

The gendered labour of desistance: Moving beyond imprisonment and monocultural perspectives

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Abstract

This article explores the interplay between desistance and gendered forms of labour in community-based settings across England and Sweden. Building on feminist conceptualisations of women's 'second shift', the article draws on qualitative data from three research projects to explore how informal, gendered practices, linked to heteronormative ideals and expectations, feature in women's stories of desistance. Our results show that women provide emotional, practical and financial support for the desistance of partners and male family members in ways that not only reflect but also reproduce broader gendered divisions of unpaid labour. Often, this happens while criminalised women are attempting to desist themselves. Framed through the concept of gendered labour of desistance, the key contribution of the paper is to expose hidden gendered dynamics involved in desistance work and to argue for their inclusion in, and resistance within, desistance theory.

Keywords

desistance, gender, divisions of labour, women, feminism, cross-national perspectives

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Introduction

Desistance studies have recently undergone a period of intellectual reinvention. A new generation of desistance literature has emerged (Maruna, 2025), moving away from primarily individualised explanations and towards greater attention to the structural inequalities faced by criminalised people (Farrall et al., 2022; Fredriksson and Gålnander, 2025). While Sampson and Laub's canonical work highlighted the importance of marriage and employment in facilitating desistance, subsequent research continues to demonstrate the significance of social bonds, relationships, familial support and identity change (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Weaver, 2016, 2019). Such work underscores the interplay between internal and external factors in sustaining desistance.

One dominant structural factor overlooked in early desistance work however is gendered inequality. Although limitations still abound, research into women's experiences has recently grown significantly (Graham and McNeill, 2017). Sered and Norton-Hark (2020) argue that institutionalised, socio-structural barriers – such as political and economic policies including the social construction of criminality – exacerbate the onus of and challenges around desistance for women. Feminist critiques also identify problems with the ways desistance research promotes heteronormativity (Fredriksson and Gålnander, 2025), neglects the impact of macro-structures (Österman, 2018) and promotes unpaid work and generativity for women without sufficient consideration of implications on time, finances and family (Barr, 2023). Recent theoretical developments, such as Desistance Emotional Work (DEW) (Hall and Harris, 2022), have begun to foreground the emotional dimensions of desistance-related labour. Expanding on this work, we develop the concept of gendered labour of desistance (GLD) to refer to practices that support desistance which are structured by broader gendered divisions of labour. Drawing on the domiciliary care literature, we define informal labour to imply activities that occur in non-formalised settings that are excluded from prescribed labour processes (Bolton and Wibberley, 2013).

This article focuses on making visible the expectations and impacts of GLD for women, both as desisters and as partners of desisters. Many desisters have never been imprisoned, and for those who have, the institutional 'halo' of prison-based resources often dissipates upon release; therefore, relational supports and gendered labour assume heightened significance. GLD captures the diverse forms of labour undertaken to support desistance, while foregrounding their gendered consequences and offering a framework through which such impacts may be identified and mitigated.

While research on gender and crime predominantly applies monocultural perspectives (Barberet, 2014), this paper draws upon desistance research with women across different settings in Europe, specifically England and Sweden, to allow for a broader theorisation of structural conditions and desistance labour. Nelken and Hamilton (2022:13) argue that a key task for cross-national comparative perspectives in criminology is identifying and demonstrating how different factors and variables are related. In this study, the cross-national dimension is used to show that, despite differences in national contexts, penal cultures and social conditions, women's lived experiences of desistance support are consistently shaped by gendered divisions of labour. We argue that the implications of

desistance, and the labour attached to such efforts, are gendered in ways that cut across borders and local conditionalities and expand beyond the lived experience of the process itself. The gendered implications of desistance extend to women as partners, mothers, family members, volunteers and professionals. Often, these roles overlap and create particular dynamics and expectations. These roles, and the labour that they entail, are often not only devalued but also contribute to gender inequality and restrain women's opportunities for empowerment.

After outlining the literature and methods, the findings explore gendered narratives of care, dual demands and limited access to formal support. The article draws together the overlapping experiences of women who are proximate to or are attempting to undergo desistance in different contexts and settings and sheds light on how many of these processes cut across time and space and exist in a *relational* context. The article ends with a discussion that calls for an acknowledgement of, and resistance to, patriarchal expectations of formal and informal gendered divisions of labour in desistance theory. The article illustrates how the conceptual framework of GLD may be useful for understanding the gendered dimensions of desistance-related labour and its ripple effects within community-based contexts and outlines GLD implications for policy and practice. The research question that has guided the analytical process is: How does gendered labour feature in women's stories of desistance across different national contexts? and in what ways do such narratives challenge traditional desistance theory? Illuminating this emotional, relational and practical desistance labour, and how this relates to feminist conceptualisations of gendered divisions of labour, is the core aim of this GLD framework.

Feminist perspectives and critiques of the desistance–labour nexus

Scholars have long documented the gendered inequalities embedded in both formal and informal labour (Collins et al., 2020; Hochschild, 1983). Socially tasked with domestic, relational, emotional and caregiving responsibilities, women often have reduced capacity to prioritise their own needs, wellbeing and autonomy (Mills and Codd, 2008; Reay, 2004). A substantial body of research demonstrates that unpaid and informal labour negatively affects women's empowerment, decision-making capacity, wellbeing and health, including increased stress and sickness absence (Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2020; Khan et al., 2023). Feminist scholarship has conceptualised this accumulation of unpaid work alongside paid employment as women's 'second shift' (Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2020; Hochschild, 1989). Marxist and socialist feminists further highlight women's central role in social reproduction, arguing that reproductive labour is fundamental to capitalism yet systematically devalued and rendered invisible (Dalla Costa, 2019; Federici, 2018).

Despite advances in gender equality, women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid labour remains a persistent global phenomenon. Women perform more than twice as much unpaid household and care work as men worldwide, which equates to over 90

additional minutes per day in high-income countries (UN Women, 2025). There is, however, substantial cross-national variation, with family-targeted policies, such as parental leave, childcare provision and child allowances, shaping the gendered distribution of unpaid work (Lightman and Kevins, 2021). This may help explain why Sweden is often positioned as a world leader in gender equality, with a substantially smaller unpaid work gap than countries such as the UK (29% versus 78%) (OECD, 2025). Yet, feminist scholars caution against uncritical invocations of a 'progressive Sweden' narrative, which may obscure inequalities between groups and social arenas (Jeziarska and Towns, 2018; Sandberg and Rönnblom, 2013). Importantly, class continues to shape time use, particularly in relation to routine domestic labour, as higher-income households are more able to outsource such tasks (Lightman and Kevins, 2021). Moreover, through what has been described as the international division of reproductive labour (Parreñas, 2015), this care work is increasingly outsourced specifically to racialized migrant women.

Unpaid labour also compensates for gaps in public welfare provision, reinforcing women's role as informal safety nets within overstretched systems (UN Women, 2025). As noted in early feminist work, women's positions as the primary providers of unpaid work effectively reinforce patriarchal structures and imbalances (Dalla Costa and James, 1973; Millett, 1969), which cannot be separated from broader capitalist structures and the exploitation of labour in both domestic and market spheres (Federici, 2018; Khan et al., 2023).

These structural dynamics are directly relevant to women's experiences of personal desistance, as well as those who are relatives to desisters. Often these identities overlap. For many women who are desisting themselves, distancing themselves from draining or harmful relationships is central to their desistance and recovery (Gålnander, 2019; Leverentz, 2006; Österman, 2018, 2022). Research on families affected by imprisonment has long shown that 'women bear the burdens of caring' (Codd, 2008: 3). Condry and Minson (2020) conceptualise these impacts as 'symbiotic harms', capturing the collateral consequences of criminal justice involvement for families. Beyond significant social and emotional challenges, for those supporting relatives' desistance, attempting to keep family ties together during imprisonment also comes with notable financial burdens (Grinstead et al., 2001). However, this care labour is not limited to imprisonment. In their conceptualisation of DEW, Hall and Harris (2022) argue that relationships have been promoted by desistance research to, overwhelmingly, help men to stop offending. While relationships may be mutually supportive, they can also increase women's risk of criminalisation and constrain their autonomy (Hulley, 2021).

Mainstream desistance scholarship often frames families as sources of social capital and 'safe havens' (Farrall, 2004), yet feminist critiques highlight how expectations of familial support, particularly from mothers, are frequently implicit, unacknowledged and burdensome (Mills and Codd, 2008). Coghlan (2024) defines 'desistance liminality' – the space between offending and primary desistance – as a particularly demanding period for women supporting men because it is associated with significant labour, both emotionally and practically, to support progress. Criminal justice practices may further entrench these dynamics, for example when women are encouraged to provide accommodation or care in the absence of adequate state provision (Farrall, 2004). These gendered

expectations extend into professional contexts, where probation and care-oriented criminal justice work remains feminised and emotionally demanding (Ministry of Justice, 2024; Phillips et al., 2020).¹

Within formal labour contexts, there are practices that may further increase expectations of unpaid labour by women who are either supporting male desistance or their own desistance. To maintain an image as a ‘good (desisting) woman’, criminalised women often take on unpaid, ‘voluntary’ positions which demand much of their time and energy (Rutter and Barr, 2021). Drug and alcohol addiction, as well as the stigma of criminal records, often overlapping with intersecting layers of stigma and trauma connected to factors such as gender, ethnicity and class, has also been found to impact on desisting women’s ability and desire to achieve well-paid employment (Barr, 2023; Low, 2024; Sharpe, 2024). Criminalised women’s interactions with formal markets are additionally conditioned by the availability of affordable childcare, structured employment programmes and wage subsidy schemes (Österman, 2018).

At its worst, desistance research uncritically promotes conformity with oppressive social structures. For criminalised women, and women supporting male desistance, this can mean the internalisation and modelling of gendered social norms (Fredriksson and Gålnander, 2025). The idea of heterosexual relationships ‘as facilitators of desistance is firmly based on gender norms and expectations placed on women as being good, nurturing, and moral bearers of society’ (Fredriksson and Gålnander, 2025: 51). Feminist examinations of the social bonds which criminalised women experience (or do not) highlight the potential harmful causes and consequences of desistance. As argued by Barr and Christian (2019), desistance for women can mask coercively controlling and violent relationships, while resistance to abuse may, for some women, be expressed through offending. At the same time, intimate partner violence can also effectively act as a hindrance to women’s desistance (Gålnander, 2019). Boxall et al. (2025) found that women who have experienced intimate partner abuse often change their own behaviour and invest significant emotional labour to reduce the risk of further violence. Although these actions may initially appear to reflect positive change or desistance on the part of the abuser, Boxall et al. (2025: 4) argue that they can actually harm victim-survivors and may themselves be experienced as a form of abuse.

This literature underscores the need to centre gender and labour within desistance theory for both desisting criminalised women and women supporting male desistance. This article responds by examining the desistance–labour nexus through a cross-national feminist lens, foregrounding the often-invisible labour that sustains desistance and reproduces gender inequality.

Methods

This paper draws on findings from three separate research projects with women desisters and women relationally proximate to desistance. It follows what West and Oldfather (1995) define as ‘pooled case comparison’ – a structured way of combining separate but similar studies, in which the original analytical categories are set aside, and the data are analysed anew.

The three qualitative studies are Research Study A (RSA), Research Study B (RSB) and Research Study C (RSC). RSA is based on observations conducted from 2014 to 2015 at five Women's Centres (WCs) located across 'Northshire' (pseudonym) in England. Twenty-three semi-structured interviews were also conducted with women with recent convictions ($n = 16$) and staff ($n = 7$), with questions focused on life stories, criminal justice interventions and desistance. RSB, conducted between 2022 and 2023, involved in-depth online interviews with six women who were, or had been, in relationships with men attempting desistance from across England. Interviews centred on core themes, such as the impact of desistance on intimate relationships and partners' perspectives on desistance policy and practice. Finally, RSC is an 18-month qualitative research study conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Sweden; it featured in-depth interviews with 12 women desisting from crime and who self-identify as falling into a 'minority group' in Sweden. This term encompasses both ethnic and 'visible minorities' and is used to allow for the women's self-defined 'minority status'. This reflects the Swedish context, where individuals are not categorised according to race or ethnic group.² Key themes included supportive and hindering factors in the desistance process, the impact of interactions with the criminal justice system and the subjective effects of identifying as belonging to an ethnic and/or 'visible minority' group on pathways to desistance. It should be noted that empirical themes relating to ethnic and/or visible minority experiences of desistance are not centred in the analysis presented in this paper. This is owing to considerations of data comparability, on the one hand, i.e. that not all studies recorded race/ethnicity or other minority status for the sample, and space constraints, on the other. Findings from these sections of the data in this particular study are reported in a separate paper (see Österman, 2026). All studies received ethical approval from the respective researcher's university/authority body, and all participants were given pseudonyms. Verbatim transcription was used throughout.³

We conducted secondary analysis of the data through a structured content analysis informed by a qualitative and deductive analytical framework (Schreier, 2019). This approach is common for secondary data analysis, justified particularly in the case of sensitive topics where recruitment can be difficult (Long-Sutecall et al., 2011). After conducting an initial scoping activity, we determined that there were sufficiently similar questions and themes in the three original datasets to undertake the analysis (Long-Sutecall et al., 2011). Secondary analysis of data was undertaken individually within each data set, guided by each author's original engagement with the data, to answer the research question on hidden gendered dynamics of desistance. Analysed data were then brought together from each of the projects to answer the main research question, producing the themes discussed below. In this way, our thematic analysis loosely followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic approach.

The three 'pooled' studies share a feminist methodological and epistemological underpinning, shaping both the research process and the interpretation of participants' accounts. The shared positionality of researchers and interviewees operates across multiple axes of identity and social location, with shared gender being one that can facilitate trust and openness in the interview encounter (Kim, 2021). Yet, differences in social location were recognised as shaping the research encounter and analytical interpretations,

particularly in relation to the researchers' privileged positions as academics. We used reflexive practices, including iterative engagement with the data and dialogical exchanges, to critically examine how meanings and concepts were constructed throughout the analysis. Following discussions over the course of a year, we developed the framework of 'GLD' as an overarching descriptor of the actions undertaken by women across themes and datasets to give name to the invisibilised work of desistance and its required resources.

Although desistance as a field has been slow to take up such methods, cross-national perspectives have started to emerge in recent years (Shapland et al., 2017). Cross-national analyses can teach us much about the impact that wider macro-level structures have on the micro-process of desistance (Farrall, 2019) and, in a broader sense, how criminology can move beyond its traditional confines of the nation-state (Hardie-Bick et al., 2005). Internationally comparative work with women who have experiences of offending remains exceptionally rare (Hine, 2019), a gap this study seeks to address. Examining how gendered labour features in women's stories of desistance in England and Sweden specifically helps illuminate how similar processes operate and relate to each other across different national contexts (Nelken and Hamilton, 2022), thus pointing to the enduring influence of gendered social structures on women in the context of desistance.

Gendered expectations of labour in informal desistance contexts

An overarching theme across the datasets is that the women within them, regardless of whether they were also engaging in their own desisting path, were providing significant informal unpaid care work to support male desistance. Some of these women repeated the narrative trope of 'the love of a good woman' (Sampson and Laub, 2003) as a central component of men settling down, with women being positioned as stabilisers in male desisters' lives. These narratives are often re-produced by the women themselves. Holly, who at the time of the interview was supporting both her own and her partner's desistance process, drew on her brother's desistance narrative, linked to him finding a 'nice girl', as a template for success:

He [brother] got sent down for like three and a half year... It was like for fighting and stuff, he were always lashing out at people. And then he met a really nice girl and she works at the chemist round there [...] and he's got a job now [...] and he's got a kid on the way so it's right good [...] He's settled down now. He hasn't been in trouble for a few years now. (Holly, RSA)

While Holly did not describe the practical work undertaken by this woman directly, the narrative reproduces a positioning in which meeting a 'really nice girl' is presented as underpinning her brother's desistance path, thereby implying indirect expectations that women's care, respectability and reproductive labour support such processes. As Hall and Harris (2022) note, such relational expectations are well established within desistance discourses, yet the emotional and gendered labour they entail is frequently rendered invisible.

There are numerous examples in the data from women in both England and Sweden, concerning expectations of practical and logistical support from women to men attempting to desist, in spite of relationship strain and/or breakdown between them. The findings suggest that women are frequently subject to both their partner's and the state's expectations. This theme is crystallised in Lucy's account of repeatedly intervening to manage the consequences of her partner's arrests, including attending a police station late at night to pay a fine to secure his release:

He spent one night in prison for non-payment of council tax while I was with him, or non-payment of a fine, I can't remember what it was, and that was before our youngest son was born [...]. I went there at night-time to pay the fine off for him, and it was too late by the time I had got there because I had been working that day, so he had to spend the night there. [...] He's been in police cells quite a lot. He's been arrested for different things. [...] Over time it's just incredibly tiring. There's lots of times when I have, looking back, have probably taken his needs above the needs of myself and other family members [...] I've been here all the way through looking out for him and it's got to this point where I'm really struggling. (Lucy, RSB)

Women often discussed responding to difficult situations to support desisting partners as an act of love. However, as illustrated in Lucy's account, doing practical labour, such as paying fines and navigating criminal justice contact, can be a foundational aspect of men's ability to comply with legal requirements and remain in the community. This labour is gendered insofar as it is implicitly expected of women as partners and carers, even when it conflicts with their own employment and wellbeing. It also carries negative consequences for the 'needs of myself and other family members'. Over time, as Lucy's account makes clear, this work can be 'incredibly tiring'. These accounts echo feminist research showing that informal unpaid labour can lead to heightened stress and reduced wellbeing and empowerment for the self (Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2020; Khan et al., 2023; Mills and Codd, 2008; Reay, 2004). Despite such support work being hidden precursors to desistance in the community, it is largely unrecognised within desistance theory and practice. GLD offers a useful conceptual framework to reveal these dynamics and divisions in such roles, expectations and impact, highlighting the uneven costs of both justice institution practices and desistance frameworks.

Our data also show how desistance-supportive labour may be complicated by women's own desistance attempts and by ongoing violence. In these situations, support for male desistance can take specific and highly gendered forms. This is illustrated in Jill's account. While attempting to desist herself and at the same time supporting her partner's desistance path, she explains why she chose not to report her former partner's violence:

J: I've been to Social Services and to meetings with my ex, who has dragged me into all sorts of things, you know. And as a mother, I always feel judged more than he is [...] I was sitting in a meeting once with my ex, and my dad had just died, I was feeling absolutely terrible [...] At the time I was working as a stripper, but no one knew that [...]. But he wanted to mess with me [so

he told them] [...]. I was sitting there with sixteen stitches in my face because of him, but I hadn't reported him – a huge mistake! [...] And then they're sitting there judging me, and in the end I say, 'you are completely sick in the head – you know what he's done, sixteen stitches in my face, and you're sitting there taking his side'. And they're like, 'well yes, we know, because he admitted it to us at the last meeting, we think it's very strong of him to admit it'. I'm like, 'are you kidding me?' I just get so provoked [...].

L: Why didn't you report him?

J: Um... because I was thinking about him. I felt sorry for him, so I didn't do it [...]. I don't know, I wanted to be kind to him, not ruin things for him, because it would have ruined things for him if he'd been convicted of assault. (RSC)

As a desisting woman, Jill's account illustrates how women attempting desistance experience gendered judgements along their paths. Simultaneously, as a woman supporting male desistance, her account shows how gendered labour can also act to invisibilise violence against women. In choosing not to report violence to protect her partner from institutional scrutiny and a potential conviction, Jill construes this concealment as a way of supporting her ex-partner's desistance trajectory, despite placing her own well-being and safety at risk. At the same time, she views the institutional meeting as unbalanced, with her partner's admission of violence being reframed as an act of strength. Jill's care and loyalty is framed to help sustain male desistance, though this comes at a significant cost – something she today regrets. Her account highlights how women's desistance-supportive labour may involve managing not only practical demands, but also shouldering the consequences of gendered intimate violence (Boxall et al., 2025).

Binary existence, dual demands

A recurrent theme in interviews was the challenge of juggling the role of a care provider while attempting a personal desistance path. These parallel roles in the women's lives came with specific responsibilities and were typically executed without any support. They also had significant consequences for both the desistance path in the short-term and for women's conditions in the long-term. Madde explains:

You are both, like, maybe a perpetrator in a criminal context but you are also partner to a person who often has a really difficult time and you usually take quite a lot of responsibility in that. [...] Also, I think it's hard for people to understand like this, you can be like... 'uh, a criminal girl', but you can also be a partner to a criminal guy, and that can like be two completely different things, it's two completely different problems. Then maybe you stop committing crimes but you're still with this person... I ended up in situations like where we were getting death threats, connected to him. It was quite a tumultuous time. You know, he was lying at home in a bullet proof vest and sick things like this. And even today, many of my friends have passed away and then these girls sit at home with kids and stuff, they're alone and they're widows like at my age! (Madde, RSC)

Applying GLD as a theoretical lens, it is suggested that the implications of carrying dual demands within binary roles, which come with different expectations, can have both short-term and long-term gendered consequences. That is, in the short-term, women's own desistance path can be more challenging owing to the partner role, being described as a 'completely different problem' that comes with 'a lot of responsibility', and in the long-term, through 'girls' being 'widowed' in their 20s. Moreover, the gendered impacts of death in desistance are brought to the forefront, with research (Fredriksson and Gålnander, 2025) suggesting that death is prevalent during criminally active and desisting periods for women.

None of the women in the studies in England or Sweden had received any specific support in navigating these dual roles throughout their desistance paths in the criminal justice or social work settings that they interacted with along the way. Indeed, offering support while experiencing a lack of support in return was a common thread across the data sets. Even if formal support had been offered, there was often not time to access it, due to the time informal unpaid work to support the desistance process took, as exemplified by Neave:

It felt like there wasn't time [to access support]. It was like trying to do my job and then trying to support him [partner]. It was just – it was constant and through the night, and I didn't get enough sleep. Trying to get some support as well... I think I just wouldn't have been able to [...] I think if he hadn't have been able to get to appointments, get his Methadone sorted, get to the pharmacy every single day, you know, and because we live in a village it's not exactly walking distance or even a bike distance, so it's about 15 minutes in the car each way to go to the pharmacy and we were having to do that every day to begin with. [...], because he doesn't drive, he just couldn't have accessed any support from where we are. (Neave, RSB)

Despite labouring to support her desisting partner's recovery, Neave had neither the option nor the time and space to consider accessing support for herself. The benefits of unpaid work taken on by Neave are reaped by her desisting partner, while coming at a significant cost to her. Without her investments, the likelihood of her partner's chances of staying out of prison was drastically reduced, and yet this work went unacknowledged and invisibilised through structural expectations of women's capacity to care for others.

All of these accounts jointly demonstrate how unpaid, desistance-supportive labour produces both short- and long-term consequences for women's lives. This resonates with wider evidence that unpaid care and domestic work continue to be disproportionately undertaken by women (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). While the precise extent of this disparity varies across national contexts, the recurrence of such dynamics across the data, including within the Swedish cases, supports calls for a critical stance towards generalisations about gender equality across entire populations and social arenas (Jezierska and Towns, 2018). In this sense, implicit expectations that women will informally support desistance processes suggest that they continue to absorb responsibilities that compensate for chronically overstretched formal institutions (Carrie, 2025).

Normative feminine ideals: Compliance and resistance

Criminalised women experience motherhood as a source of ongoing stigma and social control, especially linked to the intersecting factors of class and age (Sharpe, 2024). In the data, expectations of normative feminised roles emerged in various forms. Some women considered their roles as mothers as central to both their desistance and wellbeing, as exemplified by Ruth: ‘They’re [Ruth’s children] the only thing, the only two things, keeping me going at the moment, I haven’t got a whole lot to smile about at the minute’ (Ruth, RSA).

Ruth’s account illustrates how, for some women attempting desistance, children can be associated with hope, representing in challenging times the ‘only two things’ that can help them ‘keep going’. Yet women spoke most frequently about the challenges of being a ‘good’ mother in the face of limited support and societal stigma surrounding desistance, including partners’ desistance status. Some mothers discussed experiencing violent behaviour from their children which they believe had been learnt from experiencing domestic abuse. This was the case for Maria (RSB) who experienced abuse from her children’s father and discussed the removal of her children by social services as a result of her current co-habiting partner’s sex offending:

I hate that word, paedophile, because it conjures up such an emotional, it’s not black and white. And I’ve worked with paedophiles and victims of abuse for a really long time. Social care say I’m desensitised and that’s why I’ve been minimising the risk, but I don’t think so. And there’s a huge stigma attached to loving a sex offender. And my family have been split, you know, it’s just really hard. (Maria, RSB)

Maria’s commitment to her partner and his desistance demonstrates the ultimate identity dichotomy, where through prioritising her role as partner, she sacrificed aspects of her role as mother. Poignantly, women did not only discuss mothering in relation to their children. At times, motherhood was subjectively constructed. Women discussed the burdens of caring for their partner’s desistance like a mother, while also often parenting their actual children. Lucy articulated the stress of this dual maternal role quite concisely: ‘And for me life was, you know, I’d got a child and I was trying to bring up a child and cope with this adult child [desisting partner] that was living with us’ (Lucy, RSB).

These women often shouldered the weight of responsibility for their partners’ actions, reflecting social expectations towards mothers and gendered self-articulations around tropes of maternal nurture. A GLD approach brings to light how women often need to navigate capital, emotional and others such as economic capital, in distinct ways. Exposing the GLD highlights the additional burden of men’s desistance that women carry and the, often far off, attraction of independence and autonomy. Women describe being socialised into patriarchal ideals of motherhood and domesticity early on in their lives, as exemplified by Jonna (RSC):

I come from a foreign family, Christian [religion] [...]. In my family, boys are placed very high on a pedestal, and girls are expected to adapt and obey. You’re supposed to get engaged, get

married... [...] According to my mother, women should stay home with the kids and clean and so on. But I'm not like that. [...] I'm a lesbian woman, I came out later [...] I've always felt like an outsider in my own family. I'm a woman, an addict and I have a history with crime, and that alone is unacceptable according to how I was raised. [...] There's gang crime in my family, I have brothers who were involved in gangs, and I got pulled into it too. [...] I've had to make a decision that not only will I have to go against my friends, but I will also have to go against my family as well. Since then it has been really difficult with the family. (Jonna, RSC)

Jonna demonstrates how specific feminine scripts and expectations can shape women's lives early on and how this intersects with other aspects of their identity. However, Jonna's narrative shows how resistance to such scripts impacts women's lived experience of desistance. Such a narrative stands in stark contrast to how male desistance (as described by the women above) falls in line with traditional gender ideas and expectations. In Jonna's case, she engages in active resistance to the scripts and expectations set by her family, leading her to break ties with those who are, according to traditional desistance literature, supposed to be her key social support.

GLD can be understood as incorporating not just resistance to normative feminine scripts and expectations, but also managing personal resources and developing resilience. Similar to Jonna, Anna's offending had been influenced by men in her family and by partners, but she also found other ways to resist the feminine scripted expectations during her desistance path. Independence was key to living a more positive and crime-free lifestyle. However, this decision was informed by indications of patriarchal trauma:

Every man that I've managed to find, whether it be friend or whatever, had let me down and walked away because I can't give them more or whatever. [...] because in my eyes everybody, even my own family, have let me down [...] So I think that trust with people has had to come back. People call me a cold bitch but I'm not really, it's just that with some people I can't, if I feel I'm getting emotionally involved, I pull back. (Anna, RSA)

Anna's story of persistent let-downs and the need to pull back from emotional connections as a part of her desistance path is a common one across the data and echoes what has been found in previous studies about the role of emotional capital management in desistance (Österman, 2022). Most of these desistance paths are set against a backdrop of lived experiences of abuse and violence (Barr and Christian, 2019; Hulley, 2021). These paths also are often experiences that are draining and lonely and negatively impact on the woman's relationships, as exemplified by Lucy (RSB):

And, you know, all of this, and it makes me feel very resentful towards my [partner] because he's stepped away with his addiction and the hardest thing he has to do in the day is wake up and go and buy his booze, and I fully appreciate that his life is really difficult ... but he doesn't have any of these huge responsibilities and I feel like he's kind of abandoned me. I've been here all the way through looking out for him and it's got to this point where I'm really struggling right now, and there's nobody around that can help really. (Lucy, RSB)

Lucy's story powerfully illustrates some of the particular mechanisms and impacts through which informal and unpaid labour operates in desistance support contexts. It adds an important dimension to what is known about the broader impacts of such labour on women's autonomy and ability to take control of their own lives (Cantillon and Teasdale, 2021; Kelle, 2020; Khan et al., 2023; Lyonette, 2015; Seedat and Rondon, 2021; Sharpe, 2024).

Consequences of GLD in formal labour contexts

Feminist criminology has questioned the role of gender in the availability of and barriers to paid employment and the role it plays in women's desistance (Barr, 2023; Grace, 2022; Low, 2024; Österman, 2018). This issue extends to women whose partners are attempting to desist. Women in England and Sweden commonly discussed the impacts of having a desisting partner on their paid job experiences, with women sharing that they had lost paid employment and had to change careers due to their partner's lifestyle, as illustrated by Neave: '[I used to be] a Drug and Alcohol Worker, [but] I felt very hypocritical going into work knowing that my boyfriend was smoking weed at home' (Neave, RSB).

For Neave, this experience of feeling 'hypocritical' in her job role due to her partner's continued drug use meant that she felt unable to keep her job. Thus, Neave's interaction with the formal labour market was conditioned on, and impacted by, the desistance support that she was providing to her partner. She later changed careers as a result of her partner's arrest. The repercussions of relational desistance on paid labour also included missing work due to prison visitations, suggesting that awareness of GLD is vital if women are to be protected from further financial inequalities that proximity to the justice system can bring.

Moreover, many of the women's interactions with formal workplaces were set against the backdrop of dealing with the consequences of, or ongoing experiences of, relational trauma and abuse. For some, this abuse was located within relationships characterised by both offending and desistance. Karen described an inability to work due to her poor physical and mental health related to violent and sexual abuse.

I'm not able to work at the moment, I've had DVT [deep vein thrombosis], I've had anxiety, panic attacks because I was involved in a bad rape and locked up two weeks in the house, I've been through quite a lot. I don't really go out a lot, I never do. (Karen, RSA)

While the traditional desistance literature demonstrates that employment, and especially generative forms of it, can strengthen desistance paths, the findings in this study also demonstrate the need to understand gendered barriers to generative employment and the associated feminisation of poverty (Carlen, 1988). Specifically, the ability to work is heavily dependent on mental and physical health. The benefit of generative role engagement cannot be separated from how their 'professional ex' identity may be intertwined with personal traumas they have experienced during active offending years. Thus, GLD must always be situated in the context of what we know about women's experiences of harm and victimisation, and how these experiences impact their labour both in informal and formal settings.

Conclusion

Our combined cross-national analysis of how gendered labour features in women's stories of desistance has highlighted that gender ideals, expectations and inequalities continue to have distinct impacts on women in relation to desistance. Drawing on feminist theory of divisions of labour, we argue that GLD can function as a theoretical concept that can aid in making visible how expectations associated with desistance are impacted by traditional gender ideals and practices, and allow the consequences of desistance on women's lives to be seen through a gendered perspective. This framework highlights the inescapable links of punishment to wider patriarchal oppressive norms – dominant in both domestic and market spheres, and inseparable from wider capitalist labour structures (Khan et al., 2023) – and demystifies ideas of 'the community' as benevolent and a place of safety or freedom for women.

Locating the analysis in the desistance–labour nexus, we argue that the labour involved in desistance is deeply gendered. Women face heightened challenges due to unequal social structures in both formal and informal desistance settings that complicate their efforts to desist. Many desisting women are also supporting their partners' or family members' desistance, upholding dual roles that come with specific responsibilities and consequences with both short- and long-term impacts on their own desistance path. These roles and responsibilities are intertwined with heteronormative feminine ideals (Fredriksson and Gålnander, 2025), which are typically moulded into the women's lives early on, as well as reinforced by broader cultural narratives (Codd, 2000; Sharpe, 2024). Notwithstanding the ubiquitousness of such scripts, the findings also demonstrate how women attempt to resist them, both through and within their desistance paths, though such resistance can often come at relational costs.

Existing desistance theories have largely been shaped by heteronormative and masculinist perspectives. This cross-national pooled data case study aims to contribute to the growing literature challenging these frameworks (Barr and Hart, 2022; Hall and Harris, 2022; Österman, 2022) specifically by bringing to light the gendered labour involved in desistance and the effects it has on women's lives. Criminological cross-national perspectives can help identify how processes and practices linked to crime and criminal justice are connected in ways that extend beyond the particularities of specific local contexts (Nelken and Hamilton, 2022). The findings demonstrate that, despite differences in penal cultures and gendered social conditions, women's experiences of desistance-supportive labour are shaped by common gendered divisions of labour. This points to the enduring role of gender relations in shaping the lives of women connected to the criminal justice system. It also reinforces recurrent themes identified in previous feminist scholarship (Barberet, 2014) relating to gendered expectations, inequality and practices of resistance among women in and around the criminal justice system internationally, while extending these insights to the realm of desistance. GLD is thus about making the personal political, showing how individual women's experiences in and around desistance are not isolated, nor culture-specific problems. Rather, they are indicative of systemic structures influenced by gender and inequality, perpetuated by gender-insensitive criminal justice and desistance policy and practices. We argue that gendered

dynamics of desistance labour not only reinforce systemic inequalities and restrain opportunities for female empowerment but also make it harder for women to achieve and sustain desistance from crime and harm (Barr and Christian, 2019). While this article has prioritised the gendered dimensions of the desistance stories presented, as these constituted the primary comparable dimension across the pooled datasets, future research should further explore how gender intersects with race, ethnicity and neo-colonialism in the lives of women who support desistance.

Incorporating GLD into policy and practice would mean, as a first step, developing mechanisms of institutional awareness of GLD demands. Increasing formal supports available to desisters so that they do not have to rely on partners and family could also help to reduce the gendered labour of desistance. Funding for domestic violence refuges and safe spaces for women and children, decent quality housing, fair pay and unionised employment, universal access to education and accessible mental health support form community-based elements of recognition of the gendered labour of desistance. A more consistent offer of community-based support for partners and families beyond criminal justice institutions could also help to reduce the desistance burdens placed on women whose lives are often already full and complex. Working with male desisters to increase their autonomy, with state support, to progress in their desistance journey without an anticipated reliance on women to succeed could also help to reduce this labour. Increasing awareness of it can promote the radical and collective change needed to help ensure that desistance from both crime and harm is viable, sustainable and equitable for all.

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical approval for Research Study C was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority in January 2022. Research Study A and Research Study B were granted by the researchers' universities in 2014 and 2021, respectively. The research studies all employed written informed consent for both participation and data publication. The authors used ChatGPT (version Edu 5.2) for translation of Swedish data into English and for linguistic editing assistance, only during the final stages of manuscript preparation. This intended to improve grammatical clarity, flow and readability. After using this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and revised the text and take full responsibility for the final content.

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Notes

1. Women predominated in the English Probation Service at all levels, comprising of 68.1% (248) of staff in senior Probation Service roles (bands A-D), 74.3% (1,797) in bands 5-6, and 76.0% (14,902) in Probation Service grades below management level (which includes probation officers at band 4).
2. See Österman (2026) for a fuller discussion and critique. The term 'visible minorities' refers to groups whose appearance, language, cultural traditions, clothing, behaviours or religious practices position them as a minority in relation to the majority population (Naidoo and Edwards, 1991). The term has been used by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare since 2010.
3. While the Swedish data were transcribed verbatim in the original language, the subsequent English translation prioritised conceptual rather than lexical equivalence, with the aim of preserving the meaning of the original text rather than its exact wording.

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