

Restorative justice practices and identity transformation among formerly incarcerated women in Bungoma County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Women returning from incarceration often confront guilt, stigma, damaged relationships, and social identities that remain defined by their convictions. These challenges are especially pronounced where women's offending is linked to prior abuse, poverty, family conflict, and unequal gender relations. This study examined how restorative justice practices transformed the identities of formerly incarcerated women during reintegration in Bungoma County, Kenya. The inquiry adopted an interpretivist qualitative case study design. The study was guided by Restorative Justice Theory and Feminist Pathways Theory. The participants comprised 50 formerly incarcerated women, five probation officers, three restorative justice practitioners, 20 community leaders, three representatives of non-governmental organizations, and two representatives of community-based organizations. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit 83 participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and four focus group discussions. Thematic saturation was reached after interviews with 40 women and 10 key informants, while the remaining interviews were completed to confirm the stability of the themes. Data were analyzed thematically through familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation. The findings showed that restorative justice practices facilitated identity transformation through five interrelated pathways: personal accountability, emotional healing, restoration of self-worth, family reconciliation, and behavioral change. Counseling, mediation, spiritual support, family dialogue, community recognition, vocational engagement, and reconciliation ceremonies helped participants move from identities shaped by guilt, shame, rejection, and hopelessness toward identities grounded in responsibility, resilience, motherhood, productive work, and community contribution. However, access to structured restorative processes was uneven, and some women continued to experience rejection or lacked opportunities for dialogue with affected parties. The study concluded that identity transformation is a central mechanism through which restorative justice supports women's reintegration. It recommends institutionalizing gender-responsive restorative justice programs that combine accountability with trauma-informed counseling, family conferencing, community recognition, mentorship, and sustained post-release support.

Keywords: Behavioral Change, Bungoma County, Identity Transformation, Reintegration, Restorative Justice, Women Offenders

I. INTRODUCTION

Restorative justice is a relational response that is based on accountability, dialogue, reparation, and the rebuilding of damaged relationships. It differs from the traditional view of crime as an offence against the law in accepting that crime is harmful not just to the victim and to families, but also to the victim and to communities. According to Agbonaye et al. (2024), restorative justice provides a structure that allows those affected by an offence to be involved in finding a way to reduce the harm and restore order. The element of orientation is distinct from punitive views, which are generally focused on wrongdoing and punishment; it is aimed at determining the facts of what happened, who was impacted, what responsibilities were incurred, and what can be done to repair it.

Reintegration of previously incarcerated women does not just involve completing a sentence or simply not returning to incarceration. It also includes restoring relationships, restoring identity, and restoring a socially recognized role. Heidemann et al. (2016) determined that former female offenders who successfully reintegrated into society often identified successful reintegration as meeting the needs of their families or as supporting their family members through motherhood, stability, sobriety, work, and supporting other family members. These dimensions demonstrate the personal and relational nature of reintegration. While a woman might serve her time and thus be released from incarceration, societal definitions of her based on her crime persist through changes in familial, occupational, neighborhood, and community institutions.

Identification is especially relevant because criminal labeling can become internalised. Persistent rejection can cause women to feel permanently "deviant," or unworthy, or unable to change. Maruna (2014) claimed that social

processes that end an offending identity and confirm a transition to unconventional community membership are likely an important means to successful reintegration. A pro-social identity can be facilitated through recognition, forgiveness, and opportunities to make constructive contributions, or fostered by stigma and shame through continuation of stigma and exclusion. Restorative justice practices can provide opportunities for the reconstruction of identity, allowing women to take responsibility without being reduced to their offense. Braithwaite (1989) recognized the difference between reintegrative shaming and stigmatizing shaming. Reintegrative shaming does not condemn the person but has respect for the action and offers an avenue of reintegration into the community. Stigmatizing shaming is an offense against the offender, tapped at the source, and fosters exclusion. This distinction becomes a point of interest in relation to women offenders, as the social stigmas relating to being a mother, being moral, maintaining a family, and being female may make female offending feel even more shameful.

Women's pathways to crime are also in important ways different from pathways that are usually presumed in gender neutral correctional models. Daly (1992) found that abuse, poverty, coercive relationships, substance use and economic marginalisation could influence women's offending. Gobeil et al. (2016) then identified that gender-sensitive approaches to correctional interventions were more effective than interventional approaches, yet failed to account for the specific situation of women. It is therefore necessary to look at both responsibility for wrongdoing and histories of trauma or inequality when considering an adequate account of identity transformation. Women leaving correctional facilities in Kenya often re-enter communities where family, faith-based institutions, community leaders, and informal social networks have a significant impact on women's acceptance. Waireri (2017) reiterated the importance of offender reintegration and, for this to be successful; there should be processes of justice that recognise victims, offenders, and communities as stakeholders. In these contexts, there can be a range of possibilities for women to reclaim their persons, to recover trust, and to engage in productive relationships, including counseling, mediation, church-led reconciliation, family conversation, community recognition and facilitation, and enabling opportunities for women to participate.

The application of informal and formal structures in restorative practices can be explored in Bungoma County, a suitable context where both structures exist. Counselling, mediation, reconciliation, and post-release support involve the participation of probation services, community leaders, religious institutions, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, and families. Although not necessarily explicitly identified as restorative justice, these practices share a commitment with restorative justice to accountability, dialogue, forgiveness, relationship repair, and reintegration. This study focused on identity transformation as an outcome of restorative justice during reintegration. Identity transformation was perceived as a journey in which once-incarcerated women changed their self-concept from criminal identity to responsible identity, resilient identity, lawful identity, family identity, productive identity, and community identity. The investigation assessed restorative processes that facilitated the movement, the meanings that women gave to the restorative processes, and contexts that both fostered and limited transformation.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Upon their return into society, women offenders in Kenya are likely to find themselves in social spaces that are marked by stigma, familial ruptures, scarce opportunities for livelihoods, and emotional uneasiness. Conventional correctional practices can address legal sanctions or basic rehabilitation, but they do not necessarily offer a clear social path for a woman to admit to 'harm', to seek forgiveness, to heal relationships, or to be seen as more than an offender. Consequently, criminals can carry this stigma after release and have their self-esteem damaged, as well as strains on their home life, social involvement, and their resolution to continue in a legal life. Recidivism, mediation, conferencing and victim satisfaction are extensively researched concepts in the existing restorative justice literature. Latimer et al. (2005) showed that restorative justice might be more effective in enhancing a number of justice outcomes, but much of the literature saw only fewer instances of re-offending as a means of offender change. Bradshaw and Roseborough (2005) also examined recidivism after mediation and conferencing. These outcome measures are relevant but do not reflect the process whereby women gain new roles and identities in society after exiting from prison.

The literature available has been focusing mainly on male, juvenile, or Western populations. It offers insufficient evidence on how accountability, emotional healing, family reconciliation, recognition, and community support interact to transform the identities of women in African social settings. This gap is critical as women's reintegration takes place through family and community systems in Bungoma County, where family gender expectations, experiences of abuse, faith-based support, and community reconciliation traditions affect both stigma and acceptance. The study thus focused on the changes in the identities of the formerly incarcerated women in the process of reintegration in Bungoma, Kenya, through restorative justice practices.

1.2 Research Objective

The objective of the study was to examine restorative justice practices in transforming the identities of women offenders during reintegration in Bungoma County, Kenya.

1.3 Research Question

How do restorative justice practices transform the identities of women offenders during reintegration in Bungoma County, Kenya?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Restorative Justice Theory, Feminist Pathways Theory, and the accompanying concept of reintegrative shaming were applied to the study. These views together can account for the fact that identity transformation is an issue that needs both an approach to remedying the harm and an understanding of the gender experiences that underlie women's offence and reintegration.

2.1.1 Restorative Justice Theory and Reintegrative Shaming

Restorative Justice Theory is based on the premise that crimes are not only wrong to the state, but also harm to persons and relationships. Zehr (2002) suggested that justice should focus on determining who has been done wrong, what these individuals' needs are, and what the obligations are for the perpetrators' actions. This is a victims-centred, dialogue-based, accountable and reparative approach to justice that puts victims, offenders, families and communities at the centre of the process. The theory is pertinent to the issue of identity transformation, as it separates the person from the harmful act. An offender should accept responsibility, understand the harm of the offending, and be involved in repairing some of the harm. As this occurs, processes should also maintain dignity and establish a viable pathway to reintegration. Van Ness and Strong (1997) described how restorative justice is a participative process of restoring relationships and social harmony over dependence on punishment.

Braithwaite (1989) elaborates on the emotional and social mechanisms at work with his reintegrative shaming perspective. When coupled with forgiveness, respect, and reacceptance, constructive disapproval can engender remorse. When the shame is on the person and not the act, and there is no way to return to the community, the process turns negative. As such, restorative encounters can be useful for changing identity for formerly imprisoned women as they are able to take responsibility and experience remorse, while they are never called deviant. Presser and Van Voorhis (2002) found key components of restorative justice programs to be dialogue, relationship building, and moral values communication. These processes offer an appropriate starting point for assessing identity transformation. Through dialogue, different women can share their stories and listen to the impact this has had on others. Relationships help to restore family and community connections. Communication of moral value is helpful to give a clarification of accountability and to assert possibilities of change.

2.1.2 Feminist Pathways Theory

Feminist Pathways Theory highlights that women's pathways to offending are often linked to gendered experiences like being in an intimate partner violence relationship, childhood victimization, poverty, caregiving pressures, coercion, and social marginalisation. Daly (1992) disputed explanations that assumed that the types of crimes committed by males were universal. The theory focuses on the relational and structural context in which women engage in crime while also incorporating an individualized responsibility. This attitude is significant as restorative practices can fail to acknowledge women's prior victimization, thereby threatening identity transformation. According to Gobeil et al. (2016), gender-informed interventions in the correctional system will prove to be more effective than gender-neutral interventions. A woman is expected to own her longer-term response to rejection and lack of support to cope with the abuse, trauma, or coercion, and may feel the restorative dialogue may be perpetuating that condemnation.

Feminist Pathways Theory also assumes that family roles and social relationships play a crucial part in women's reintegration. Heidemann et al. (2016) demonstrated that women tended to see successful re-entry as being a mother, stable in their relationships, and being able to take care of others. Restorative practice approaches, such as family mediation, parenting support, and identity recognition for women in caring roles, might then augment the process of change by re-engaging women in socially valued roles. The analysis had the benefit of differentiating responsibility from stigmatisation by adopting a framework that was based on two theories. Restorative Justice Theory described how dialogue, accountability, forgiveness and repair of relationships could aid in the process of identity change. Because of the Feminist Pathways Theory, these processes were all interpreted in the context of women's trauma, family conflict, poverty and gendered expectations.

2.2 Empirical Review

Empirical research has linked restorative justice practices to positive reductions in the negative outcomes of offenders and victims. According to Latimer et al. (2005), restorative justice-initiated programs could ease the likelihood of re-offending and boost satisfaction as compared to traditional justice methods. The focus on measurable outcomes (repeat offending, however) has often masked the potential psychosocial changes that precede any sustained psychosocial desistance. Bradshaw and Roseborough (2005) also discovered that mediation and conferencing might impact juvenile recidivism. They found the value of participatory processes while failing to fully account for the nature of what occurred regarding a change in self-perception of the offenders following restorative encounters. In the case of an identity transformation, it is important to pay attention to the narratives through which they come to an understanding of what they did in the past and what they can do in the future.

Maruna (2014) contended that reintegration requires the removal or the demeaning of two things: the offence label and the recognition of return to social membership in the conventional community. A new identity can be maintained through symbolic recognition, community incorporation, and avenues for expression/gestures toward change. This view is directly applicable to practices like recognition ceremonies with the public, leadership positions, and community responsibilities. Arreola et al. (2024) identified acceptance, employment opportunities, support from family, and the ability to overcome stigma as determining factors in the reintegration experiences of former offenders. They conclude that identity change is maintained when a person is socially validated in their change with credible information. In the absence of this, their personal wishes might be diluted by continued isolation.

Crime avoidance is not the only factor in women's successful re-entry to society. Heidemann et al. (2016) found that ex-female offenders considered success as relational, economic, and personal stability. Martilik (2018) also reported that safety, support, self-efficacy and restored meaningful roles are components of women's concept of successful re-entry. Lin et al. (2023) had a connection with restorative justice implementation and its connection with social reintegration and reduced recidivism. Knowing the responses necessary for relationship repair and community engagement was reinforced. In rural and peri-urban African communities, however, the evidence failed in its attempt to specifically elucidate the impact of restorative processes on women's identities.

Waireri (2017) studied restorative justice and offender reintegration in Kenya and highlighted the need to engage stakeholders in the repair of harm. The research found the significance of restorative practice in the Kenyan context of justice, though there was an underdevelopment of gender focus on identity transformation. Gichana (2023) explored the reintegration of the parolees from Kakamega County and aspects of social and institutional support that remain significant. It was, therefore, crucial that the experiences of former female inmates in Bungoma County could be asked about and investigated. The empirical gap was threefold. Firstly, there is a dearth of studies measuring identity reconstruction, as existing studies typically measured recidivism, compliance, or satisfaction. Second, most of the research was not focused on women who were formerly incarcerated. Third, there was limited evidence of how formal and informal restorative approaches in a county in Kenya promoted accountability, emotional healing, reconciliation of families, social recognition, and commitment to lawful living. The current research aimed to fill this gap by conducting a detailed qualitative analysis of women's stories and stakeholder views.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Study Area

The study used an interpretivist qualitative case study approach. An interpretivist approach was suitable as identity transformation is a process involving meanings, self-perceptions, and relationships that cannot be measured through numbers alone. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth discussion of the restorative justice practice in the social, cultural and institutional context of Bungoma County. Yin (2018) noted that case studies can be used when there is a high level of connection between the phenomenon being studied and its real-life context. Bungoma County was purposefully selected because informal and formal restorative practices were conducted through probation services, correctional programmes and families, churches, community leaders, NGOs, and CBOs. The county is also home to rural and urban communities, which offer diverse experiences with stigma, reconciling, rebuilding livelihoods, and communal acceptance.

3.2 Target Population, Sample and Sampling Procedures

The main subjects in the study were 50 formerly incarcerated women clients who had taken part in restorative justice or related reintegration processes. Five probation officers, three restorative justice practitioners, 20 community leaders, three representatives of non-governmental organizations, and two representatives of community-based organizations provided the additional perspectives. These groups were chosen because they had first-hand experience related to women's reintegration, the restorative processes, or community supports. The purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that the participants included would be able to provide information relevant to the study objective. Snowball sampling supported the identification of formerly incarcerated women who met the inclusion

criteria and were willing to discuss their experiences. The final sample comprised 83 participants. Saturation was initially reached after interviews with 40 women and 10 key informants, when additional interviews produced no substantially new themes. Further data collection was done with the remaining participants to establish if the thematic structure was stable and complete.

Table 1

Participant Categories, Sample Size, and Data Collection Methods

Participant category	Sample size	Data collection method
Formerly incarcerated women	50	In-depth interviews
Probation officers	5	Key informant interviews
Restorative justice practitioners	3	Key informant interviews
Community leaders	20	Four focus group discussions
NGO representatives	3	Key informant interviews
CBO representatives	2	Key informant interviews
Total	83	Multiple qualitative methods

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The formerly incarcerated women were engaged in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews focused on their perceptions of restorative justice, experience of counselling or mediation, acceptance of responsibility, guilt and shame, changes in self-perception, family reconciliation, social recognition and behavioural change. All the interviews were about 30 to 45 minutes in duration and provided for follow-up questions as needed. Key informant interviews were held with probation officers, restorative justice practitioners and those from non-governmental and community-based organizations. The interviews explored how restorative practices are implemented, how women, families and communities are changing, and any unmet needs for reintegration. Four focus group discussions were held, each with five community leaders, engaging the community in shared perceptions and experiences of supporting women coming out of incarceration. A pilot test of the data collection instruments was conducted with 5 respondents in Busia County for the purpose of testing for clarity, relevance and sequence. These preliminary results showed that minor adjustments were needed before fieldwork could start. All of the interviews and focus group discussions were recorded as agreed upon by the participants, with the addition of field notes.

3.4 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analysed thematically using the stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Audio recordings were made and the transcripts were read many times for familiarisation. First, the codes were placed on statements about responsibility, guilt, healing, and recognition, relationship to family, behaviour, stigma, and reintegration. The related codes were clustered into underlying themes, which were then evaluated with the entire data set and modified to attain internal consistency and to establish clear boundaries between themes.

Both inductive and deductive coding was used. Inductive coding was used to uncover meanings in the participants' stories, and deductive coding was used for the study objective and theoretical framework. The final themes developed were: personal accountability and acceptance of responsibility, emotional healing and psychological changes, restoration of one's own worth and positive identity reconstruction, family reconciliation and reestablishment of social relations, and modification of behaviors and commitment to lawful living. Confidence was enhanced by member checking, an audit trail, peer review of the thematic interpretation, and detailed participant accounts. Views of women, justice practitioners, community leaders and civil society were compared to map convergence and divergence. This triangulation was used to increase confidence in the themes as not being a reflection of a single category of participant.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology and subsequently authorized by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation and concerned County authorities. The participation was voluntary, and informed consent was given prior to the test administration. Participants could decline to answer any question or withdraw without penalty. A participant code was used to protect confidentiality. Formerly incarcerated women were identified as FWO01 to FWO50; probation officers as PO01 to PO05; restorative justice practitioners as RJP01 to RJP03; community leaders as CL01 to CL20; non-governmental organization representatives as NGO01 to NGO03; and community-based organization representatives as CBO01 to CBO02. Interview evidence was reported using these codes together with the date, month, and year of each interview. The issues of incarceration, victimisation and stigma were discussed in a sensitive way and participants who felt distressed were able to pause the interview or be referred for psychosocial support.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Participant Context

All 83 targeted participants were engaged in the study. The formerly incarcerated women represented different ages, educational backgrounds, offense histories, lengths of incarceration, and periods since release. This diversity allowed capturing both short-term and long-term aspects of identity reconstruction within the study. The majority of women had primary or secondary education, and many were in economically and socially active age groups with high expectations about parenting, income earning and community engagement.

Additionally, the participant profile indicated the inappropriate assumption of homogeneity for women's reintegration experiences. For some women, counselling, vocational training, spiritual support, mediation, family reconciliation had been provided and in some instances, there was limited access to a structured restorative engagement. Thus, the thematic findings related to enabling experiences, as well as ongoing barriers.

4.1.1 Personal Accountability and Acceptance of Responsibility

The first theme indicated a beginning of identity-change with personal responsibility. Participants described restorative justice as an opportunity to reflect on the consequences of their actions, acknowledge the harm caused, and accept moral responsibility. Counselling, mediation, prayer and family reconciliation offered opportunities to have responsibility expressed while not diminishing the woman in the offence. One such participant shared that counseling and family reunification contributed to her gaining awareness of the broader implications of her actions:

To me, restorative justice means taking responsibility for what happened and trying to rebuild relationships with all those affected by the crime. While in prison, I participated in counseling sessions, spiritual programs, and family reconciliations. Those sessions made me deeply reflect on my actions and how they affected others.

(Formerly incarcerated woman [FWO01], in-depth interview, 18 May 2026).

The account indicates that accountability was not experienced merely as admitting legal guilt. It involved considering the hurt in relationships and the desire to repair damaged relationships. This confirms the findings of Presser and Van Voorhis (2002), who focused on dialogue and building on relationships at the heart of restorative justice processes. A probation officer also linked susceptibility to accountability with a willingness to be rehabilitated:

Women who openly accept responsibility for their actions become more receptive to counseling, reconciliation, and community supervision. Accountability is usually the first sign that genuine rehabilitation has taken place (Probation officer [PO02], key informant interview, 19 May 2026).

From the accounts of the participants, it was clear that responsibility and context were not mutually exclusive. Women identified negative behaviour but also shared experiences of domestic violence, childhood abuse, poverty, and family conflict. The process thus did not default to simply focusing on all women as offenders versus all women as victims. It helped them to rediscover an ability to exercise agency in a complex life situation. This finding is explained by Braithwaite's (1989) distinction between re-integrative and stigmatizing shaming. The restorative processes condemned the hurtful action and its behavior, and also indicated that the woman could change and that she could lead a normal life back in the community. When accountability was linked to forgiveness, support, and the ability to make things right, it became identity-forming.

4.1.2 Emotional Healing and Psychological Transformation

The second theme was about emotional healing and psychological change. Many of the participants re-entered their reintegration with feelings of guilt and shame, anger, self-blame, hopelessness, and unresolved trauma. Counselling, prayers, spiritual guidance, mediation and reconciliation supported women in identifying these emotions and understanding where they came from and how to start the process of forgiving herself. One participant shared about the inner emotional struggle she faced between her crime, her religious background, her commitment to her profession, and her family responsibilities:

I felt guilty and ashamed and deeply regretted my actions. Being raised in a Christian foundation and then ending up killing someone and being incarcerated was very painful. I felt that I had failed my parents, my children, my community, and the organization I worked for. Through prayer and counseling, I was able to manage these emotions (Formerly incarcerated woman [FWO01], in-depth interview, 21 May 2026).

The document illustrates that jail was not just a barrier to legal status. It challenged the identities of faith, motherhood, professional competence, and community respect. Through restorative support, the participant was able to work through this dissonance and visualise a meaningful future in spite of an irreversible past. A restorative justice practitioner stressed women's needs for a context where accountability and trauma can be dealt with in tandem:

Identity transformation begins when offenders are given a safe environment to acknowledge the harm they caused while also dealing with the trauma they have experienced. Restorative justice creates that

opportunity through dialogue and reconciliation (Restorative justice practitioner [RJP02], key informant interview, 25 May 2026).

This dual focus was at the heart of the issues. The women's narratives revealed that guilt of having violated feelings and thoughts was in interaction with previous experiences of domestic violence, sexual abuse in childhood, rejection, poverty, and intimate partner violence. According to Gobeil et al. (2016), gender responsive interventions generated more correctional results. As such, the findings of the current investigation underscore the importance of responsiveness to identity: unacknowledged wounds can have a long-term effect and keep anger, encountering one's own condemnation, and defensive behavior alive even after serving a sentence.

There is no removal of responsibility in emotional healing. Its only dream, however, was to encourage responsibility instead, which made it beneficial. Those who were able to process the guilt and trauma reported feeling hopeful, better able to regulate their emotions, and more willing to make an effort to rebuild relationships. This can be supported by the findings of Martilik (2018), who is a re-entry woman successful in relation to safety, support, and self-efficacy. When healing happened, women switched from shame-based to resilience-based, agency-based identity.

4.1.3 Restoration of Self-Worth and Positive Identity Reconstruction

The third theme indicated that positive social recognition and self-worth were restorative of identity transformation. A number of women said they were failures, criminals, or disappointments before they got the support. Internal change through counselling and reconciliation, and external validation through the recognition of others, helped. One woman explained that participation and recognition in counseling and prayer changed the way she viewed herself:

It helped me stop viewing myself as a criminal. Being recognized as the most committed participant in counseling and prayer sessions motivated me to change even more. It made me feel that people could still see good in me despite my past (Formerly incarcerated woman [FWO04], in-depth interview, 27 May 2026).

Another participant recounted a vocational recognition from a church, which put the stigma into perspective and gave a concrete way to contribute:

The church recognized me as the best tailor after I completed my training. People started bringing clothes for me to make. That recognition gave me hope that I could also be accepted in the community despite my mistakes. (Formerly incarcerated woman [FWO05], in-depth interview, 21 May 2026).

As is illustrated in these outstanding accounts, the process of positive identity reconstruction involved more than private self-belief. Strengthened by the delegating of roles to women, recognizing their skills, or by including them in socially valued roles by institutions or community members. Maruna (2014) said reintegration is aided by rituals and recognition, which reduce the offender label. These certificates of disaffirmation were fulfilled by the leadership duties, church offices, vocational accomplishments, and familial honors that participants discussed. The key theme of recognition was succinctly summarised by a representative of an NGO:

Recognition is important because it shifts attention from what the woman did in the past to what she is capable of contributing today. Public acknowledgment motivates many women to remain committed to positive change. (NGO representative [NGO02], key informant interview, 18 May 2026).

Arreola et al. (2024) also concluded that community acceptance and participation opportunities were associated with reintegration for people who had formerly been incarcerated. The present research contributes to this insight by revealing the ways in which connotations of recognition became the experience of identity. Women started to refer to themselves as mothers, tailors, mentors, church members, entrepreneurs, and responsible members of the community. The identities were focused on the future and provided a rationale to maintain legal actions.

4.1.4 Family Reconciliation and Restoration of Social Relationships

The fourth theme identified family reconciliation as a foundation for identity transformation. Incarceration had strained relationships with children, parents, spouses, in-laws, and extended family members. Because family roles were central to how many participants understood themselves, continued rejection reinforced the offender identity. Mediation, dialogue, forgiveness, and church-supported reconciliation enabled some women to recover belonging and social legitimacy. One participant described the role of faith and family support in reopening communication with her in-laws:

After serving my sentence, I asked my local church to help me talk to my in-laws and see whether I could seek forgiveness. The church played a very important role. My family also stood with me throughout the process, and their faith gave me strength to believe that things could change (Formerly incarcerated woman [FWO01], in-depth interview, 28 May 2026).

A restorative justice practitioner explained why family mediation mattered:

Most women want to reconnect with their families before anything else. Mediation creates a safe environment where family members express their pain, offenders accept responsibility, and together they begin rebuilding trust (Restorative justice practitioner [RJP02], key informant interview, 22 May 2026).

The findings indicated that the family reconciliation was a multi-component process with restorative functions. It allowed women to apologize, it permitted their family to voice their pain, it offered clarity about how the incident offended, and it established negotiated options to begin again. Family acceptance also helped in the emotional support, housing and childcare networking, as well as encouragement on the livelihood reconstruction.

However, reconciliation was not automatic. The family had presented for a possible meeting with the victim, but it was rejected due to family resistance, with the participant expressing guilt over the event. This divergence illustrates that restorative justice relies on the voluntary involvement of those concerned and a willingness to engage in it. Restorative justice does not rely solely on the offenders' willingness to engage in dialogue; victims and families must also be ready and well-supported. Heidemann et al. (2016) determined that women tended to measure success in reintegration by relating to family and caregiving. This is in line with the Bungoma findings. Women who were reaccepted as mothers/daughters, wives, or kin were reasserting their confidence and motivation, whereas women who were still estranged continued to feel lonely/rejected. Family reconciliation thus worked as a process of relationship repair and a restoration of identity.

4.1.5 Behavioral Change and Commitment to a Law-Abiding Life

The fifth theme was about behaviour change and committing to a lawful lifestyle. The participants connected restorative justice to a better ability to manage their emotions, to manage conflicts, to communicate, to be patient, and to make decisions. Through counselling and mediation, they were encouraged to think about the situation that led to their offence, and to find other ways to react to confrontational situations. One participant identified a different style of dealing with interpersonal conflict:

Counseling helped me understand that dealing with anger and emotional pain in a better way could have helped me make different decisions (Formerly incarcerated woman [FWO03], in-depth interview, 29 May 2026).

Another woman framed her transformed identity in explicitly pro-social terms:

I now view myself as a role model for change and a hardworking mother rather than an ordinary offender (Formerly incarcerated woman [FWO05], in-depth interview, 28 May 2026).

A probation officer also linked counseling/reconciliation to the maintenance of behavior change:

Women who successfully complete counseling and reconciliation programs become more cooperative, responsible, and committed to rebuilding their lives. They rarely return to the behaviors that previously brought them into conflict with the law (Probation officer [PO01], key informant interview, 14 May 2026).

The results implied that the behavior change was achievable whenever behavior was aligned with a new identity. The women who saw themselves as responsible mothers, workers, mentors, or community contributors had more motivation not to do actions that would jeopardize their perception of themselves in those roles. Latimer et al. (2005) suggested that restorative justice has the potential to help reduce recidivism. The current findings shed light on one potential mechanism—healing, relationship repair, recognition, and dialogue helped women build identities conducive to desistance.

Bradshaw and Roseborough (2005) reported positive behavioral outcomes following restorative mediation and conferencing. Change in Bungoma County was expressed in peaceful conflict resolution, taking responsibility for family and livelihoods, engaging in church and community work, and supporting other vulnerable women. Thus, behavioral change was not just the lack of crime but also movement towards conventional and constructive social roles, which was measurable through observable behaviours.

4.2 Integrated Discussion

Five themes were integrated in a manner that was not solely sequential. It was emotional healing that kept accountability from becoming a way of life for women, which led them to confront harm. The recognition of the individual and entrance into the labour force boosted self-esteem and familial relationships validated social inclusion. These processes, in combination, facilitated a behavioral change and an identity towards the future. Table 2 summarizes the identity transformation pathways identified in the data. Themes illustrate that restorative justice was implemented internally and externally. Internal mechanisms were: reflection, remorse, self-forgiveness, hope and emotional regulation. External mechanisms were mediation, family dialogue, recognition, community responsibilities and social support. The two were needed to achieve sustainable transformation.

Table 2*Restorative Justice Pathways to Identity Transformation*

Identity transformation theme	Restorative mechanisms	Observed identity outcomes
Accountability and responsibility	Counseling, mediation, reflection, apology, reconciliation	Remorse, moral responsibility, agency, readiness to repair harm
Emotional healing	Trauma-sensitive dialogue, spiritual support, prayer, psychosocial counseling	Reduced guilt and shame, self-forgiveness, resilience, hope
Restoration of self-worth	Recognition, vocational roles, mentoring, leadership, community responsibility	Confidence, pro-social identity, sense of contribution
Family reconciliation	Family dialogue, church-led mediation, forgiveness, community support	Restored trust, belonging, renewed family roles
Behavioral change	Conflict-management skills, supervision, mentorship, livelihood engagement	Emotional regulation, lawful living, responsible citizenship

The findings also qualify overly optimistic accounts of restorative justice. Access to structured mediation and reconciliation was uneven. Some women benefited from coordinated counseling, spiritual support, family dialogue, and community recognition, while others relied on informal support or lacked opportunities to engage victims and families. Restorative potential was therefore shaped by the availability and quality of facilitation, the willingness of affected parties, and the continuity of support after release. The combined theoretical interpretation was useful. Restorative Justice Theory explained why accountability, dialogue, reparation, and relationship repair promoted change. Feminist Pathways Theory explained why women's experiences of abuse, poverty, family disruption, and caregiving could not be treated as peripheral. The findings indicate that a gender-responsive restorative model must hold women accountable for harm while addressing the conditions that influence their capacity to heal and reintegrate.

The findings on accountability, dialogue, and relationship repair agree with Presser and Van Voorhis (2002), Latimer et al. (2005), and Bradshaw and Roseborough (2005), who showed that restorative processes can produce constructive outcomes through participatory engagement. However, the Bungoma findings extend this literature by showing that the effect was not limited to reduced reoffending or satisfaction. Women described movement from identities dominated by guilt, stigma, and the offender label toward identities grounded in responsibility, motherhood, productive work, and community contribution. This supports Maruna's (2014) argument that reintegration depends on de-stigmatization and social recognition, while demonstrating how such recognition was enacted through family, church, vocational, and community roles. The findings therefore identify identity transformation as one mechanism through which restorative practices may contribute to longer-term desistance.

The findings on emotional healing, family reconciliation, and social recognition also support Heidemann et al. (2016) and Arreola et al. (2024), who emphasized family support, acceptance, meaningful roles, and opportunities for participation in successful reintegration. At the same time, the Bungoma evidence qualifies these studies by showing that such outcomes depended on the willingness of family members and other affected parties to participate and on access to structured facilitation. The experiences of abuse, poverty, family conflict, and caregiving reported by participants further accord with Gobeil et al. (2016), whose findings favored gender-informed over gender-neutral interventions. In the Kenyan context, the findings extend Waireri (2017) and Gichana (2023) by showing specifically how restorative practices can reshape women's identities, rather than only supporting reintegration at a general social or institutional level.

The study contributes to existing knowledge by positioning identity transformation as a substantive reintegration outcome. Recidivism remains important, but it is an incomplete measure of whether a woman has regained dignity, belonging, and a credible social role. The narratives from Bungoma County illustrate how identity reconstruction may be manifested in the way women describe themselves, the roles that others trust them to fulfil, the relationships they restore and also in their decisions and actions when faced with conflicts.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Restorative justice practices facilitated the identity transformation of formerly incarcerated women in Bungoma County through personal accountability, emotional healing, and restoration of self-worth, family reconciliation, and behavioral change. Through counselling, mediation, spiritual support, family dialogue, vocational engagement, community recognition and reconciliation ceremonies, women were able to transcend guilt, shame, rejection, criminal labelling, and identities that were overwhelming in some cases. Results indicate that identity transformation was highest when responsibility for harm was accompanied by support and a clear avenue for reacceptance into society. Families, faith communities, community leaders, civil society organizations, and justice practitioners recognized their progress and opportunities for meaningful social and economic roles, which facilitated change for women. Where there was no dialogue or families did not come to terms, guilt and exclusion continued.

The study finds that identity transformation is a key pathway through which restorative justice can play a key role in reaching reintegration. It should therefore be judged, whether successfully reattached or not, by restored dignity, renewed self-worth, restored relationships, constructive involvement in the community, and dedication to living lawfully. Restorative justice approaches that are gender responsive, trauma-informed, relational, and continue beyond the gate are more likely to be effective for women.

5.2 Recommendations

Structured restorative justice interventions for women should be institutionalised before and after release by the Kenya Prisons Service, Probation and Aftercare Service, and the State Department for Correctional Services. Counselling, mediation, family conferencing, mentorship, and community-based follow-up should be integrated within a coordinated programme rather than delivered as isolated interventions. Restorative justice practitioners should apply gender-responsive and trauma-informed facilitation that assesses and supports experiences of domestic violence, childhood abuse, poverty, family conflict, mental health challenges, and caregiving responsibilities while maintaining accountability. This approach would reduce the risk of reproducing shame or power imbalances during restorative processes.

Family reconciliation should begin before release through voluntary, safe, and non-coercive procedures. Probation officers, trained mediators, or faith and community leaders should prepare women and family members separately before dialogue sessions. Follow-up should be provided after the initial meeting to support the implementation of agreements and address renewed conflict. County governments, community and religious groups, and community-based organisations should also provide visible platforms for positive recognition through vocational achievement, mentorship, community service, peer education, and participation in women's groups. Such recognition can demonstrate change and weaken the continuing offender label.

Psychosocial support and livelihood linkages should continue after release because reconstructed identities are difficult to sustain amid unemployment, poverty, housing insecurity, and renewed rejection. Counselling should therefore be linked to employment opportunities, enterprise support, social protection, and community mentoring so that emotional recovery is reinforced by practical pathways to stability and social participation. Future research should follow formerly incarcerated women over time to establish whether identity changes associated with restorative justice are sustained and how they affect family stability, livelihood recovery, community acceptance, and reoffending. Comparative studies across counties and countries could further clarify how cultural and institutional differences shape restorative outcomes.

Declaration of Interest

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