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When the Carceral Web Slips: Digital Moral Labour Among Migrants in Legal Precarity

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Abstract

Across Europe, migrants in legal precarity experience forms of carcerality that extend beyond prison walls. This carceral continuum operates through migration controls, policing, bureaucratic scrutiny, stigma, and, increasingly, digital infrastructures. Drawing on two multi-sited fieldworks and digital ethnographies in Europe, this article explores how two formerly incarcerated migrant men navigate this continuum through digital practices. Bridging migration studies, border criminology, and digital anthropology, we extend Gurusami's (2019) concept of the carceral web by introducing carceral slippages to capture a form of control that is pervasive without being seamless: Articulations across penal, migration, administrative, and digital systems remain partial, opaque, and difficult to anticipate. These slippages generate uncertainty while leaving limited room for manoeuvre. We then show how migrants negotiate this condition through digital moral labour: selectively disclosing or concealing incarceration, managing stigma, and sustaining obligations of care across geographically dispersed relationships. Rather than treating digital technologies primarily as deterministic instruments of state surveillance or merely emancipation, we explore how they also become infrastructures through which migrants negotiate personhood, care, and obligation under conditions of legal precarity. By foregrounding migrants' retrospective experiences and (digital) practices, we show how carceral slippages shape both the uncertainty individuals endure and the limited possibilities through which they negotiate who they are and who they can become. This article complicates accounts of carcerality as seamless or totalising, showing how the carceral web can remain pervasive precisely through its fragmented and uncertain articulation.

Keywords

carceral web; incarceration; digital inclusion; migration; uncertainty

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1. Introduction

"I felt free." Uba said this without irony when recalling his last period of incarceration in Switzerland. After years of sleeping rough, living at the fringe of society, navigating opaque administrative requirements, and moving across European borders under constant threat of arrest due to his precarious legal status, three weeks in this prison felt, to him, more stable and bearable than life outside. Ali, who held a precarious temporary permit in Switzerland, also felt that the rhythm of prison provided a degree of stability otherwise lacking in his everyday life. However, his short incarceration carried an additional cost, since it could endanger his prospects of obtaining a more stable residence permit. Yet, for both, the consequences of incarceration also extended into their close and more distant relationships after release.

These two life-snippets resonate with what Foucault (1979, pp. 297–98) described as a carceral continuum: "a subtle, graduated carceral net, with compact institutions, but also separate and diffused methods." For precarious and deportable migrants, confinement may thus extend from prisons and detention centres to asylum reception facilities, border controls, welfare systems, policing practices, and migration bureaucracies: a broader landscape of legal liminality, deprivation, and uncertainty (Motta, 2026). These dispersed forms of control are increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures. We build on and expand Gurusami's (2019, pp. 2, 15) notion of the carceral web, defined as "the spatial intersection between carceral institutions and digital technologies" that "functions as a racialized tool of social control that extra-legally constrains the lives of Black people and the opportunities in their communities." Its "stickiness" captures how institutional and digital traces continue to constrain life after release. Uba and Ali's prison records, administrative requirements, and migration files follow them beyond incarceration and across borders, while their consequences remain difficult to anticipate—both for them and for us as ethnographers.

Drawing on two multi-sited fieldworks and digital ethnographies in Europe, this article explores how two formerly incarcerated migrant men navigate this carceral web through digital practices. We introduce "carceral slippages": not an escape from the carceral web, but the gaps, discontinuities, and ambiguities through which it is navigated. Carceral slippages thus capture how the web remains pervasive without being seamless, while its fragmented articulation produces uncertainty about where, when, and with what consequences carceral traces may materialise.

Bridging migration studies, border criminology, and digital anthropology, we examine how our interlocutors negotiate these uncertain conditions through what we call "digital moral labour": the digitally mediated work of selectively disclosing or concealing incarceration, managing stigma, and sustaining obligations of care across geographically dispersed relationships. Rather than approaching digital technologies primarily from the perspective of state control, we examine digital inclusion from actors' own vantage points and how they use them to negotiate stigma, care, and masculinity across different relationships and audiences under conditions of continuing legal precarity. The two concepts capture different but connected dimensions of these trajectories: Carceral slippages identify the uncertain institutional conditions within which consequences materialise, disappear, or remain pending, while digital moral labour captures the relational work through which migrants live with these conditions. It is at the intersection of these two dynamics—continuing carceral constraints and enduring relational obligations—that digital practices are particularly significant for understanding the post-release experiences of migrants in legal precarity.

After situating these concepts within scholarship on carcerality, migration, and digital infrastructures, we present our ethnographic approach before tracing how uncertainty unfolds across Ali and Uba's trajectories, how carceral slippages emerge through interconnected but fragmented governance, and how digital practices become forms of moral labour through which they manage visibility and stigma, fashion viable moral selves, and sustain care across distance.

1.1. From a Sticky Web to Carceral Slippages

Imprisonment represents a reproduction of inequalities (Wacquant, 2009), while racialised carcerality operates through overlapping systems of surveillance, discipline, and disposability (Gilmore, 2007), increasingly mediated by electronic monitoring, data sharing, and bureaucratic scrutiny (Brayne, 2021; Gurusami, 2019; Lyon, 2008). Gurusami's (2019) work on the carceral web shows how carcerality and digital technologies are woven together in ways that extend punishment beyond prisons into welfare systems, housing and labour markets, producing subjects vulnerable to further hidden sentences. Its "stickiness" is characterised "as the Internet's ability to make carceral histories inescapable across time and physical space, making it impossible for formerly incarcerated people to shed their criminal histories" (Gurusami, 2019, p. 435). For deportable migrants in the European context, however, this web stretches across borders, connecting penal and migration institutions. These connections also create fragmentation, nuancing the carceral web's inescapability.

Ali and Uba's experiences reflect the intertwining of penal and migration controls around deportable "crimmigrant others" (Aas, 2011), for whom uncertainty becomes a structuring condition rather than an episodic experience (Bosworth, 2014; Wyss, 2022). Blurring the boundaries between crime and migration, European states increasingly rely on biometric databases, transnational information pooling, and algorithmic risk assessment, connecting policing and migration control across jurisdictions (Khamsy, in press), extending control beyond territorial borders and embedding surveillance into migrants' everyday lives (Vuilleumier, 2025). These developments might foster a deceptive image of technological inescapable state control, yet what information circulates, connects, or becomes consequential remains uncertain—including to migrants themselves. Carceral slippages capture these uncertain passages across partially connected penal, migration, administrative, and digital systems as experienced by people themselves. Rather than opposing the carceral web, this concept captures how the web can remain pervasive without necessarily being seamless: Its connections remain discontinuous and difficult to anticipate.

1.2. The Stigma of Racialised and Gendered Threat

Uncertainties and constraints produced through the uneven carceral web are not distributed equally. For racialised non-citizens, carceral traces also carry stigma, intersecting with gendered constructions of threat and deservingness. Wyss (2022) shows how European migration regimes construct particular forms of migrant masculinity as threatening, increasingly associating migrant men—particularly those perceived as Muslim, North African, or Black—with criminality, sexual danger, and an inability to conform to European gender norms. The figure of the "criminal migrant" is therefore not only racialised but profoundly gendered.

In Switzerland, this racialised and gendered construction of criminality has been reinforced by law surrounding the figure of the "foreign criminal." The 2008 popular initiative on the "removal of foreign

criminals," most significantly, contributed to framing non-citizens as a distinctive category of criminal threat and ultimately expanded judicial expulsion, as penal conviction can carry consequences for freedom of movement and the right to remain (Gnaedinger, 2024). The figure of the "foreign criminal" thus connects the stigma of racialised masculine threat to concrete forms of differential punishment. This illustrates the punitive turn in the governance of populations deemed "undesirable," whereby migration control and penal logics extend beyond the formal boundaries of imprisonment (Motta, 2026).

The expansion of the Swiss carceral system has accompanied this punitive turn, producing significant, though rarely publicly discussed, patterns of migrant incarceration that scholars have termed a "silent demographic revolution" (de Dardel & Blanc, 2023, p. 104). In 2024, approximately 72% of incarcerated people in Switzerland were foreign nationals, placing Switzerland among the most extreme cases in Europe (Gnaedinger, 2024). Yet this figure conceals an even sharper disparity: Migrants without residence permits, estimated at around 2% of the population, account for nearly half of those incarcerated, while foreign nationals are disproportionately subjected to pre-trial detention and imprisonment even for minor offences (Fink, 2017). Prison, in this context, is not merely a response to criminalised conduct but a site of racialised and gendered constructions of non-citizenship with consequences that extend long after release.

1.3. Release, Rehabilitation Void, and Digital Infrastructures

Despite the significance of the Swiss case in Europe, research has paid limited attention to the post-release trajectories of formerly incarcerated people, focusing instead mainly on recidivism (Capela & Lambelet, 2016). Existing studies show that most people released from Swiss prisons are young men facing precarity (Lambelet, 2025). Release is often marked by unemployment, accumulated debt, housing instability, and social isolation (O'Mara, 2026), while Swiss rehabilitation programs frequently fail to provide sustained orientation for reconfiguring life trajectories or for projecting viable futures (Lambelet, 2025).

Migrants in legal precarity face rehabilitation challenges amid a striking institutional void: For people like Ali and Uba, rehabilitation programmes are simply absent. The work of rebuilding a viable life (Warr, 2020) is therefore demanded under continuing legal precarity. Penal punishment, migration-related sanctions, and social isolation accumulate, while release often returns individuals to homelessness, administrative uncertainty, restricted employment, and police scrutiny, conditions against which prison may have appeared comparatively predictable (Carceral & Flaherty, 2022; Halsey, 2007).

Digital infrastructures are increasingly central to the post-release landscape. Research on formerly incarcerated people has documented significant forms of digital exclusion, including limited access to devices, connectivity, and digital literacy, which can compound marginalisation (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). For migrants in legal precarity, however, the problem extends beyond digital exclusion. Digital access may itself be conditional, mediated, or risky: Digital infrastructures can simultaneously enable transnational connection and expose users to new forms of identification, traceability, and scrutiny (Khamsy, in press; Nagy, 2024). While scholarship on digital carcerality has largely foregrounded state surveillance and control, less attention has been paid to the relational work performed through digital practices under carceral conditions. For migrants, this relational work is distinctly transnational, as obligations and expectations persist across borders despite incarceration and legal precarity.

1.4. Transnational Obligations and Digital Moral Labour

Transnational care is embedded in moral economies of obligation, sacrifice, and reciprocity, binding distant individuals through gendered and generational power dynamics (Čiubrinskas & Glick-Schiller, 2025). For migrant men, these obligations intersect with gendered expectations of self-reliance and provision (Griffiths, 2015), while legal precarity simultaneously shapes which performances of masculinity become perceived as deserving or threatening (Wyss, 2022). Remittances crystallise these tensions: Sending money is not merely an economic transaction but a relational performance of care and responsibility, while the inability to provide can expose the gap between expected masculine roles and the material capacity to inhabit them (Vuilleumier, 2021). Messaging, video calls, social media, and remittances therefore operate not merely as communication technologies but as infrastructures through which care, obligation, and presence are sustained across distance.

Neither incarceration nor release suspends these expectations. Rehabilitation entails material and social reintegration but also the work of becoming—and being recognised as—a different person (Warr, 2020). Yet for migrants in legal precarity, producing a credible redemption script does not necessarily enable social reintegration, as their legal and material conditions may prevent that "redeemed" person from being recognised or enacted in practice (Maruna, 2025). Warr (2020) describes narrative labour as the work prisoners undertake to produce institutionally legible accounts of change, while Laursen and Mjåland's (2025) notion of moral labour captures the more ambiguous ethical self-reflection through which prisoners grapple with wrongdoing, guilt, shame, and who they are or want to become, often with little institutional assistance. We extend this argument beyond institutional recognition: For migrants in legal precarity, moral labour unfolds in a post-release context where institutional reintegration is largely foreclosed while (transnational) interpersonal expectations persist. Personhood must then be negotiated before dispersed audiences: Family members, friends, partners, and other transnational ties before whom incarceration, hardship, provision, and respectability acquire different meanings.

We conceptualise these practices as digital moral labour: the digitally mediated work of sustaining, repairing, and negotiating personhood across relational audiences under conditions of continuing carcerality. If carceral slippages describe the uncertain articulations across partially connected carceral systems, digital moral labour captures the relational work through which individuals negotiate personhood under carceral opaque consequences.

2. Ethnographies Between the Digital and the Carceral Web

Our fieldworks were conducted in Switzerland and across other European contexts. We were both embedded in grassroots solidarity networks, enabling us to conduct immersive ethnographies and socialise with our interlocutors outside formal institutional settings, which often generate mistrust and suspicion among migrants in legal precarity.

I (Louis) conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2018 and 2023 with Sub-Saharan male migrants experiencing housing precarity and negotiating everyday illegalisation. I relied on my personal network in Switzerland to access my interlocutors, notably a squatting collective that occupied vacant infrastructures to house precarious migrants. I met Uba in this squat, which included around 50 men aged 18 to 55 with

diverse legal statuses, including pending asylum seekers, rejected applicants, and individuals with residence permits. Several experienced recurrent periods of incarceration, homelessness, or informal housing. Later, I followed some of them across Europe (France, Italy, and Malta) through short visits and sustained online communication, adopting a longitudinal and multi-sited perspective. I maintained irregular contact with Uba through WhatsApp calls and messaging.

I (Nina) conducted fieldwork among interlocutors hailing from West Asia, mainly young Persian-speaking people on the move in southeastern Europe and in Switzerland. I drew on my command of Persian and prolonged online communications to sustain my discussion with my interlocutors. I began my fieldwork in Switzerland before moving to southeastern Europe. I met Ali among the men in reception centres or private housing in a French-speaking city in Switzerland. Ali stood out as particularly resourceful in navigating these constraints, notably securing shared accommodation quicker than many of my other interlocutors. I remained in contact with Ali through WhatsApp and exchanges of music video links on YouTube while I was outside of Switzerland. At the same time, his temporary permit restricted his mobility beyond Switzerland, making digital communication particularly important for sustaining relationships across borders.

As ethnographers, while we both hold Swiss citizenship, our positionalities differed and shaped exchanges and observations. I (Nina) identify and was identified as a woman and drew on my shared West Asian origins and linguistic knowledge to conduct my fieldwork in Persian. I (Louis) identify and was identified as a white man, conducting my fieldwork mainly in English and French. As a white European citizen, supporter, and researcher, I was often the recipient of narratives of endurance, dignity, and deservingness that inform part of the analyses developed in this article. Gender dynamics also shaped our (online) interactions with participants and are discussed in the analysis when relevant.

Our in-depth comparative analysis of two cases enables us to contrast Uba's trajectory and digital practices with those of Ali. We selected these two cases not because they are representative or statistically generalisable, but because they are theoretically productive. Their contrasting trajectories and (digital) practices allow us to identify recurring processes across otherwise different experiences, making carceral slippages and digital moral labour visible. While neither project was originally centred on incarceration, the relationship between incarceration, legal precarity, and digital practices emerged inductively from everyday interactions. Nina explicitly foregrounded digital media use in her ethnography, whereas Louis did not initially. Bringing these differently oriented materials into dialogue revealed shared dynamics across contrasting (digital) practices and experiences of the carceral web.

Our interlocutors' precarious legal status and the sensitivity of carceral and digital traces required particular attention to iterative consent, identifiability, and sensitive information circulation, which shaped our research practices. Nina respected Ali's wish not to have his interview recorded and took notes during the interview instead, while Uba consented to recording his interview. Furthermore, we removed details that could both further stigmatise our interlocutors and facilitate their identification, such as their nationality.

These precautions extended to digital materials, whose circulation and interpretation raised particular ethical concerns throughout the research. Drawing on digital reflexivity (Khamsy, 2025), we treated online materials as situated within the relationships through which they were produced and interpreted. Because accounts of incarceration were primarily retrospective rather than based on direct observation, we paid

particular attention to what was disclosed, minimised, or omitted. We both kept detailed fieldnotes documenting everyday interactions across sites, capturing (digital) practices unfolding before, during, and after incarceration, even though prisons themselves were not directly observed. Online and offline interactions were not separate but mutually constitutive (Hine, 2015). Facebook and WhatsApp constituted the primary communication infrastructures. We exchanged voice notes, calls, images, and updates with our interlocutors on a more or less regular basis.

For this article, our semi-structured interviews with Uba and Ali focused on their carceral experiences and digital practices in relation to our online and offline field observations. These interviews allowed interlocutors to reflect on digital practices we had previously observed, particularly regarding social media use. We referred to images encountered online during fieldwork to initiate conversations, rather than interpreting them independently of their contexts. These exchanges, rather than the online content alone, constituted the empirical material from which our analysis emerged.

Field notes and (informal) interviews were transcribed and analysed inductively, drawing on constructivist grounded theory. Analytical categories were generated through iterative comparison across our respective field sites, enabling triangulation between observations, narratives, and contexts.

3. Living Carceral Slippages

The trajectories of Uba and Ali through and within Europe reveal how carcerality unfolds beyond formal incarceration through legal uncertainty, fragmented governance, and uneven access to resources. We first trace how these conditions produce carceral slippages. We then analyse three forms of digital moral labour through which dignity, obligation, and personhood are negotiated across transnational relationships.

3.1. Trajectories of Uncertainty and Suspended Futures

After arriving in Italy in 2017, Uba spent a year in an asylum reception centre, where he finally received a temporary resident permit. His compliance with and dependency on the reception centre were perceived by Uba as existentially suffocating. “Just pray, behave well and hope to have good news,” he commented, adding: “You have to endure until your documents come. Then you can liberate yourself.” Increasingly frustrated by this dependency, Uba decided to “find [his] own way.”

Uba’s decision to leave Italy, first for France and later for Switzerland, must be understood against this backdrop of constrained choices. Although formally allowed to travel within Europe for three months as a tourist, Uba remained excluded from formal employment and encountered similar patterns of material precarity: lack of language proficiency, absence of stable work, and reliance on emergency shelters and later on squats. Sleeping in shelters and queuing for informal construction jobs, Uba described feeling trapped in a cycle of repeated failure. It was in this context of prolonged precarity that he eventually turned to street-level cocaine distribution, framed both as deviance and as a reluctant practice of survival in the absence of viable alternatives (Vuilleumier, 2023). Physical mobility thus coexisted with biographical stagnation: Moving elsewhere did not necessarily restore his capacity to move forward.

Following a fight with a client and subsequent police intervention, Uba was arrested and transferred to police custody, where he spent two weeks in conditions he described as "hell." Detained underground, without any furniture, privacy, or meaningful activity, he spent his days lying on the floor, watched constantly, allowed outside only 10 minutes per day, with a provided Bible as his only solace to maintain hope. He commented: "If you stay up to two weeks there and after that you continue with crime, honestly you don't like yourself [laugh]." What he emphasised most, however, was forced idleness and disorientation. According to him, he was not clearly informed of the reasons for his incarceration, the length of his sentence, or the procedures governing his case. "They never explained anything," he said, "they just said I had to go."

His transfer to prison did little to resolve uncertainty over the duration and justification of his sentence (see also Bosworth, 2014), an indeterminate suspension that ultimately lasted three months. Confinement was therefore not only spatial: Institutional time displaced his capacity to know and organise what came next (Carceral & Flaherty, 2022). Yet his later incarceration produced an almost inverted temporal experience.

After a subsequent arrest in 2022, for an "illegal stay" following a territorial ban related to his prior conviction, Uba spent three weeks in a German-speaking Swiss prison, an experience he recalled with surprising ambivalence, and even appreciation. In this facility, he had a room of his own, regular meals, paid work, recreational activities, meaningful relationships with fellow incarcerated people, and a predictable routine. When I (Louis) saw him shortly after his release, in the squat where Uba was staying, I remarked that Uba looked rested. Years later, during an online interview, Uba returned to this observation: "I know it's still prison—you don't have full freedom—but I was more comfortable," he explained, "I wanted to stay more. People laughed at me. Normally, people are happy to leave prison. But I wasn't." He added: "I felt safe….I didn't mind being locked up; I was not even feeling it. We played snooker, tennis, football. It felt almost like home—like we were in [home country]. I was busy. When you are busy, you don't really feel bad." Confinement therefore restricted Uba spatially while temporarily relieving some of the uncertainty structuring life outside.

Uba's experience is striking but not unprecedented. The routines, basic provisions, and relative stability of prison can make confinement a paradoxical sanctuary from precarious life outside (Halsey, 2007), particularly when deprivation stretches across cycles of incarceration and release (O'Mara, 2026). For Uba, this paradox takes a specifically migratory form: What does "freedom" mean when release represents returning to an illegalised existence?

While marked by comparable uncertainty, Ali's trajectory highlights a distinct articulation of carcerality and legal precarity. Ali's journey began in West Asia, in his hometown, where he belonged to an ethno-linguistic group subjected to longstanding discrimination. Having left his country as a teenager after completing two years of schooling, he made his way to Europe at a moment he described as one when "the road was open" (*râh bâz bud*)—when Europe's migration routes were relatively tolerated for those seeking international protection. Ali arrived in Switzerland in 2015, aged 16, alone.

Ali's experience of the arbitrariness of the asylum system shaped his sense of incomprehension: He could not understand why individuals with similar "stories" were granted asylum while others were rejected. During this period, Ali lived in a crowded reception centre for minors and went to the French language learning school. I (Nina) first met him in a French-speaking Swiss city in the early 2020s, through a mutual acquaintance.

Holding an F permit (a temporary permit awarded after a rejected asylum application; see Khamsy, 2025), Ali encountered significant difficulties securing an internship that could eventually lead to an apprenticeship. Nonetheless, he accumulated experience through a series of placements lasting between three and six months in various manual labour sectors, including construction and agriculture. Getting into an apprenticeship training with a temporary residence permit proved challenging, particularly because many employers in Switzerland are unfamiliar with such permits and often prefer hiring candidates with more stable statuses to avoid the potential additional administrative tasks required. Despite this, Ali managed to maintain good relationships with the employers who agreed to undertake the administrative procedures to hire him. He also developed friendships, one of whom I (Nina) met and who spoke highly of him. In this sense, Ali succeeded in building meaningful social networks in the city where he lived, that he could rely on when needed. During this period, however, he entered a phase of frequent nightlife, heavy drinking, and conflicts with other groups of young people. Through a local association, he met a family who became his "godmother" and "godfather" family. They met for regular dinners and outings. When he turned 18, he could move into a flat share and become friends with some of his flatmates.

I remained in contact with Ali over the following years, exchanging messages and links to music videos, even while conducting fieldwork in the Balkans. During one return visit to Switzerland, as we arranged to meet, Ali mentioned that he had moved from his flat share to a "quieter place." The meeting took place at this new location, and only upon arrival did he disclose that he was, in fact, living in a carceral facility. He explained that he had been involved in a fight that had escalated and resulted in his placement there for six months. Ali described his incarceration as "fair," but insisted that migration status made the sanction carry a heavier toll: "If a Swiss citizen and a migrant committed the same crime, the migrant would invariably pay a harsher price." Yet Ali spoke positively about the prison: He was permitted to leave during the day for work (in contrast with those who had no work and had to stay in), and the evening curfew meant he spent most of his nights at the gym. When we discussed this period again in 2026, he described it as a time he had ultimately come to appreciate, a kind of "cleansing."

At release, his relationship with the state remained marked by mistrust. Ali was deeply worried about the impact his prison sentence might have both on his employment and on his residency prospects in Switzerland. He noted that, after several years, the sentence could be removed from his record, yet the uncertainty surrounding its consequences fuelled his anxiety about the future. The sentence itself was known; its administrative afterlife was not.

Across these trajectories, incarceration paradoxically restricted movement while providing routines, material necessities, and temporal predictability often lacking outside, offering an ambiguous respite: a "peculiar kind of sanctuary" (Halsey, 2007, p. 343). Uba's "I felt safe" and Ali's "cleansing" thus point, however distastefully, less to prison itself than to the prolonged uncertainty against which imprisonment was experienced.

Release restored mobility but not control over the future. As Wyss observes of migration governance, opacity can work precisely by keeping people confused and "in a state of ignorance" (2022, p. 106), while uncertainty surrounding detention and administrative decisions makes their timing and consequences difficult to anticipate (Bosworth, 2014), compelling forms of caution and compliance. Uncertainty hence also lay in the connections themselves: whether, when, and with what consequences different institutions and jurisdictions would intersect. It is in these discontinuities of governance that carceral slippages become visible.

3.2. Carceral Slippages and Fragmented Control

During his 2022 arrest, Uba recalled the officers calling a colleague to "check [him] and see the system." The check revealed that he still "owed prison time"—a consequence Uba himself did not understand. He later understood, more or less accurately, that the detention concerned the violation of a five-year territorial ban linked to his previous conviction, which he admitted he had "not read properly." Past sanctions can lie dormant before being abruptly reactivated through routine policing (Brayne, 2021) and, for Uba, the carceral web materialised when an opaque institutional connection suddenly turned his past into renewed incarceration.

After leaving Switzerland for Italy following his second incarceration, Uba remained unemployed for eight months before securing a factory job through a placement agency, despite his expired residence permit. The tax records generated through this employment subsequently contributed to his obtaining a ten-year humanitarian protection permit in October 2024. His two Swiss convictions had therefore not prevented him from securing employment and subsequently regularising his status in Italy.

While Gurusami emphasises the administrative stickiness of the carceral web—particularly the "ubiquitous reliance on background checks as a complication of reentry" (2019, p. 8)—Uba's trajectory reveals how such stickiness may become less predictable across jurisdictions. Swiss and Italian authorities appeared to him to operate in parallel without full alignment, producing uncertainty over whether—and when—his convictions might become consequential. He speculated: "They might know, but they might wait….But if you behave well in Italy, I believe they might put it pending." The apparently tentacular "system" Uba described was thus experienced as pervasive without being totalising. Its connections remained partial, opaque, and difficult to anticipate. Whereas a past sanction had suddenly resurfaced through a police check in Switzerland, the circulation of its traces and its consequences in Italy remained uncertain.

Ali's trajectory reveals another configuration of this uncertainty. Unlike Uba, whose movement across jurisdictions exposed tangible discontinuities, Ali remained in Switzerland but was unaware of whether his completed prison sentence would have further consequences on his temporary status. After release, he worried that his conviction might affect his employment, residence permit, or ultimately his right to remain in Switzerland, reflecting the intertwining of crime and migration control around deportable "crimmigrant others" (Aas, 2011), for whom release from incarceration does not necessarily bring respite from the threat of further sanction (Bosworth, 2014; Wyss, 2022). In this sense, carceral webs could stick, but neither Ali nor Uba could know where, when, or with what effects.

These inconsistencies do not signal the absence of control but its uneven implementation. Carceral slippages did not eliminate risk; they displaced it across institutions, jurisdictions, and time, making its consequences difficult to anticipate. As Uba commented: "There's nothing you can do. You just have to endure until your freedom comes." Such endurance shapes the prolonged uncertainty in which people must orient their lives toward opaque consequences whose timing and outcomes remain beyond one's control (Vuilleumier, 2025).

Carceral slippage is therefore double-edged. Gaps, delays, and partial connections may leave room for manoeuvre; yet precisely because these openings remain contingent, they also sustain anticipation, caution and therefore docility. The cracks in "the system" can be navigated but never controlled. In this sense,

carceral slippages complement rather than oppose Gurusami's carceral web: They foreground the discontinuities through which its "stickiness" is unevenly experienced.

Yet the consequences of this uncertainty are not only institutional. Incarceration and legal precarity also raise relational questions: Who should know, what should remain hidden, and how can one remain recognisable as a respectable son, partner, worker, or future husband when carceral experiences threaten how one is perceived by others? These questions become particularly visible in Ali's and Uba's digital practices.

3.3. Digital Moral Labour: Managing Visibility

Digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook become crucial arenas through which Ali and Uba negotiated the visibility and framing of carceral experiences. Both faced markedly different conditions of digital access during incarceration. Ali, who was able to leave the prison during the day for work, retained access to his smartphone both outside and inside the facility, except during designated "recreation" periods in the courtyard. As a result, his access to digital communication was not markedly restrained, and his face-to-face and digital interactions remained largely uninterrupted. In terms of his digital presence, he did not make any significant changes to his posts.

Yet continued connectivity did not entail disclosure. Ali framed his incarceration through a register of shame, closely tied to his position as a national from West Asia, identified as a Muslim, and to broader discourses surrounding "foreign criminals" in Switzerland. Against this backdrop, Ali distanced himself from those who embraced or displayed their prison experience—"These are the petty thugs." Beyond the legal risk of deportation, what was at stake for him was avoiding the stigma of migrant criminality. He repeatedly emphasised that such an event should not define him, in the eyes of the state and general population, but more particularly for those closest to him.

As we were talking, I (Nina) noticed a scar but did not dare mention it. Later in the conversation, he explained its origins: After injuring himself in a fall on the pavement, he chose not to inform his relatives in his home country, or even his Swiss godparents. "I don't want to make them worry; I think it's best not to tell them," he explained. This logic extended to his incarceration. In his communication with family in his hometown, he routinely withheld information about hardship and everyday difficulties, and even more so about imprisonment, which he considered shameful. In contrast to accounts of communication as emancipatory for incarcerated people (Hartnett et al., 2011), Ali's concealment enacted a form of moral labour through silence and omission.

While the carceral web emphasises the persistence of stigma despite mobility, Ali's case shows how non-disclosure and distance can interrupt its circulation. Self-censorship and digital infrastructures' avoidance might help precarious migrants to evade state surveillance (Nagy, 2024), where disconnectivity can both harm and support (Khamsy, in press). Ali remained digitally connected while practicing selective concealment. Silence was not an absence of relational work: Withholding incarceration allowed him simultaneously to distance himself from the figure of the "foreign criminal," preserve respectability before his family, and shield relatives from concern.

Such silence was impossible for Uba. During his two imprisonments, he did not have access to his phone or social media. Unlike Ali, whose phone access was almost unaltered, Uba's sudden interruption of digital presence and daily posts required him to inform his next of kin in his home country about his incarceration, as he put it: "I told them but carefully." He explained to his mother: "Prison here is normal. In Europe anybody can go to prison. In [home country], if you go to prison, you are a bad person." He added: "I was protecting them." Unable to control whether incarceration became known, Uba instead sought to control what it meant. Presenting imprisonment in Europe as ordinary, relatively comfortable, temporary, and fundamentally different from incarceration "back home," combined with his physical distance, enabled him to normalise incarceration for his relatives, communicate reassurance, mitigate the risk of stigma, and protect both himself and his relatives from shame.

Ali and Uba thus faced opposite conditions of digital connectivity but engaged in comparable digital moral labour. Ali could conceal incarceration and regulate who knew; Uba's enforced disconnection made disclosure difficult to avoid, so he regulated how incarceration was understood and sought to normalise it. In both cases, these different attempts to attenuate the stigma of incarceration (Lambelet, 2025) aim at the calibration of what could be disclosed, to whom, and in what form.

3.4. Digital Moral Labour: Becoming a Better Self

Beyond managing the visibility and stigma of incarceration, digital moral labour also involved rendering a viable moral self visible to others. Posting pictures and short reflections several times daily, Uba described his posts as "a preach": "For example, a friend of mine is married with children and he's cheating. I might post something indirectly to correct behaviour. I am sending a message across, so people can learn and behave." Uba thus described posting as both moral commentary and exemplary practice: "You lead by example." His posts addressed others indirectly, but they simultaneously positioned Uba as someone entitled to speak about proper conduct. Digital moral labour therefore involved not only managing stigma, but making moral personhood visible through the evaluation—and embodiment—of appropriate behaviour.

A few days after he obtained a factory job in Italy, I (Louis) recorded a post in which Uba was wearing his work uniform, lifting heavy materials near a dustbin, accompanied by the caption "working hard." During our interview, I asked him to reflect on this post. He explained: "Sometimes I write messages to show that money is not flowing and life here is hard…people will know life is not easy for Uba, he has a lot of challenges, he is surviving." Elsewhere, he described posting photographs of himself "lifting cartons [cardboard boxes], doing hard work, wearing dirty clothes, close to dustbin" so that distant relatives could "see how [he] struggle[s] here." What seems to matter was not simply communicating hardship but producing evidence of effort. His work uniform, dirty clothes, and physical labour made visible the exertion otherwise concealed by geographical distance. Rather than presenting himself simply as successful or unsuccessful, Uba presented himself as *trying*: working, enduring, and continuing despite limited results. One of Uba's WhatsApp posts featured a grey background with the message: "There is no shortcut to success; it pays to be focused, hardworking, and patient." His posts implicitly instruct others (family members, peers, prospective migrants) about the conditions of life in Europe: Even modest success requires patience. These posts therefore do more than communicate the hardships of migration; they allow effort itself to become visible before distant audiences who cannot observe his everyday circumstances directly.

If Uba made effort and endurance conspicuously visible, Ali's digital practices reveal a different form of moral labour. During his early years in Switzerland, Ali, then still a teenager, regularly engaged in heavy drinking and partying, often broadcasting these moments live on Facebook. I (Nina) occasionally saw his livestreams when he was out. On one occasion, an acquaintance from Ali's home country called him and said "bro, stop," describing this behaviour (filming himself being drunk) as disrespectful. Digital moral labour is therefore not simply a matter of self-fashioning but is negotiated through expectations, judgements, and responses of others. Ali regularly expressed a desire to "go clean," stop drinking and smoking, and pursue a "stable life." Years later, he retrospectively described his incarceration as "cleansing," a period of transformation that resonated with his earlier desire to "go clean." Such reframing is a form of moral labour, through which past conduct is reinterpreted and oriented towards a morally viable future (Laursen & Mjåland, 2025; Warr, 2020), resonating with the rehabilitative ambition of modern punishment to transform the conduct and, ultimately, the "soul" (Foucault, 1979). Yet the paradox is stark: Prison could provide Ali with everyday stability and a narrative of transformation while further destabilising the future into which this transformed self was supposed to emerge. With a temporary permit, the opaque migration consequences of his conviction meant that 'cleansing' could transform the self without dispelling the continuing threat of illegalisation.

3.5. Digital Moral Labour: Caring Across Distance

Personhood was also negotiated through obligations to others across distance. As I (Nina) strolled in the city with Ali during his apprenticeship, he occasionally received calls from relatives. However, his limited income prevented him from sending regular remittances, he explained. He feared disappointing them, as he put it: "A man should care for [*movâzebat*] his family…if he doesn't care he's not a man." Then, perhaps anticipating my reaction as a woman, he quickly added: "And here I mean a woman as well." Yet, his desire to have a "stable life" was inseparable from his ambition to provide for his relatives financially. While his material circumstances constrained his capacity to do so, he attempted to care for them through other means, such as continual communication and shielding them from worry.

Uba confronted similar expectations of provision and commented: "When I send them 10 CHF instead of 50, I want them to understand how hard I work to earn it. I will post pictures of myself doing hard work, wearing dirty clothes so they can see how I struggle here. That way, they appreciate whatever I send them." Making hardship digitally visible allowed Uba to account for what he could—and could not—provide. The dirty clothes, factory work, and physical exhaustion became evidence of care precisely because they demonstrated effort where economic provision remained limited.

Ali and Uba thus negotiated similar transnational obligations through contrasting regimes of visibility. Beyond economic exchanges, remittances and their anticipation are framed as evidence of commitment and care, even when limited or irregular (Vuilleumier, 2021). Furthermore, for young migrants pressured to be "good men" for their family who provided the funds for their journey (Scalettaris et al., 2021), using different channels and accounts enables them to regain control over which audience can see which posts (Khamsy, 2025). With silence, care is enacted through emotional protection: not burdening others, not exposing vulnerability, not transmitting uncertainty.

Uba often posted images of home-made meals, but one caught my (Louis's) attention: a large bowl of richly coloured rice with red oil, topped with assorted meats and fish, with the bold caption "I CAN'T KILL MYSELF."

When asked about this post, Uba described how his digital practices often subtly address his promised future wife as love letters. Using dark humour, this post communicates both the material realities of survival (food as fuel for labour) and the daring of pleasure (the right to enjoy a modest reward after effort), while also signalling readiness for future marital commitments. Uba added: "I posted it to let her know that if she doesn't have the strength to cook, I can also cook. Being a man means responsibility—providing, going outside hustling, paying bills, taking care of your family, behaving maturely." This post expanded Uba's performance of masculinity beyond provision, projecting domestic foresight: To be a future husband was also to care.

Such projections towards marriage and family gave moral direction to uncertain futures. Like Ali's desire for "a stable life" and to "help [his] family," Uba's imagined future as a husband made present hardship part of a journey towards a viable life. Yet these projected futures remained difficult to realise under conditions of legal and material precarity. Digital practices therefore did more than represent who Ali and Uba already were: They helped articulate and sustain who they were trying to become.

Digital moral labour extends beyond self-presentation: It is the digitally mediated work of sustaining and negotiating personhood under continuing carceral and migratory constraints. Carceral slippages produce uncertainties that Ali and Uba cannot control; digital moral labour provides limited means to negotiate how those uncertainties enter their relationships.

4. Conclusion: Carcerality Without Coherence

Ali and Uba's trajectories show that the carceral web is pervasive precisely without being totalising, contributing to a better understanding of prison beyond the most visible and spectacular form of confinement (Foucault, 1979; Gilmore, 2007). As formal sentences extend through a classed, gendered, and racialised carceral web into everyday life, including its digital contexts, our interlocutors' experiences show how hidden sentences of incarceration can also endanger their relationships (Brayne, 2021; Gurusami, 2019; Lyon, 2008). Our (digital) ethnographies of the Swiss carceral context present how Ali's and Uba's digital practices render these relational consequences particularly visible. Their trajectories show that carceral power operates through opacity itself and precarious migrants learn to endure, adapt, and navigate confusing systems, internalising uncertainty as a condition of everyday life.

These observations complicate deterministic readings of the carceral web as an ever-expanding and seamlessly connected apparatus of control. Carceral slippage instead captures the uncertain passages across partially connected penal, migration, administrative, and digital systems. It thus designates neither escape from carceral governance nor its failure, but the uncertainty produced through its fragmented and uneven articulation. Carceral slippages are therefore double-edged: Fragmentation may open room for manoeuvre while its unpredictability sustains caution, compliance and docility.

If carceral slippages identify the uncertainty Ali and Uba could not control, digital moral labour captures the relational work through which they lived with it. Their digital moral labour involves calibrating visibility across different audiences, producing evidence of effort, reframing stigma, and negotiating obligations of care, while working towards viable versions of themselves as sons, partners, workers, and providers. Our analysis focuses on experiences of mobility and performances of masculinity; how carceral slippages and digital moral labour may take different forms in relation to femininity remains an important avenue for comparative research.

From a policy perspective, the central implication is straightforward: Rehabilitation cannot even be imagined while its material conditions are simultaneously withheld. For migrants in legal precarity, release may mean returning to homelessness, restricted employment, administrative opacity, deportability, and fragmented support—the very conditions that undermine the stability rehabilitation presupposes (Lambelet, 2025). Post-release support must therefore address legal and material precarity alongside access to housing, employment, and legal assistance, while recognising digital connectivity as an infrastructure through which geographically dispersed relations of care are sustained.

Carcerality, then, cannot be reduced to incarceration or even to the extension of confinement beyond prison walls. It emerges relationally and unevenly across penal sanctions, migration governance, digital infrastructures, and transnational obligations. Ali and Uba's trajectories reveal a carceral world that is powerful precisely without being coherent: one in which freedom and confinement, visibility and concealment, connection and abandonment continually slip into one another.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the co-produced ethnographic data, they are not publicly available.

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