impressions and create an authentic performance that is received as credible.¹⁵ Social discourses guide these

performances and how they are received. For instance, behaviors are interpreted differently based on the race, class, gender, and sexuality of the person performing that behavior. In short, the self is an interactional accomplishment that is deeply social and structured by social hierarchies. As political theorist Barbara Cruikshank argues, "the self is . . . not personal but the product of power relations."¹⁶

Understanding the social-historical context and available discourses within which identity work occurs is immensely important. The symbolic-interaction tradition has produced significant insights about the social construction of gender. Gender scholars Candace West and Don Zimmerman famously coined the phrase "doing gender" to examine how gender is an achieved status and interactional accomplishment. As people receive positive reinforcement for socially conventional performances of femininity and masculinity, and negative sanctions for performances that transgress gender norms, the very definition of gender is reproduced.¹⁷ Yet, gender performances never are solely about gender, as they always are structured by additional intersecting systems of inequality.

Feminist critical race scholars examine how race and class shape the construction of multiple, unequal femininities. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, examines how "controlling images of Black womanhood" discursively work to close off attainment of hegemonic (i.e., White) femininity to Black women and uphold the structures of patriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism.¹⁸ The feminine ideal of the virtuous woman who selflessly cares for others and defers to the authority of men, who in turn will provide her with the security and protection she not only needs but deserves, is attainable to a select group of women who possess the social privileges of Whiteness, financial security, heterosexuality, and citizenship.¹⁹ Women who lack this social privilege are precluded access to the true womanhood ideal and its associated benefits, such as support for mothering and protection from violence. While all women experience gender-based oppression, the nature of that oppression is shaped by race, class, sexuality, nationhood, and additional social locations; gender-based oppression serves additional projects that differentially benefit and harm women.

THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM AND FEMININE SUBJECTS

Criminalized women face judgment and stigma for the double violation of the law and feminine norms.²⁰ The state's interventions in criminalized women's lives, whether explicitly punitive or supposedly therapeutic, always have aimed to enforce compliance with both the law and gender norms.²¹ Women's economic class and racial identities structure these interventions. Women's reformatories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used isolation, education, and surveillance to prepare middle-class women to be devoted mothers and wives and working-class and poor women to work as domestic servants, thereby restoring "fallen

women” to respectable social positions.²² Notably, Black women largely were not sentenced to reformatories and were housed in men’s penitentiaries, based on the assumption they were not real women and could not benefit from interventions to restore femininity. During the era of convict leasing in the South, White women largely were spared placement in convict labor camps, based on the belief they were too fragile for the intense labor and punishment that were common in these camps.²³ Black women, however, were sentenced to these camps, forced to do the same work, and subjected to the same physical punishments as men. Black women additionally were responsible for the domestic labor that kept the camp functioning and were subjected to sexual violence, which historian Sarah Haley refers to as the “double burden of both labor and violence.”²⁴ Labeling Black women as inherently nongender normative provided ideological justification for the torturous racist and sexual violence Black women routinely experienced under convict leasing and reaffirmed normative femininity as White.²⁵

Criminalized women today regularly encounter a particular type of gendered governance that targets their emotions, desires, and morality.²⁶ The tasks the criminal legal system imposes on women include getting in touch with and learning to contain their emotions;²⁷ controlling “dangerous desires” that lead to unhealthy lifestyle and relationship choices;²⁸ creating strong selves to replace “diseased and incomplete selves” that are the source of their troubles;²⁹ and building up their sense of empowerment and independence so that they can make better decisions about their lives.³⁰ As sociologist Kelly Hannah-Moffat summarizes, “By attending programmes such as parenting, life skills, substance abuse, anger management and vocational classes [incarcerated] women are expected to conform to a series of normative standards.”³¹

Three common threads run through these well-documented interventions to reform criminalized women. The first is the neoliberal logic of personal responsibility, which absolves the state of responsibility for social welfare and reframes social problems caused by structural inequality as individual problems to be overcome through personal change.³² The second is the interwoven thread of dependency, which, as noted above, puts a gendered spin on personal responsibility. Women’s imprisonment encompasses more than the loss of liberty; it is a state project to regulate and reformulate women’s selves. The third is the unrelenting relationship between punishment and racist gender ideology that remains alive and well in the U.S. criminal legal system today.³³ These interventions are deeply rooted in controlling images about women of color’s dependence, lack of discipline, and promiscuity. These “enduring legacies”³⁴ continue to mark women of color as always already deviant and dangerous.³⁵

As with all controlling images, the rehabilitated woman controlling image is inherently racialized, even though White women also are harmed by criminalization and struggle with postincarceration challenges. Similar to the “crack ho” or “welfare queen” controlling images, the rehabilitated woman controlling image is rooted in White supremacy and reflects the interconnected nature of the social

constructions of both race and gender. The women who participated in this study recognized the relationship between race, gender, and criminalization. As I discuss further in chapter 6, several Black participants critiqued racial inequality in the criminal legal system and throughout society. Only 4 of the 36 participants identified as White. Two of these four White women shared some version of a fish out of water story while reflecting on their own experiences of criminalization. Cathy Hill, for instance, struggled with losing some of the benefits of Whiteness and her middle-class background. Using explicitly racist terms, she repeatedly commented on how she was not like the other women caught up in the criminal legal system, suggesting she was not supposed to be part of this system. When Iris first called me to express her interest in participating in the project, she made a point to clarify her story was a bit different from most of the other stories I likely was hearing. She offered this clarification to ensure I still wanted to interview her, almost as if she did not want to mislead me. These reflections shaped and affirmed my conceptualization of the rehabilitated woman as a controlling image.

Considering how criminalization works within the context of controlling images reveals that criminalized women of color face judgment as more than just “doubly deviant,” as race already marks a violation of normative femininity. Criminalized women of color, thus, face a distinctly gendered stigma related to the *criminal-addict* status and to race. In addition to the “dirty,” “impure” controlling images poor women and women of color encounter on the basis of race and class, criminalized women encounter the further “dirty,” “impure” label of “criminal” and often “addict.” Indeed, 12-Step discourses label people who are still using as “dirty” and people in recovery as “clean,” and urinalysis results that show the presence of drugs commonly are referred to as “dirty drops.” For the women in this study, perhaps no controlling image was more prevalent than that of the “crack ho,” as it exists at the nexus of race, gender, poverty, drug use, and criminalization. The image connotes a promiscuous, immoral, manipulative poor Black woman who is so overcome by her dependence on drugs that she cannot be trusted to take care of herself or her children, maintain a home or job, or even follow the law.³⁶ Along with its masculine counterpart “the gangbanger,” the racist, gendered controlling image of the “crack ho” provided ideological justification for the policies and practices that gave rise to the current era of mass incarceration.³⁷ These overarching systems and discourses constitute the social context within which formerly incarcerated women did the work of personal transformation.

REHABILITATING THE SELF

Incarceration breaks down the self.³⁸ As such, rebuilding the self is a central part of postincarceration life.³⁹ That rebuilding often entails a cognitive transformation process in which people make sense of their past behavior and envision a future rehabilitated self.⁴⁰ Formerly incarcerated people who are “making good” frequently draw distinctions between their past, current, and future selves,

highlighting the work they are doing to facilitate this change.⁴¹ Claiming a rehabilitated identity entails showing just how distant one's current identity is from one's past "criminal" identity. Simply believing in one's own personal transformation, however, is insufficient. Creating a rehabilitated self is a process of constantly negotiating how one feels about their personal transformation process, how others respond to this process, and institutional recognition or rejection of it. Additionally, structural constraints that suggest rehabilitation is not possible—such as continual denial of employment, housing, and other supports—can derail one's identity work.⁴²

Criminalized women worked to craft rehabilitated selves against the intersecting stigmas and vulnerability associated with criminalization, drug use, poverty, race, and gender. Acknowledging this social-historical context raises a number of questions about criminalized women's understandings of their own identities—past, present, and future. How do criminalized women claim a sense of self in the face of institutions that read them as never rehabilitated but, at best, as working to maintain their rehabilitation? Against a backdrop of stigmatizing discourses that are so deeply gendered, how do criminalized women use gender—implicitly and explicitly—in their narratives of personal transformation?

For the remainder of this chapter, I show how criminalized women traded in a currency the state recognized, specifically feminine appearance and employment. The rehabilitated woman controlling image presumes a particular idea of femininity. I cannot point to a specific vehicle through which this idea of femininity reached the women who participated in this study. Because I did not conduct ethnographic research, I did not observe support groups or other interactions where recovery home or program staff explicitly taught or subtly encouraged a particular type of femininity. It is likely women pulled from a variety of formal and informal sources—such as popular culture, books, classes, groups, counseling, drug treatment programs, family members, and peers—to develop their notion of what it meant to accomplish femininity. The gendered governance literature meticulously documents how carceral programs explicitly push a particular idea of what it means to be a reformed woman. I presume the organizations with which women in my research interacted operated in similar ways, in part because of this extensive literature, but even more so because the components of gendered rehabilitation that make up the core of my analysis were so prominent across the interviews I conducted. It is noteworthy that the women who participated in this study were engaged in a variety of postincarceration and drug treatment programs. While there was overlap in program participation, women were not always engaged in the same programs. This diversity of program participation suggests just how pervasive this idea of femininity was.

Additionally, as the remaining chapters show, there was room for variation within the rehabilitated woman controlling image. Women did not have to approximate White beauty standards to demonstrate rehabilitation through their

appearance, for instance. Nor did they have to partner with a man to show rehabilitation through relationships. There was not even one acceptable way to mother. The key way women accomplished femininity was through drawing a stark contrast between their past *criminal-addict* selves and their current *rehabilitated* selves. As long as this general contrast existed, the specifics could vary.

Still, there are questions regarding how much variation or departure from conventional notions of femininity, particularly regarding sexuality, would be acceptable in the eyes of program staff and actors within the criminal legal system. Only two women, Lynn and Faye, talked about being in a same-sex relationship, and they happened to be partnered with each other. As I note in chapter 6, Lynn reported confronting homophobia at multiple recovery homes and being kicked out of one when she and Faye were caught engaging in sexual activity in the home. In one of our interviews, New Life was critical of some of the church services offered in prison for being explicitly homophobic, with preachers condemning homosexuality as a sin. As such, there is evidence heterosexuality was a presumed part of women's rehabilitated identities on the part of at least some service providers. What is noteworthy for my analysis, though, is how women rejected such rigid and discriminatory constructions of sexuality, retaining a positive sense of self despite others' judgment. Additionally, none of the participants in this study identified as transgender or nonbinary. Future research should investigate how criminalized LGBTQ+ people accomplish rehabilitated identities and what those efforts reveal about the coconstitutive nature of gender, sexuality, and criminalization.

Criminalized women worked within, challenged, and adapted available discourses, primarily the 12-Step logic, to craft rehabilitated identities. It was not so much that prison programs and recovery homes laid out a precise discourse of what a good woman was; rather, the 12-Step logic made clear what she was not, which informed the oppositional nature of the identity work women engaged. I am critical of these discourses because they were so rigid, subjected women to invasive moral judgment and extensive surveillance, largely ignored the structural oppression and violence that have deeply harmed criminalized women, and reduced these social issues to individual problems. In this way, I join a long line of feminist scholars who critique the carceral state for focusing on individual-level responses to structural issues that legitimize punitive interventions, the harm these interventions cause, and the social inequality they deepen.⁴³

In order to truly listen to the women who participated in this project and honor their lived experiences, I also examine how these discourses provided hooks women could engage to create more fulfilling lives and feel good about themselves. The paradox of the rehabilitated woman controlling image is that it made it possible for women to carve out a space of personal protection, growth, and joy—an undeniably positive outcome—while also reaffirming the overarching discourses that structured women's lives, including those that cause severe harm. This tension reflects a fundamental social truth embedded in all controlling

images: women subject to these images are not, in the eyes of society, real women. They exist outside the bounds of what is recognized as normative and fully human. Criminalized women were not passive subjects, however. They played with the rehabilitated woman controlling image to resolve (or at least manage) the tension between structural arrangements and ideological discourses that denied their humanity, and their intense commitment to personal transformation and living in ways that brought dignity and joy.⁴⁴

APPEARANCE: EMBODIED FEMININITY

Women often included pictures of themselves in the PEIs.⁴⁵ Discussing these photographs, women reflected on how they viewed themselves, how they suspected others viewed them, and how their physical appearances communicated a great deal about their personal transformation processes. Incarceration is an embodied experience that causes long-lasting changes to one's body, dispositions, and sense of self.⁴⁶ Formerly incarcerated people contend with these embodied changes as they navigate postincarceration experiences. For the women who participated in this project, improved physical appearances were signs of moving forward not only from incarceration, but also from drug use and histories of abuse.⁴⁷ As women's appearances more closely approximated normative standards of femininity, they demonstrated and felt they were achieving rehabilitation. Sociologist Edward Flores found in his research with gang-involved men that "embodied masculine practices and performances facilitated recovery, as the body symbolically and concretely represented the struggle between gang life and recovery."⁴⁸ Similarly, women in this project described how *feminine* practices and performances reflected their personal transformations from *criminal-addicts* to *rehabilitated women*. Cultivating a healthy feminine appearance was a pleasurable experience that created distance from the fear and risks associated with past identities.

Multiple women referenced weight gain and changes in their complexions as evidence of improved health and abstinence from drugs. Carmel, a 44-year-old Black woman, recalled a time during her past drug use when she had looked so unhealthy that she would not visit her long-time partner while he was in jail. She explained, "I was so ashamed, I didn't even wanna look at myself! You know, I had lost so much weight, you know, 82 pounds, and cocaine has got me just this black. You know, 'No, I'm not comin' to let you see me.' You know. And my auntie, she would tell me that, you know, 'God, you lookin' bad' . . . You know, I didn't comb my hair or anything. She, 'Girl, you look terrible, Carmel.'" Others' interpretations of Carmel's weight and complexion mirrored back to her a vision of herself as an "addict." The shame that reflection evoked compelled Carmel to limit contact with loved ones. Conversely, women's new appearances were testaments to their "clean" identities.⁴⁹

Simply having control over their appearances signified progress. Prison is a "defeminizing" experience; rules that limit or prohibit personal expression through

dress, makeup, and hairstyles strip women of their individuality and traditional markers of femininity.⁵⁰ Recovery homes often provided women with special salon and spa days, which helped women reclaim their femininity and distance themselves from their experiences in prison and on the streets. Nyla, a 42-year-old Black woman, reflected on this transformation when discussing a photograph of herself following one of these “beauty days.” For Nyla, the photograph revealed more than just a transformation in her physical appearance. It also revealed her recovery from drug use. She had sent the photograph to her incarcerated son so he could see the physical evidence of her recovery, specifically her weight gain. In an earlier letter, her son had told her that he forgave her for being absent, explaining, “I never could hate you. It was just that I hated to see what the drugs were doin’ to you and how skinny and pale in the face you were.” When sending the photograph to her son, Nyla wrote to him, “You can laugh, because I know I have gained some weight.” She explained that for her children “to see me just healthy, you know, that means a lot.” Nyla’s weight gain and darker complexion were positive changes that reflected her good health and communicated her fitness as a mother.

Nyla took pleasure in displaying her femininity in ways that reaffirmed her rehabilitated identity. The physical markers of her recovery reminded her that she was becoming the woman she wanted to be. She explained she had been “amazed” by her appearance following the beauty day. Wearing her hair down and fashionably styled rather than in a ponytail as she typically did was a fun way to demonstrate how far away she was from prison. She knew she had to remain vigilant in her identity work, though. The beauty day photograph prompted Nyla to recall what she referred to as a “before picture” that showed how she looked when she was in “that lifestyle.” Nyla hung the “before picture” on the wall in her room at the recovery home. It offered motivation and reassurance that no matter how bad things seemed today, “it’s just not all that bad. It’s . . . getting better.” It also was a reminder of the *criminal-addict* identity she was working to leave behind. Nyla recalled first seeing the “before picture” when a friend sent it to her while she was incarcerated. “It simply said to me that my soul was hurting. I was so tired. It, my soul was just cryin’ out . . . I actually cried when I saw that picture . . . I looked at that picture, and I could feel the pain.”

The similarities between Nyla’s description of her “before photo” and Ella’s reflection on her mug shot were striking. Both women went far beyond noting their criminalized status or drug use and zeroed in on the way trauma and violence impacted their identities, specifically the hurting of Nyla’s soul and the damage of Ella’s spirit. The pleasure Nyla felt in her new appearance existed in tension with her fear of returning to her past self that was documented in the “before picture,” the self that looked like a woman who was dependent on drugs and an unfit mother. Recall the lightness and darkness imagery Nyla used to contrast periods of her life when she was under the protection of God’s umbrella with periods when she was doing what the devil would have her do. The healthy, bright image she was able to share with her son reflected alignment of her faith, recovery,



FIGURE 11. Chicago police (Photo credit: Chicken Wing).

and gendered identity. Her changed appearance reflected her commitment to the deep internal moral and spiritual identity work the rehabilitated woman controlling image demanded.

The way others reacted to women's physical appearances provided a gauge of how well they performed the rehabilitated woman identity. Chicken Wing, a 55-year-old Black woman, took a photograph of a police officer (figure 11)⁵¹ and explained what it showed: "I don't have to be scared of the police no more . . . I can go up and ask them, 'Can I take your picture?' You know, I don't look like a crackhead. I don't look like I'm fittin' to rob nobody. I can go in stores now. I feel good about myself now." Chicken Wing's friendly exchange with the officer when she obtained his permission to take his photograph revealed a dramatic change not only in how she felt about herself, but also in how the officer viewed her. She had explained to him she wanted to take his picture because she was making a documentary about criminals. He had responded, "But I'm the good guy, right?" Chicken Wing had replied, "Yes, you are."

She clearly had fun with this exchange, even joking with the officer. This interaction was possible because of his assessment of her as a fellow person on the right side of the law, which stemmed from her appearance. She no longer looked like a "crackhead," which she described as "breasts . . . sunk in. Your neck's sunk in. You're lookin' like a *wreck*. Like I was 20 years ago. I looked bad. I looked like I was *dead*. I just didn't have the dirt poured on me." Chicken Wing had not just looked unhealthy, she had looked decidedly unfeminine: too skinny, sunken-in breasts, disheveled, an overall inattentiveness to her appearance, which broadcasted a "dirty" identity. Chicken Wing's healthier and more put-together appearance directly repudiated the "crack ho" controlling image and helped her draw a strict boundary between her current self and her past self.

Ella shared a similar experience when describing the process of acquiring her rap sheet from the Chicago Police Department's headquarters. The officer who assisted her was surprised to learn Ella was picking up her own rap sheet. She recalled their exchange: "He was like, 'And who is this for?' I was like, 'For me.' He said, 'OK. But who is the *person*?' I said, 'Me!' He was like, 'For real?' I was like, 'Yeah.' So . . . I guess he was surprised . . . it's like you didn't believe that it could be me that was in trouble. Yeah, I been in trouble [*laughing*], you know. Maybe I don't have that look, so I felt good." Ella no longer had "that look" of the *criminal-addict*, which completely changed the tone of her interaction with this officer. When she returned a few days later to pick up her records, the same officer assisted her and informed her there was a three-dollar fee. Ella did not have any money with her, so the officer waived the fee. Ella decided to ask him for "one more favor . . . He said, 'What do you want now?' I say, 'Can I have some of them peppermints?' [*laughing*] He was like, 'Here, girl. Go on!' [*laughing*] So it was funny, but he was real nice . . . I think people look at you different, and people don't mind helpin' people if you're willin' to help yourself, you know."

Like Chicken Wing's exchange with the officer, Ella's interaction with this officer took on a playful tone and represented a complete break with her past experiences with police. She contrasted her friendly exchange while picking up her records with past arrests, noting some police officers "feel that you're the scum of the earth, or they treat you real bad because you did something that might not meet their standards." She explained a time when she was arrested for possession of a small amount of cocaine, and six squad cars encircled her:

You would think I shot the president. I didn't do nothin'. I just had some drugs on me. You know. And they jump out the car and like five or six of 'em tryin' to grab little, ol' me! Little, ol' me! It don't take six of y'all to grab me! I didn't run. I didn't try to run. I didn't try to resist. Well, when they start twistin' my arm, yeah, I tried to get my arm. 'Cause why you twistin' my arm? You know. And they like, "You better stay still! I'll break this MF and all!" I'm like, I say, "It seem like you tryin' to anyway!" You know. "You ain't got to do all that!"

While critiquing these officers' abusive treatment, Ella also recognized her efforts to change her self were a necessary prerequisite for the changed response she now received from police officers. She explained, "First you have to seek that help, and when you do, it is people that are willing to help and want to help, you know. And I think they look at you different knowing that, OK, you made a mistake, or you did wrong, but now you're trying to correct it. Oh, you want to do better. And it's OK. We're human, we do that, you know." Ella's assertion "we're human" was critically important. When her appearance looked as it did in her mug shot, she was recognized and treated as less than human. Her new appearance reclaimed her humanity and demanded a basic level of respect that should have been a baseline for all interactions, but routinely was absent from criminalized women's lives.



FIGURE 12. Personal hygiene items (Photo credit: the Lioness).

Taking control of one's appearance was a way for women to communicate personal transformation and to accomplish femininity. The Lioness, a 49-year-old African American woman, also took pride in her new appearance, sharing a photograph of her personal hygiene items to illustrate how important it was that she took care of herself (figure 12). The photograph showed how the Lioness was different from the woman she used to be, when she would stay out overnight getting high at unfamiliar places and would be without any personal hygiene items in the morning. She recalled a specific incident when she had stolen soap, toothpaste, and deodorant from a store. The man working behind the counter confronted her outside. She explained:

He said, "Hey!" And I turned around, and I was fittin' to run. He said, "I'ma let you have that!" He said, "But a real woman would keep," you know . . . he was sayin' things that made me feel bad as a woman . . . he was sayin' things that . . . I should be ashamed of myself . . . he made me feel so bad as a woman that I could not keep my personals and keep my hygiene up. I mean he was just tellin' me that I need to keep myself clean and my hygiene up, I shouldn't have to steal, I should have money to buy it, I mean he made me feel *so bad*. So from that day, I vowed that I would never, ever, *ever* be without hygiene products. And I am *not*. Never ever.

The store worker did not judge the Lioness for breaking the law but shamed her for failing to behave like a “real woman.”

Prisons institutionally perpetuate this shame through routinely denying women sufficient access to needed items like toilet paper and sanitary napkins. Forcing women to ask officers for these items not only “infantilizes women,” it constrains their ability to manage basic hygiene needs, with dehumanizing and defeminizing consequences.⁵² It also connects the institutional violence incarcerated women endure to the longstanding historical reality that “black women’s bodies did not belong to themselves.”⁵³ The pervasive gendered violence throughout criminalized women’s lives—interpersonal violence, community violence, and institutional violence, specifically at the hands of police and the entirety of the incarceration experience—continues that legacy and robs women of control of their own bodies. For the Lioness, drug use also robbed her of control. Taking care of her personal hygiene and appearance was a way to claim control and demonstrate her rehabilitated identity. She added that she now made sure to have three of every personal hygiene item she might need to ensure she never ran out. She commented, “Because a woman is supposed to always be clean, and fresh, and smelling good.”

In this context, the Lioness’s use of the word *clean* took on multiple meanings. It obviously referenced her hygiene and physical cleanliness, but at a deeper level, it also referenced her recovery from drug use. Aside from looking nice and approximating normative feminine beauty standards, the Lioness rejected dependence on drugs and tried to decrease her vulnerability to gendered violence, such as another assault by a correctional officer.⁵⁴ In doing so, she claimed power and dignity by asserting ownership of her body. As with Nyla, the Lioness’s appearance reflected deep internal work and growing independence from drugs, abusive men, and violent institutions.

Just as drug use, violence, and trauma were embodied, so was recovery in women’s weight gain, complexions, and overall improved appearances that approximated feminine norms. Women repeatedly noted their clean, healthy appearances as signs of recovery from drug use and criminalized activity. To underscore this point, they contrasted their current appearances with vivid descriptions of how they looked when they were “in their addictions” and “in the streets.” In the past, women’s appearances were evidence of their drug use and “criminality” (i.e., their “dirtiness”) and reflected ways they were not living up to their roles as respectable women and mothers. Rehabilitating their feminine appearances provided a way to demonstrate the deeper changes they were making in their lives and to gain recognition for these transformations.⁵⁵ In contrast to the shame they previously felt regarding their appearances, women took pleasure in their new performances of femininity and distinguishing their past and current selves. Employment provided another way to mark this distinction.

EMPLOYMENT: THE MARK OF RESPONSIBILITY

Work is a key component of identity, particularly for formerly incarcerated people, as the ability to hold a job communicates self-discipline, moral redemption, and the transformation from *criminal* to contributing member of society.⁵⁶ As has been documented with men, sociologist Tara Opsal shows that formerly incarcerated women “saw work as an opportunity to create new identities and new lives that contrasted from those they inhabited prior to incarceration.”⁵⁷ Yet, it would be a mistake to equate the meaning of work in formerly incarcerated men’s and women’s lives. Work is a gendered institution, as are prison and reentry.⁵⁸ As sociologist Susila Gurusami shows, the state’s monitoring of formerly incarcerated women’s employment connects to a long history of carceral and welfare work mandates that seek to reform and regulate Black women’s presumed laziness and immorality and make them “legible” as an exploited source of labor under capitalism.⁵⁹ It follows that work not only is a site of gendered regulation, but also of gendered identity construction.

Although employment runs counter to traditional femininity scripts, it is a fundamental component of the rehabilitated woman controlling image. In her research with women on parole, Opsal found that “none of these women relied solely on traditional gender roles as they crafted their replacement selves.”⁶⁰ This finding reflects the reality that normative femininity is out of reach for most criminalized women. Few formerly incarcerated women possess the myriad social privileges necessary to achieve the true womanhood ideal, regardless of whether that ideal is attractive. As poor women and women of color (primarily Black women) with criminal records living in the neoliberal era of postwelfare reform, the women who participated in this project could not rely on the state to provide financial assistance.⁶¹ They also could not rely on partners to provide for them financially. Those who were involved in romantic relationships were partnered with men, and in one case a woman, who had their own criminal backgrounds. These partners faced intersecting discriminations based on their criminal records and race, which constrained their access to employment.⁶² In short, romantic relationships did not offer financial security or an avenue out of poverty.⁶³ Employment thus provided critical material assistance.

For women who had stopped using drugs, appearance was the most immediately attainable gendered marker of rehabilitation. Employment, on the other hand, was a more aspirational component of the rehabilitated woman controlling image. Of the 36 women who participated in this project, only one-third (12 women) were employed at the time of the interviews, and only 5 of these employed women (less than 14 percent of all participants) held full-time jobs. Yet, almost all of the women identified employment as a goal and a necessary part of their rehabilitation processes.

This disconnect between formerly incarcerated people’s desire to work and the ability to secure stable employment is well documented. Despite employment

being a common requirement of parole, employer bias, criminal background check policies, and laws that bar occupational licenses for people with convictions systematically exclude formerly incarcerated people from employment.⁶⁴ It is no wonder that in 2008 formerly incarcerated people had an unemployment rate over 27 percent, almost five times higher than the general population's unemployment rate.⁶⁵ As with all parts of the criminal legal system, race and gender matter. Formerly incarcerated women experienced higher unemployment rates than formerly incarcerated men across all racial categories. Women of color, particularly Black women, fared worst. In 2008, the unemployment rate was 40 percent for formerly incarcerated Black women, 39 percent for formerly incarcerated Latinx women, and 23 percent for formerly incarcerated White women. As Lucious Couloute and Daniel Kopf conclude, "both race and gender shape the economic stability of criminalized people."⁶⁶ In addition to their criminal records, many women had limited work histories and had been out of the workforce for extended stretches while using drugs and while incarcerated.⁶⁷ Plus, women struggled to find employment that was not temporary, seasonal, or part-time and that was accessible by public transportation. Race, gender, poverty, drug use, and criminalization intersected to create a formidable barrier between formerly incarcerated women and mainstream society, with especially deleterious effects for women of color.

Women's reflections on employment indicated securing a job was about much more than just securing an income. A secure financial income would help women take care of their personal appearances, obtain stable housing, provide for their children, and protect against the vulnerabilities—both material and ideological—associated with dependence on drugs, institutions, and other people. As such, employment was a key component of women's identity work.⁶⁸ It helped women contest the controlling images of the "crack ho" and "welfare queen" and showed they were becoming productive members of society. Work was a way for criminalized women to show they were worthy of integration into society, although integration would be partial, relegating women to the margins. In a postincarceration landscape structured by surveillance, moral judgment, and control, the rehabilitated woman is a working woman.

At the most basic level, employment was necessary for women to have any chance of moving forward from the transitory period many found themselves in during the months after their release from prison. In this way, securing a job provided peace of mind and reassurance that things would get better. Nyla, for instance, explained her recent hiring at Dunkin' Donuts meant "a door open . . . I'm relieved of some of the questions. How will I do this? How will I do that? It kind of opens the door to and gives me leeway to do these things now as far as financially. Even from, like health care, like a good example is my teeth. You know, stuff like that. Little stuff. From day to day my personal items that I need . . . Bein' able to support my son in his incarceration. And just bein' able to pay my way. And somethin' is better than nothing." The part-time job alone would

not provide enough to be financially independent, but it provided Nyla with reassurance she was moving in the right direction. Notably, she connected employment to her appearance, health, and relationship with her son and in doing so suggested how appearance and employment were two foundational components of the rehabilitated woman identity. Overcoming her dependence on drugs and incrementally establishing her financial independence allowed her to take care of herself and her son. The connection between material and relational needs came into focus. Nyla also highlighted that achieving the rehabilitated woman identity was a work in progress. The part-time job at Dunkin' Donuts would not allow her to rent her own apartment yet, but it signified she would be able to do so one day, perhaps even soon. In the meantime, it also allowed her to feel good about herself and proud of her progress—feelings that were unreachably distant when she was out from under the protection of God's umbrella.

Moon, a 40-year-old African American woman, made an explicit connection between employment and independence when reflecting on the progress she had made during the approximately three months she had been living at Growing Stronger. She had completed an intensive outpatient drug treatment program and was attending an adult high school program with the goal of earning her diploma. Not having a job was holding her back, however. Moon commented, "I desperately need a job . . . that's my only thing now, is I need a job." Once she had a job, she would be able to move out of Growing Stronger and start the next phase of her life. Moon continued:

I wanna work. I don't want a handout . . . bein' here can be a blessing as well as a curse, because, if I get so complacent whereas I just don't gotta worry about no bills, I can stay at Growing Stronger. They don't have no time limit on how long you can be there . . . it'll make you lacksy daisy, you know. I don't wanna be lacksy daisy . . . Then once I get a job I can start saving my money and be independent . . . I definitely need housing, but in order to maintain housing, I need a job first, you know, so, and I'm in school that I may get a better job instead of just a job. You know, but for right now I'd be happy with just a job, you know, because I don't have the income, and that's a door that definitely needs to be opened for myself, and I want to do whatever it takes in order to make that happen so that . . . I'll still be able to be independent . . . on my own and pay rent, even if all I can do is just pay rent and insurance on myself, I'd be pleased with that, you know.

Like Nyla, Moon talked about employment as a "door" that, once opened, would propel her forward past the barrier of financial dependence that had paused her progress. Without steady employment, Moon would remain dependent on others, whether that was social service programs or other people. That financial dependence hindered her ability to truly achieve a rehabilitated identity.

While Moon made an explicit connection among employment, housing, and independence, she also alluded to the deeper personal meaning employment held. Moon made clear dependence was not a neutral description of a social relation but

rather a reflection of her moral character.⁶⁹ She expressed fear of becoming “lacksy daisy,” a character trait that suggested a lack of will or determination on her part.⁷⁰ Having a job would communicate she was not taking a “handout,” lazy, or content with living in transitional housing programs. Employment would ward off the specter of the “welfare queen” and communicate her rehabilitation, which necessitated not only a desire to have “a better life,” but also the ability to achieve one.

Employment was a marker of personal transformation that women referenced as part of establishing a boundary with their past lifestyles.⁷¹ Although she was not employed at the time of our interviews, the Lioness discussed how becoming employed would not only show she was a “responsible” person and “a productive part of society,” but would also change the way others viewed her. She explained, “When you [are] . . . a working person, people tend to look at you different. When I say, ‘Oh, I gotta go to work,’ or, ‘I’m on my way to work,’ people . . . would never look at me and say, ‘Oh she’s an ex-offender.’ See it’s a big difference. They look at you with respect. I’m more respected when I’m a working person.” The Lioness noted the pride she felt when others recognized her as a responsible, productive person. These affirming views contrasted with her recollection of the corner store worker who had shamed her for not being a “real woman.”

These markedly different social interactions produced two very different selves. Caught between her past identity and aspirational identity, the Lioness relied on more attainable gendered markers of rehabilitation, such as appearance, while striving toward employment. She anticipated how employment would increase the pleasure associated with performing the rehabilitated woman identity and offer further protection from the judgment and uncertainty she faced in her past “dirty” identity. The Lioness added that once she had a job, she would be able to pay back a debt she owed to a professional school. Paying this debt was important “because then . . . I will be clean . . . I won’t be owin’ nobody. You know, it’s just . . . a sense of responsibility.” Her use of the word *clean* again was important. Her debt was a reminder of her past involvement with drugs and incarceration. Erasing the debt would mark her as a responsible person and help her have a fresh start. Employment was a critical part of being able to attain a “clean” identity unencumbered by past mistakes.

Chicken Wing also discussed the importance of having a job. She took a photograph of her place of employment, a church where she prepared food, cleaned, and assisted with additional day-to-day tasks (figure 13). More important than the income it provided, the part-time job was a sign of the new person she had become. She commented, “I never had a *job* before. This is my first job. I’m 55 years old! My first job.” She added she had “money in the bank” for the first time in her life and recently obtained a credit card, which showed “that I’m a productive citizen now . . . It just feels so good. And my sons are so proud of me. Least when I die . . . they can’t say their mother died a crackhead.” Chicken Wing expressed pride in her job and took pleasure in the markers of success it made possible. As



FIGURE 13. "My first job" (Photo credit: Chicken Wing).

she did when discussing her photograph of the police officer, Chicken Wing again invoked the controlling image of the "crackhead" and explained how she actively contested it. Further, she linked her repudiation of that image to her relationship with her four adult children, who had ranged from toddlers to teenagers when she was incarcerated 21 years earlier. Her sons' pride, which she in part attributed to her employment, helped Chicken Wing accomplish not just a new "clean" and "rehabilitated" identity, but also a new identity as a mother.

Chicken Wing's attention to her credit card was echoed by Ms. Fields, a 47-year-old Black Afro-American woman, and Denise, the 45-year-old Black woman who had worked so hard to earn Judge Hopkins's approval. Without prompting, all three discussed how obtaining a credit or debit card was a milestone that represented becoming part of society. Ms. Fields even took a photo of the Chase bank branch where she had opened a bank account after obtaining her first job postincarceration (figure 14). She talked at length about how happy she was to have a debit card: "I just felt like I was a part of something . . . I had some money, [and] I hadn't had money in 14 years, you know, unless I was stealin' or beggin' my mother . . . Everywhere I went, everybody, you know, my sponsor would swipe, my sister, everybody swiped. So I don't know if it was just the prestige or I just wanted to swipe . . . I just wanted to feel like I was a part of gettin' better, I guess." Swiping her debit card was a pleasurable act for Ms. Fields. Each swipe showed she was



FIGURE 14. Debit card (Photo credit: Ms. Fields).

a responsible person whom the bank trusted and that she was capable of taking care of herself in dignified and legal ways. With each swipe, she performed independence, countering her past dependence on drugs, theft, and family members to get by. She also affirmed her connection to people she admired and strengthened the boundary between the respectable woman she identified as today and the untrustworthy woman she viewed herself as being in the past. The public act of swiping her debit card and the sense of prestige it afforded were part of creating a rehabilitated identity as a capable, independent woman. Securing legitimate work made being a debit cardholder possible and was a cornerstone of Ms. Fields's identity work.

Denise also discussed the importance of being able to open her first bank account after she came to the recovery home and started working. Like Ms. Fields, she used her debit card with pride: "That makes me feel special, like when I . . . [am] going to the stores with the ladies [from the recovery home] sometimes and they'll put cash on there. And, baby, I'll just bust out with that card and they . . . give me the look, but they [were] probably saying the same thing that I was saying. 'Man, I wish that was me.' But see, a lot of us in our addiction, we . . . took from banks and . . . wrote bad [checks], so you can't get [an] account [now]. So the only way they can go it is [to] pay in cash." Bank accounts, credit cards, and debit cards were status markers that distinguished women from others who were not as far

along in their recovery and postincarceration processes. The accounts and cards were signs of respectability that represented their rehabilitated, “clean” identities. Swiping a debit card thus became a fun feminine performance of respectability and responsibility that publicly distanced women from the controlling images of “crack ho” and “welfare queen.”

Denise underscored this point by recounting a story from when she had first arrived at Growing Stronger. She explained that without a legitimate job, she had returned to sex work. She reasoned, “Well, you know, being an addict and didn’t have an income, it’s quite expected that you was prostituting or whatever to get money.” Again, Denise linked employment with her sense of self and showed how the rehabilitated woman identity exists in a constant tension with her past. She described sex work as “humiliating, you know . . . being with people I didn’t wanna be with just so I can get some money,” and associated that work with her *criminal-addict* identity. For Denise, employment, even when it paid minimum wage and was temporary, guarded against going down the wrong path back to her past identity. She suggested that not having legitimate work could lead back to dependence—on work she found to be humiliating, on men, on drugs—and the associated fear, uncertainty, and risk of criminalization.⁷²

Legitimate work allowed Denise to keep money in the bank and protect multiple components of her “clean” identity. For instance, she recalled that her daughter recently had called her from jail, requesting help with posting bail. Denise responded by going directly to the bank:

I took out \$250 and I went to the police station and I got my daughter . . . And I was so happy that I could do that. ‘Cause she was saying she called her daddy and he was like, “I ain’t got no money.” But he worked, made good money. Told her he ain’t got no money . . . And I was able to get my daughter outta jail. That meant so much to me. And it was like I knew that was gonna happen one day. I said, “Denise, you sittin’ up here savin’ this money, but watch, one of your kids gonna need you, and you gonna wind up, you know?” And I was okay with that, too.

Employment allowed her to maintain a bank account and respond to her daughter as the type of mother she wanted to be. Like Chicken Wing, Denise connected her employment to her identity as a mother on whom her children could confidently rely. Her growing independence—rooted in her employment and sobriety—made this new type of caretaking possible.

Again, given that two-thirds of the women who participated in this project were unemployed at the time of our interviews, it is important to consider how employment is an aspirational component of the rehabilitated woman controlling image and how elusive stable, full-time employment remained. During the course of our interviews, Stacey Williams, a 41-year-old African American woman, and Tinybig, the 51-year-old Afro Native American Indian woman who described arriving at jail as “pigs . . . goin’ to slaughter,” began doing telemarketing work with a company



FIGURE 15. Two-hour commute to work each way (Photo credit: Stacey Williams).

in a far western suburb. While they needed the money and the work experience, both ultimately left their positions after several weeks due to the long commute and inconsistent pay. Stacey took a photograph of the Chicago red line L station, which was just one leg of her two-hour commute each way to her job (figure 15). She commented that her days lasted “12 hours, including from me getting up at four in the morning to get out there . . . But I’m only working eight hours a day. But it’s just too much.” Because she had not yet made any sales, she had not earned any commission. Thus, her earnings totaled only about \$400 every two weeks. Stacey explained how desperately she needed the money. Her sister, who took care of Stacey’s two daughters, was ill and needed Stacey’s help. Thus, she felt a great deal of pressure to secure a stable income so she and her sister could pool their resources and rent an apartment. The costs associated with the telemarketing job simply were too great, however, so Stacey continued to look for more stable employment that would allow her to fulfill her caretaker role for her sister and children.

Stacey’s reflection on her work underscored Chicken Wing’s and Denise’s insight that employment fulfilled more than material needs. Of course, Stacey needed stable, better-paying employment to keep a roof over her head, food on the table, and clothes on her back. But her desperation and sense of urgency to secure better employment were rooted in relational needs, specifically her commitments

as a mother and sister. The stress and frustration associated with her employment search connected to the deep, internal work she was doing to transform her self. Failing to secure a good job kept her dependent on her sister and the recovery home where she lived and thus caught between the past *criminal-addict* identity she was working to leave behind and the rehabilitated woman she was trying to become.

Despite these frustrations, Stacey was one of the few women in this study who had secured full-time, permanent employment. Most participants were unemployed, and that status not only created financial dependence, but also prevented women from feeling as if they were able to move forward with their lives. Because of their felony convictions and subsequent unemployment, they remained stuck in limbo. Moon's earlier reflections about lack of employment and this sense of suspended progress took on additional meaning when she recalled how an employer had withdrawn a job offer after receiving the results of her background check. Moon explained:

Some people don't want to even hire you for seven years . . . Seven years until you had been out on the streets, so in the meantime . . . how do I feed myself? How do I eat? I'm bonded by the state of Illinois, but by me being a thief, nobody wants to hire me. Target hired me. I went through the drug test. I passed that. I passed the interview and everything, and when I called to get my schedule for Target, they said to me, "Please tell us you gave us the wrong Social Security number." I said, "No, that's my right Social Security number," and they said, "Well, um, I'm sorry. We can't give you this job." You know, that crush a person, because it's like, "Damn, when in life [will] I ever get the right to pay my debt to society?" It's like they push you and instead of like help you get a job, whereas you can be a productive, conducive member in society, it's like, "Naw, because you did this, you just go keep payin' this debt all over and all over and all over again."

Moon felt stuck and helpless.⁷³ In this example, she was engaged with social services and had secured bonding by the state of Illinois, which would ensure payment to the employer should they lose any money because of Moon. Even with the state's backing, Moon could not convince the employer to recognize her as rehabilitated and give her a chance at employment. She faced perpetual judgment and punishment, despite completing her formal sentence; the "mark" of the criminal record felt insurmountable.⁷⁴

It is this permanent "mark" that prevented many women from ever feeling truly settled or like they finally made it. While Nyla expressed relief at securing part-time employment at Dunkin' Donuts and described the job as "a door open," she also explained she could not slow down. Although she had checked the box on the job application disclosing her felony conviction, the manager had not asked about it during their interview. His decision not to ask her about it might indicate her conviction was irrelevant to her hiring. The lack of discussion, though, left some lingering uncertainty. Nyla knew the job could be taken away from her at any

moment. She was especially cautious since she had not started the job and was not yet on the payroll. She elaborated:

I still feel the need to get up and go. Like I have to be doin' somethin'. I can't get complacent. Because the thought is now what if, what if, what if. Because I guess that thought is there because I actually haven't started workin' yet, so I feel the need to not stop what I've been doin', get up every mornin', and travel the city of Chicago. And yesterday, somebody was like, "Just sit down. [*laughs*] Just sit down. You got a job now! [*laughing*] . . . Well, why don't you just be still? Make some meetings . . ." You know, she was pretty much sayin', "Relax. Get out the way." And I understand all that, Chez, and at the same time, I'm like, you know, I don't want to think the worst or anything, I guess you could say because I'm not there, and now I have the [employee] shirts and everything, right? And I filled out the paperwork, but I'm still not there yet, you see? I don't feel like, I'm still, I'm still not on the payroll. So until then I have to do somethin' to stay in this process.

Nyla tried to reassure herself that she could slow down, but she did not feel secure and remained stuck in this transitory space. She identified the same risk that troubled Moon: complacency. There was a frantic sense to Nyla's ongoing employment search, which reflected the never completed project of personal transformation. Nothing would ever be good enough to communicate permanent rehabilitation. Regardless of the amount of clean time amassed, the number of certificates of program completion earned, or the number of job applications submitted, Nyla could not be complacent. Even when she secured a job, she could not get comfortable. She must do the continuous work of self-improvement. She must "keep movin'."

Nyla continued to connect with various reentry programs across the city that promised assistance with job training, resume writing, and interview skills. This was a frustrating ordeal that required a lot of appointments and waiting. Nyla was in the midst of a two-month intake and waiting process with one organization that offered a one-week job training program. Completing the program would not guarantee job placement. Rather, the organization would put Nyla's name on a list for employers.⁷⁵ Nyla laughed and commented, "What am I to do in the meantime?" She had completed an intake and orientation with another program, only to be unable to reach them when it was time for the training to begin. The program had moved, and the phone number no longer worked. Neither Nyla nor her case manager at yet another reentry program had been able to track down a working number.

Nyla captured the stress and satisfaction of "keeping it movin'" with a photograph that showed her seated at a table, surrounded by paperwork, in the recovery home where she resided.⁷⁶ Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and her small gold cross necklace popped against the long-sleeved black shirt she was wearing. Nyla looked at the camera, almost smiling. She held a pen in her right hand, which rested atop a sheet of paper. It was as if the photographer caught her in the middle of filling out an important form or writing a note. Additional sheets of paper were

scattered on the table, as well as a yellow folder. Nyla's winter coat and scarf hung over the back of a chair at the head of the table, and her purse rested on the table in front of the chair. Nyla explained the photograph: "This one I was feelin', I felt very comfortable. I felt very comfortable in doin' what I was doin' because I like doin' this. I felt secure. I felt like I was workin' my mind, and I was puttin' all of everything together from all of this. Your project . . . and just the whole feelin' of it . . . and then I was also thinkin' on my sons . . . that this could all be used to help them, too. Bein' . . . that they're incarcerated. And so it's just not, I'm just not wastin' my time. That's what that picture was." Nyla started to cry. Referring to the photograph, I asked, "And that was just on your own that you're just workin'." Nyla replied, "Right . . . I'm actually sittin' down tryin' to regroup, you know, get all these things together 'cause I'm all over the place. You know, I felt like I had been all over the city of Chicago." She laughed. "Was this at the end of the day you were feelin' that way?" I asked. "Yeah," she said still laughing. "And I'm sittin' there and then I'm thinkin' on my sons, how to write them and, you know, so I just felt like, 'Nyla, it's all gonna come together.' That was that picture."

The photograph conveyed the fear and joy embedded in Nyla's continuous work to maintain the boundary between her past *criminal-addict* identity and her rehabilitated identity. Over just a couple of minutes, her description of the photograph shifted from comfort and security in her progress, to concern for her incarcerated sons, to feeling "all over the place," to confidence that everything is "gonna come together." For our PEI, she had asked people to take photographs of her at each organization she went to for assistance. She documented her work, and then, at the end of the day, she documented how it all felt, sitting exhausted at a table trying to regroup. There was a sense of pride in working so hard, running all over the city, refusing to be discouraged by the run-around she encountered at reentry organizations, and making things happen on her own. A friend, not a social service organization, had referred her to the Dunkin' Donuts job. There also was an ominous sense, however, that hard work might not be enough.⁷⁷ Nyla had been in this place, under the protection of God's umbrella, before, and she had slipped back to her *criminal-addict* identity. Once again, she was working hard to stay under God's umbrella. Her photographs documented her work to create her rehabilitated identity. Her healthy appearance and her employment were getting her closer to being the woman she wanted to be. Nyla felt joy in these accomplishments and concern about what the future held.

Employment is a complicated piece of the rehabilitated woman controlling image. On the one hand, it subjects women to surveillance and exploitation. The state and reentry organizations view employment "as a primary indicator of criminal rehabilitation," which compels formerly incarcerated people to accept whatever employment they can find.⁷⁸ Employers of "bad jobs" seize on this desperation, recruiting formerly incarcerated people to fill low-wage and temporary jobs that offer neither benefits nor upward mobility.⁷⁹ The precarious nature of this work creates distinct gendered risks for criminalized women who lack employee

protections but face sexual harassment and assault on the job, widespread availability and use of drugs in the workplace, and aggressive behavior by supervisors who scream, threaten to fire, and fire women without cause.⁸⁰ The majority of the women in this study had not secured employment since their release from jail or prison, and the jobs women did obtain rarely provided an income that made self-sufficiency possible.

This is the dilemma of employment for criminalized women. It is necessary to have a chance of making it on the outside, but it often is unattainable. When it is attained, it typically reaffirms the deeply engrained inequality that structures the postindustrial neoliberal economy.⁸¹ Today's bifurcated economy depends on low-wage workers to fill jobs in an ever-expanding service sector that props up the unfettered accumulation of wealth in the hands of the professional classes.⁸² As sociologist Loïc Wacquant argues, the neoliberal state disciplines low-income and poor people into these social roles through the interlinked projects of "workfare" (e.g., the restrictive work requirements imposed by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Welfare Reform Act) and "prisonfare" (e.g., the containment and control administered through policing, probation, parole, and prisons).⁸³ The simultaneous necessity and severe limitations of employment that criminalized women confront fit squarely into the neoliberal economy. While employment may enable a criminalized woman to pay her rent, access health care, swipe her debit card, and bail her child out of jail, it rarely provides security. Rather, it consigns women to a lifetime of just barely getting by, in other words, to living on the economic and social margins of society. And that outcome only is possible if women can hang on. If the ongoing precarity and stress become too much, or if a disruption like a job loss or eviction occurs, not even a position on the margins is guaranteed. Women risk slipping back to an unsafe living environment, the streets, drug use, and eventually jail or prison.

On the other hand, "employment is an implicit challenge to the cultural stereotypes" that poor women, women of color, and criminalized women encounter.⁸⁴ Women referenced employment to contest controlling images and craft identities as rehabilitated women capable of taking care of themselves and their children. Striving for and securing employment provided women with deep personal meaning. Like Opsal found, the women who participated in this study viewed employment as "play[ing] a central role in creating and sustaining change as they set out to be different kinds of people."⁸⁵ Work was not only valuable for the necessary though insufficient financial means it provided; it was a key piece of the new identities women were creating. In contrast to past periods of unemployment or illegal work, holding paid legal employment, even when it was a "bad job," provided evidence of women's changing selves. As such, women found personal meaning in their work and took pleasure in what employment allowed them to do.

This tension is precisely what makes the rehabilitated woman image a controlling image. Like the seemingly positive image of the respectable "Black lady," who has secured professional success through education and hard work, the

rehabilitated woman controlling image, on the surface, connotes empowerment and achievement that result from perseverance. Yet, by existing in opposition to the “welfare queen” and “crack ho” controlling images, it presupposes and reifies those more obviously denigrating images.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the rehabilitated woman image propagates the lie that criminalized women will survive if they just work hard enough, while eschewing the question of why anyone should be content with mere survival in a society that denies their fundamental humanity and dignity. In this way, the rehabilitated woman image resonates with the analyses of feminist scholars who document how the carceral state’s gendered goals of empowerment and independence do not actually help women but rather coopt feminist ideals in the service of the state’s work to discipline and regulate the socially marginalized.⁸⁷ And yet, if we truly listen to criminalized women, we see how joy exists within this tension. Despite the overbearing requirements and restrictions criminalized women navigated daily, they did more than survive; they embraced moments of unbridled joy through claiming their humanity in a society where recognition of that humanity was not a given.

CONCLUSION

The gendered markers of rehabilitation that constitute the rehabilitated woman did not grant access to normative femininity, which remained closed off due to race, class, and the permanent nature of the *criminal-addict* label. They did, however, provide a way to navigate a postincarceration landscape beset with institutions and individuals that relegate criminalized women to a second-class status and a 12-Step logic that presents only two recognizable subject positions—clean or dirty.⁸⁸ These gendered markers also provided women with personally affirming evidence of their ongoing progress away from their past *criminal-addict* selves. In some respects, rehabilitation was an aspirational identity, particularly for women who were recently released, living in recovery homes, still using drugs, or under formal correctional supervision. When women had not yet achieved these gendered markers of rehabilitation, they foregrounded the work they were doing to move closer to accomplishing this identity, in the process distinguishing their current self from their past self. Women embraced the joy of crafting rehabilitated identities, while also contending with the fear and risk associated with a return to a past *criminal-addict* self, and used the clean/dirty dichotomy to navigate these competing identities.

The 12-Step logic provided women with a roadmap to follow after incarceration to ensure they remained on their path to recovery. While the path did not have a conclusion, the 12 Steps prescribed how women could engage faith and recovery discourses to demonstrate their commitment to their noncriminality and sobriety. These discourses facilitated women’s boundary work, meaning the many ways they drew distinctions between their past *criminal-addict* identities

and their present recovering identities. In this context, relapse was not a neutral, routine part of the recovery process; rather, it posed a threat of returning to these past identities. Relapse threatened women's identity work, as resuming drug or alcohol use signaled a return to criminality and the associated judgments that return could prompt regarding morality and spirituality. The *criminal-addict* identity was inherently racialized and gendered, as it was bound up with deep-rooted controlling images of deviant women who threaten gender norms, family stability, and social order.

Against the backdrop of the 12-Step logic, appearance and employment were two foundational gendered markers of women's ongoing identity work. Appearance was the most recognizable and oftentimes most quickly achieved gendered marker of rehabilitation. Even when women were newly released from prison and therefore at the very beginning of their postincarceration processes, a healthy, feminine appearance quickly signaled their commitment to recovery. Stable legal employment, independent housing, and reestablished relationships with children and loved ones were longer-term goals that would take time to achieve. In the meantime, women could work on their selves. A healthy complexion, appropriate weight gain, and kempt appearance were immediate attainable signals of sobriety and thus evidence that women were working the 12 Steps. These markers also helped women distance themselves from the controlling images of the "crack ho" and "welfare queen" that justified the gendered violence they had survived prior to and during incarceration. Appearance communicated independence from drug and alcohol use, which was the foundation upon which women's recovery and rehabilitation were built. Legal employment, even temporary, seasonal, or part-time work, communicated independence from institutions and others, as well as sound moral character and commitment to fitting into the existing social order.