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Minority Women's Experiences of Desistance in Sweden (MiWoDeS)

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The opinions expressed in this working paper are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Nordic Research Council for Criminology.

Findings

- Desistance-orientated spaces (such as exit-programs and/or ex-offender organisations) are viewed by female desisters as masculinised and gender unequal. At worst these spaces are identified as misogynistic, upholding discriminatory and predatory practices, and at best as poorly tailored to women's circumstances and needs.
- There is a need for gender-specificity in desistance-orientated programs and practices. Core factors identified by the women in this study as being of particular value include female-only spaces that are safe and supportive, female staff with suitable training and skills, and a 'whole system approach' where services and resources that can address multicomplex needs are assembled in single space.
- Many women express a strong critique of the dismantling of treatment wards and 12-step programs in the Swedish prison and probation services. This was viewed to decrease the potential for onset to recovery and desistance inside prison settings.
- How minority positions are defined and experienced is not straight-forward. For some women in this study, being a woman with experience of committing crime was construed as a more marked minority position, connected to greater extent of stigma and exclusion, compared to other officially recognised minority positions that they identified with. These could for example be linked to country of birth, ethnicity, or mother tongue.
- Different minority positions influence women's desistance processes in various ways. Belonging to a visible minority group emerged as significant in this context. Identifying as a woman who could 'pass' as ethnic white heterosexual Swedish corresponded to fewer instances of discrimination in their desistance story.
- The route out of crime can be experienced as tougher for women who identify as belonging to a minority group in Sweden. For those not born in Sweden, the desistance process was viewed

as especially isolated and lonely due a lack of a pro-social network to re-connect with. Others described experiencing intersecting forms of prejudice and stigma: for being an ex-offender/ex-drug user, for being a woman with such experiences, and for having a different cultural heritage.

- A few women identified their cultural heritage as an enabler in their desistance process. A key example is that it represented an opportunity to go back to their 'roots' and through that, a 'hook' that they could form a new identity around. The experience of going back to one's 'roots' as part of the desistance path, however, was coloured by the level of gender (in-)equality in the culture that they wished to re-connect with.

Background

MiWoDes is an 18-month qualitative explorative research project that ran between Dec. 2022 and June 2024. It aims to address desistance processes by women who identify as belonging to a minority group in Sweden. Women make up a minority group in the context of crime and criminal justice, and how their experiences are impacted by gendered norms and processes has increasingly been recognised in criminological literature, including in the subfield of desistance (Gålnander, 2019; 2020; Barr; 2019; Cobbina, 2010; Petrillo 2023; Gomm 2016, Österman 2018; 2022; Hall, Österman and Harris, 2024). Power relations in society relate to several different aspects of a person's identity. Thus, an intersectional perspective on the lived experience of desistance may enable a more rounded understanding of the dynamics that influence this process. The limited literature that explores desistance from minority

perspectives, though drawing exclusively on male samples, has found that the family contexts can play a diverse role across different ethnical group settings and influence the desistance path in different ways (Calverley, 2013). So too can racialized barriers and disempowering processes within the criminal justice system (Glynn, 2013). MiWoDes specifically focus on how female desisters who self-identify as belonging to a minority group in Sweden voice their story of change, viewed through an intersecting lens of different identities and social positions. An overarching aim is that lessons can be learned in terms of how policy and practice can be developed to aid more women to make a successful route out of crime.

The study is qualitative and focuses exclusively on minority women's subjective experiences of desistance, including interactions with state systems and support settings. A significant challenge in the study was how

to define minority. Leaning on critical race and whiteness studies in the Swedish context (Wikström, 2009), a key definitional aspect was the person's own definition of themselves. Furthermore, studies show that people are judged, evaluated and discriminated against based on how they appear visually, and ignoring this may lead to a neglect of racialization processes (Hübinette et al, 2020). The project therefore combines the term ethnic minority with the term 'visible minority'. This is a term used to describe groups in a society whose appearance, behaviours, clothing, language traditions or religious practices are deemed to comprise a minority status to the majority population of a country (Naidoo and Edwards, 1991; Socialstyrelsen, 2010). The term has been used by the National Board of Health and Welfare ('Socialstyrelsen') in Sweden since 2010.

The project conducted a total of 12 in-depth interviews with women desisting from crime across Sweden. Linking to the self-defined nature of 'minority', the diversity of the women who participated in the study was considerable, ranging from belonging to one of the five national minorities in Sweden (Jews, Roma, Sami, Swedish Finns and Tornedalers), to being mixed race, having immigrated to Sweden. or having a non-heterosexual sexuality. The study uses a feminist methodology, and the interviews adopted a pseudo-conversational form. The data was analysed using a thematic approach.

Nordic relevance

The findings provide new input to the Nordic desistance literature especially by focusing on gender equality and intersectionality. Gender inequality continues to penalise women and pose challenges to their desistance process, both within informal and formal contexts. Some of those challenges are furthered by intersecting social positions. In a current Nordic context where women and girls in criminal environments are increasingly in the spotlight (see for example JP 30.04.24 and SVT 03.05.24), and calls are made for increased knowledge of gender equality questions in criminal justice policy and practice (Kriminalvården, 2021; Vetenskapsrådet, 2024), the time is ripe for women's voices in desistance to be raised and listened to. The findings in this study is a starting point, calling for the advancement of desistance-orientated policy and practice that is gender- and diversity-aware.

Recommendations

The following recommendations should be interpreted as directions that would be conducive for criminal justice policy and practice to explore:

- Explore the development of gender-specific desistance programs and spaces. Models from other countries, such as women's centres, whole system approaches and 'one stop shops', offering holistic gender-informed, needs-based,

individualised services should form a key part of such an inquiry.

- Investigate the potential of culturally aware desistance programs that recognise minority perspectives and address discrimination practices, including those based on visible minority positions. Such an investigation may gain from drawing on programs from for example Canada, USA, and Australia, where criminal justice systems have come some way to acknowledging the role of diversity and the creation of what can be described as culturally safe (Workman, Kaddour & Griffin, 2023) services.
- Set a clear gender-equality agenda for the delivery of criminal justice policy and practice. Drawing on international instruments such as the UN's Rules of the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (2010), as well as recent examples of other countries' women-specific policy initiatives and best practice (see for example HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024), would be a valuable starting point for the development of such an agenda. Here examples can be found of how trauma-informed practice, women's centres, and women's problem-solving courts can support desistance.
- Monitor the effects of the removal of the of 12-step program from Swedish prisons and give firsthand female viewpoints on

the onset of recovery and desistance a voice within such. Criminal justice policy and practice should remain open to the possibility of bringing the 12-step program back into Swedish prisons if this is deemed to improve the likelihood of onset of recovery and desistance for women serving time.

Outputs

Presentations academic conferences:

- Nordic Research Council for Criminology (NSfK) Research Seminar 2023, Hämeenlinna, Finland. 'NSfK-funded research in progress: Minority Women's Experiences of Desistance in Sweden'
- FORSA/NASSW International Conference 2024, Gothenburg, Sweden. 'Female narratives of the intertwined processes of initiating desistance from crime and recovery from drug use within the Swedish criminal justice system.'
- British Society of Criminology Annual Conference 2024, Glasgow, Scotland. 'Intersectional perspectives on desistance processes: Minority women's route out of crime in Sweden.'

Three academic journal articles are currently in the process of being written up on the results, reflecting core themes in the above presentations.

Knowledge gaps and future research needs

Intersectional perspectives on desistance represent a neglected area in the criminological research field, especially so in the Nordic sphere. This small-scale explorative study shows that there is value in further developing research in this area, exploring how different minority positions may influence and interact with the experience of 'going straight'. The results also clearly demonstrate the continued importance of research that places specific focus on the role of gendered practices and norms and their impact on desistance processes for women.

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