



Recovery pathways and societal responses in Belgium, the UK and the Netherlands (REC-PATH)

SUMMARY OF THE PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

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“Photovoicing interconnected sources of recovery capital of women with a drug use history.”

The voices of women in recovery have long been absent in treatment studies and addiction recovery debates. Available qualitative research primarily applies interview and focus group methods, but in this study we used an innovative photovoice method to uncover the personal recovery stories and pathways of women with a history of (illicit) substance use problems. The **goal of this study** was to engage with the lived experiences of women who use or have used drugs and to understand what supported them to initiate and maintain change. Eight women who are initiating or maintaining recovery met monthly over a six-month period to select pictures and to share and find common themes, related to facilitators and barriers in their recovery process.

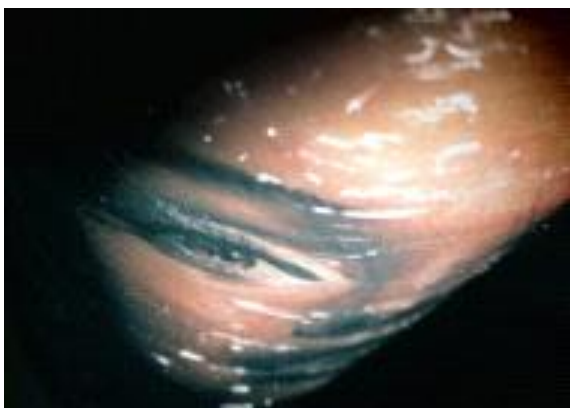
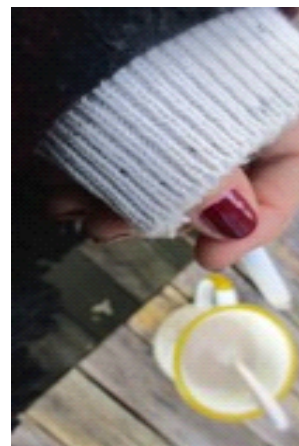
The photovoice project took place from 01/11/2019 to 30/06/2021. During that period following research activities took place: development of the photovoice methodology, recruitment, six group sessions, data-analysis, development of an academic article, development of a photo website, development of a photography book and preparation of a book presentation and/or a photo exhibition.

At the start of the project the research team **developed a photovoice methodology** which translated into a manual for the participants which contained information about the project, photography tips, some tricks and exercises and inspiring work from other photographers and photovoice projects in relation to addiction and recovery. Additionally, the team wrote a working paper on the conceptualization of recovery.

Women were **recruited** from the group who participated in the Life in Recovery survey in Belgium (Best et al., 2018). Only participants who met the baseline eligibility criteria (i.e. being at least three months in recovery, had a primary problem with illegal substances and being at least 18 years old), provided contact information and could be reached for the 12-month follow-up period were eligible for this sub-study. Based on these criteria, 27 women were eligible for the photovoice research. Eventually, ten women (between 25 and 54 years old) provided informed consent and started in the photovoice study. During the project, two participants dropped out due to specific challenges related to their recovery process. Two other participants could not engage in the group meetings. Therefore, we decided – by mutual agreement – to work with them individually. The remaining six women engaged in the group meetings throughout the duration of the photovoice process (six planned group sessions between November 2019 and June 2020).

The project was built on six group sessions. Each participant received a ‘photovoice manual’ and a digital camera, which they could keep after the project. In general, the idea is that the participants make photos that are being discussed throughout the group sessions. The first group meeting had a strong focus on getting to know each other in order to create safety and explore the content of the project. During the first session, participants were asked what brings quality of life

in their current daily lives. This served as a gateway to talk about which factors initiated change in their lives and what supported or hindered them in maintaining change. In the second group session, there was a focus on what supports the participants in maintaining positive change in their lives. This entailed talking about persons, places and activities that were supportive for their recovery process. The following group session started with an introduction to the concept of recovery capital and how it can be connected to their day to day lives and environments. The group was invited to analyse the photos and interconnecting stories together with the researchers. As such, the focus of this session lied on understanding how personal, social and structural elements have an influence on recovery in day-to-day life. The fourth group session continued to build on the same focus. Additionally, we also left space to talk about what factors hinder (maintaining) change. The fifth group session had to be cancelled. The final and sixth group session focused specifically on the topic of gender in relation to recovery.



Data-analysis was performed through inductive thematic analysis. The goal was to understand which dynamics constituted recovery processes in the lives of our participants. A first element of the thematic analysis was that participants were invited during the group sessions to analyse the data together with the researchers. This consisted of sharing the meaning of individual photos, how this relates to other photos or lived experiences and working towards a collective analysis of these photos and topics. A second step in the analysis was undertaken by the researchers. After verbatim transcription of the group discussions and individual interviews, two authors (TVS & JDM) familiarised themselves with the data and analysed the data

(group sessions, individual interviews, photos) independently. This resulted in a text document, including the analytic structure of relevant and recurring topics.

This research demonstrates the interactive and complex dynamics of recovery capital. The different photos and stories show how being in recovery is an intricate web of individual, social and societal (im-)material (in-)equalities. Even stronger, all these elements of recovery are fundamentally shaped by contemporary ideas and expectations about beauty, addiction, woman- and motherhood.

Four themes were identified as building stones for initiating and maintaining recovery:

- (1) (Re-)building me;
- (2) Untangling what is life and what is addiction;
- (3) Becoming (re-)connected;
- (4) (Enacting) perspectives on the future.

The study revealed the methodological potential of the photovoice method for exploring interconnected recovery challenges among women, as well as the destructive impact of negative social norms on women's recovery experiences.

The photovoice project resulted in:

1) **the development of an academic article** (Van Steenberghe, T., Vanderplasschen, W., Bellaert L. & De Maeyer, J. (2021). Photovoicing interconnected sources of recovery capital of women with a drug use history, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*. DOI: 10.1080/09687637.2021.1931033)

2) **the development of a photo website** (www.photovoicingrecoverypathways.com), **a nicely designed photography book** (<https://borgerhoff-lamberigts.be/boeken/recovery-pathways>) and an **ongoing cooperation with Museum Dr. Guislain** to present the photography book and/or create a photo exhibition.