

Recovery Pathways

PROLOGUE

A warm welcome to you!

We're very happy that we can share this photographic adventure with you. Together with eight women in recovery we started a photovoice project on recovery. The main goal was to gain a more in-depth understanding of the day-to-day life of women in recovery. In general, we were interested in what supported or inhibited their recovery pathways. But more specifically, we were very curious about how being a woman played a part, as well as how society influenced these experiences in everyday life.

During our first encounter we met eight individual women curious about each other, the project and us as a research team. Although they each had a different story, they shared a great respect and openness for each other. Initial insecurities about 'becoming a photographer' were slowly replaced by their first shots and experiments to reveal their daily quest for a meaningful life. These first steps we made with the women in participatory photography revealed the power of creating together and turned them from eight individuals into a collective of photographers. Our next sessions together illustrated how photography can contribute to a shared understanding of finding our way in life. Building on this collective authorship was empowering for everyone who was part of it and resulted in a sense of belonging.

This photobook takes you through the different steps of our shared adventure. We start with some background information on the what and the how of the research and some of the central concepts. We also highlight the role of photography and what this meant for our participants. After that short introduction, the stories are told by the photos and quotes. The photobook consists of four big sections which together shape recovery pathways. Each section consists of three subthemes addressing certain challenges or important topics in the daily life of women in recovery. In other words, this book will take you through 12 chapters of lived experiences of recovery.

These 12 interconnected chapters will demonstrate the interactive and complex nature of recovery. The different photos and stories reveal how being in recovery is an intricate web of individual, social and societal (im-)material (in-)equalities. But more than that, all these elements of recovery are fundamentally shaped by contemporary ideas and expectations about beauty, addiction, woman- and motherhood.

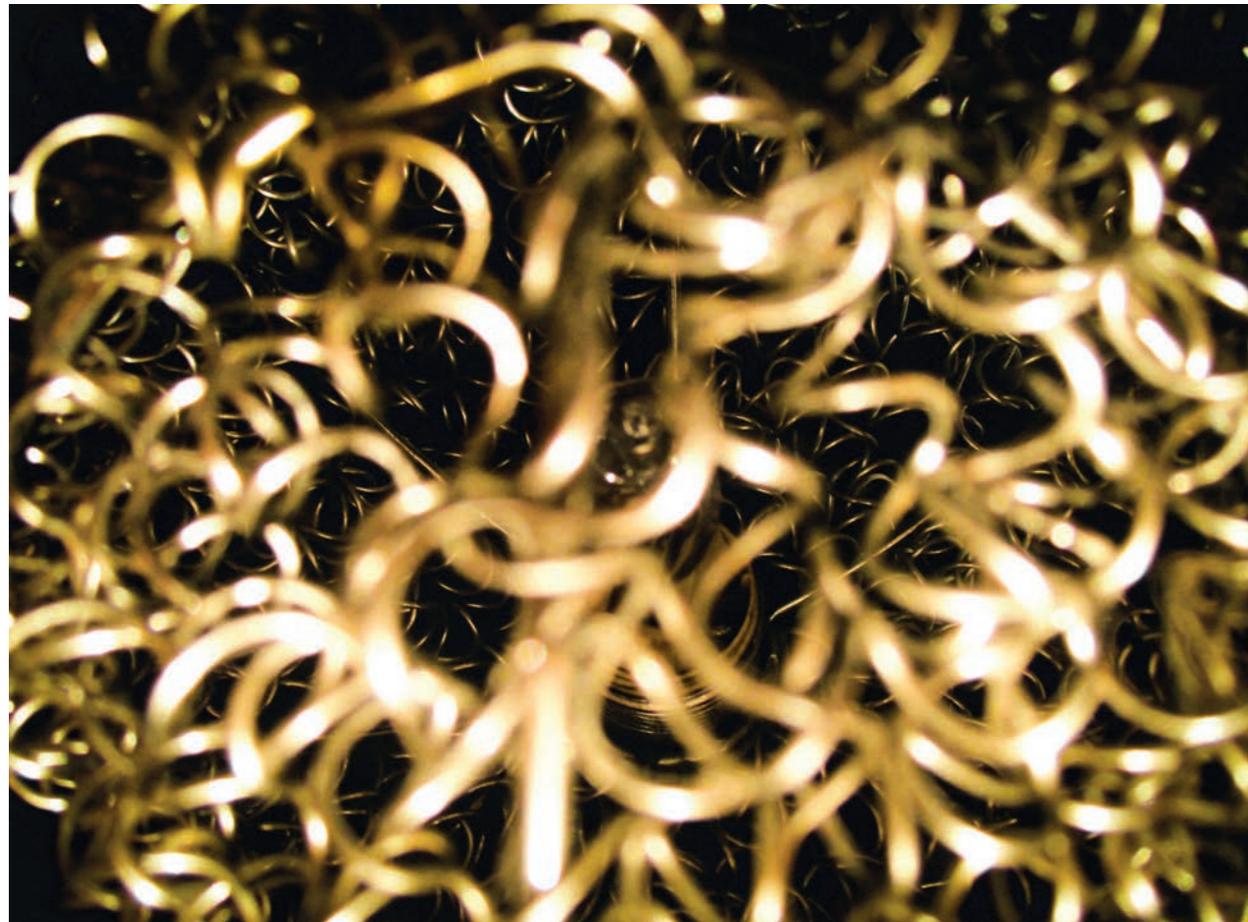
With this project we hope to contribute to the ongoing recovery debate and to a better understanding of what it means for women with a history of drug use to be in recovery. Even more than that, it is a call to society to think beyond stereotypes and to make an effort to capture the complexity of recovery

pathways. We are looking forward to creating an exhibition in the near future together with the women and the Museum Dr. Guislain in Ghent (BE) to give the women the artistic platform their work deserves.

Finally, we want to fully express our appreciation and thanks to all the women/mothers/sisters/daugh-

ters/photographers/illustrators that shared their life histories, struggles and perspectives on the future. As much as this project meant for all of you, it has done the same for both of us.

Tijs and Jessica



THE WHAT AND HOW OF THE RESEARCH

Starting point of the study

The authentic experiences of women who are in recovery are the starting point of this photobook. It is the result of a participatory photo project with eight women who have a history of drug use. This was part of an international study on recovery pathways (cf. REC-PATH). The photovoice project only took place in Belgium and was carried out by the EQUALITY//ResearchCollective.

The EQUALITY//ResearchCollective aims to tackle social exclusion of people in vulnerable living situations. *Human Rights and Quality of Life* are the two central frameworks used in the search to respond to the societal challenge of tackling social inequality and structural processes of social exclusion. The research centre is embedded in the University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Ghent.

Goal of the study

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. Being in recovery is often framed as an individual endeavour where people must regain control over their lives. But recovery pathways are being shaped by complex interacting factors, social and material inequalities that go beyond personal control. An important focus of this study was to better understand how society responds towards individuals in recovery.

Four countries

The REC-PATH project aims to understand variations in recovery policy and practice between four nations: England, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The goal is to support further advancement of recovery strategies and interventions.

The research institutes that carried out the research are: University of Derby, UK; Ghent University, Belgium; IVO Research Institute, the Netherlands; Tilburg University, the Netherlands; University of Manchester, UK; & HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Belgium. For more information on the international project: <https://www.rec-path.co.uk/>

THE CENTRAL CONCEPTS OF THE RESEARCH

Recovery capital

The idea of recovery capital has been gaining ground in the addiction recovery debate. This concept builds on ideas of social capital. In essence, it refers to all kinds of resources that people ‘possess’ or can use to live a qualitative, good life. These resources are for example: the support of family and friends, savings, health, education, community support or specific values and beliefs. The core belief is that individuals who have access to diverse sources of recovery capital are more likely to initiate and sustain recovery. However, there is also negative recovery capital. Those same personal circumstances, relationships, values or material resources can impede recovery processes. As such, this research project taps into the interactive and relational nature of recovery capital.

Gender

Research, policy and practice have long ignored what it means to be a woman in recovery. Recently there has been a growing insight on the gendered nature of recovery and recovery capital. Recent research

shows how female drug users are being ‘conceptualised’ or ‘constituted’ through research and policy, which is full of contradictions. Female drug users are portrayed as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘criminal’ and ‘victim’, ‘enslaved addict’ and ‘free-willed decision makers’, ‘undeserving’ and ‘salvable’, etc. These paradoxes of being a woman in recovery are an important part of the photovoice project.

Photovoice

Photovoice is a research method where individuals take pictures and discuss them in group. The goal of this method is to establish personal and societal change. This is important because some people’s stories are never heard in society. At the same time, people in recovery often experience stigma and a lack of understanding of their unique stories. Furthermore, Fitzgibbon and Stengel (2018) have shown that photovoice can provide ‘an in-depth understanding of participants’ realities’ and their lived experiences and daily situations, relations and activities that constitute addiction recovery.

WORKING WITH PHOTOGRAPHY

Supporting individual expression

Working with photovoice provided the participating women access to a specific form of art creation. This contributed to their feelings of agency, meaningfulness, and expression in their daily lives. Going out to make photographs supported some women in the development of me-time. For others it opened opportunities to (re)connect with meaningful others. At the same time, supporting self-expression through others gave possibilities to reflect on the past, appreciate the present or think about the future. As such, working with photovoice as a research method can support certain aspects of being in recovery.

A creative space

An innovative part of this photo project was the creation of ‘a space’ to not only discuss the content of the photos but also the creative aspects of photography. This was important to engage with the voices, stories and lived experiences of the participants. At the same time, addressing and supporting these women as creators gradually opened up more ways for them to express themselves artistically.

In order to make space for these discussions on content and creative aspects of photography, the sessions followed a specific structure. The group meetings consisted of two parts. The first part of the session focused on selecting photos together and discussing aspects like composition, lighting, texture and use of colour, and how these supported the content of the photo.

In the second part of the meeting, we talked about the meaning of the photos and how this resonated with other photos and stories. This part of the session connected individual experiences in order to create a more collective understanding of what shaped recovery pathways.

The sessions were led by two of our main authors (TVS & JDM) one female and one male, with personal, professional, and academic expertise in relation to photovoice and recovery (Tong et al., 2007). As such, their presence and background was also part of this creative space.

Connectedness in collective meaning-making

The group sessions were crucial to this photo project and brought some interesting dynamics to life. These moments of sharing and meaning-making created dynamics of peer-to-peer support and membership. For some women, it was the first time they openly shared their stories with others (with similar experiences of being in recovery). There were several moments of recognition and mutual understanding which supported women in their own individual recovery process. In other words, through connecting stories in an open dialogue, this project contributed to them feeling connected with others in recovery.



CENTRAL ELEMENTS OF RECOVERY PATHWAYS

(Re)building me

One of the recurring themes throughout the stories of the participants was the importance of (re)building themselves. It connects to the feeling that life is starting to happen after missing out on so much. The participants' stories reveal that creating me-time is not self-evident. It's strongly influenced by self-esteem, socio-economic position, the lens of addiction and ideas about womanhood.

Untangling what's life and what's addiction

Being in recovery can have a double-edged nature. Throughout the stories of the participants, it becomes clear that this double-edged nature is intrinsically connected to the 'lens of addiction'. It opens up questions on what and how day-to-day experiences are connected to (previous) dynamics of addiction. This refers to 'ordinary' moments in everyday life that remind them of their (previous) patterns or dynamics of drug use and/or care and support. To cope with these questions, it's important to share your story. But there are several challenges in relation to womanhood and finding balance in day-to-day life.

(Re)connecting

A challenge throughout many of the participants' recovery pathways is (re)connecting with meaningful others. Their experiences uncover the ambiguous nature of these (un)conditional connections, which can simultaneously have positive and negative meanings. For many participants it's been liberating to experience that some of their life struggles are not exclusively connected to their recovery. Within these experiences, there are however very specific dynamics in relation to womanhood and motherhood.

Enacting perspectives on the future

A final central element in how recovery pathways can take shape, is the 'enacting of perspectives on the future'. The stories of our participants reveal how an important part of recovery is being able to build perspectives on the future and having resources to support them. These perspectives on the future can entail all life domains, from building relationships to having a job, following an education, having affordable and qualitative housing... The stories show how social expectations towards woman- and motherhood influence those perspectives.

(RE)BUILDING ME

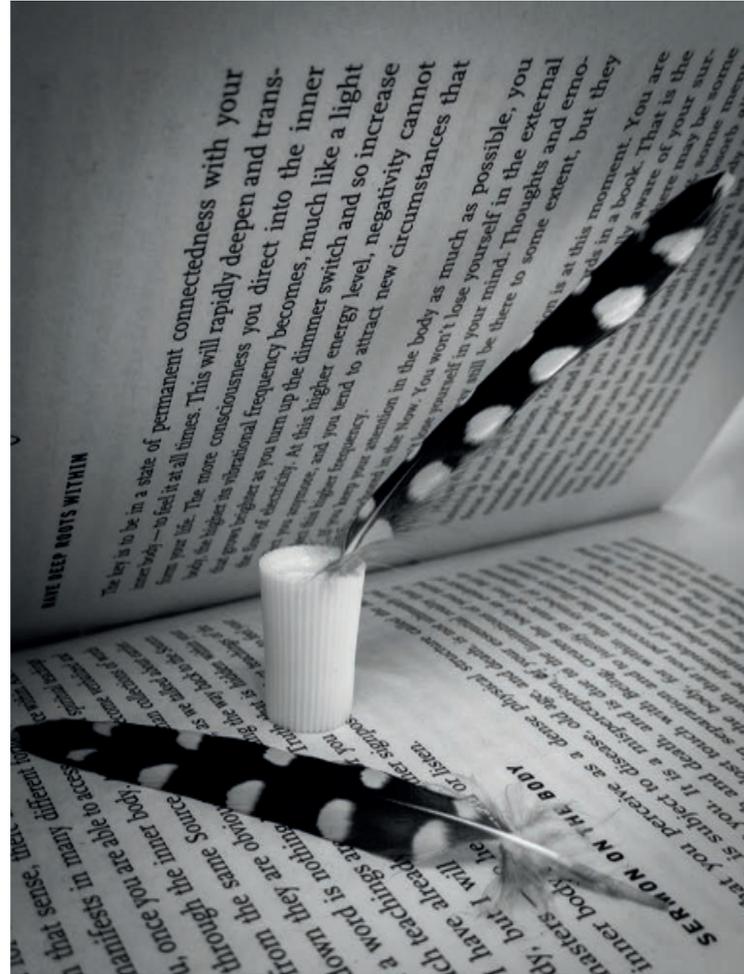
BECAUSE I'M WORTH IT

A first shared element that opened up the discussion about me-time is its connection to self-worth and self-acceptance. An important part of recovery is (re)discovering who you are and who you want to be. The participants call it a challenge to accept a more positive outlook on themselves as an individual when drug use undermined their self-worth. They share the idea that it takes time to (learn to) love themselves again and to feel that they deserve to build the life they want, because they are worth it.

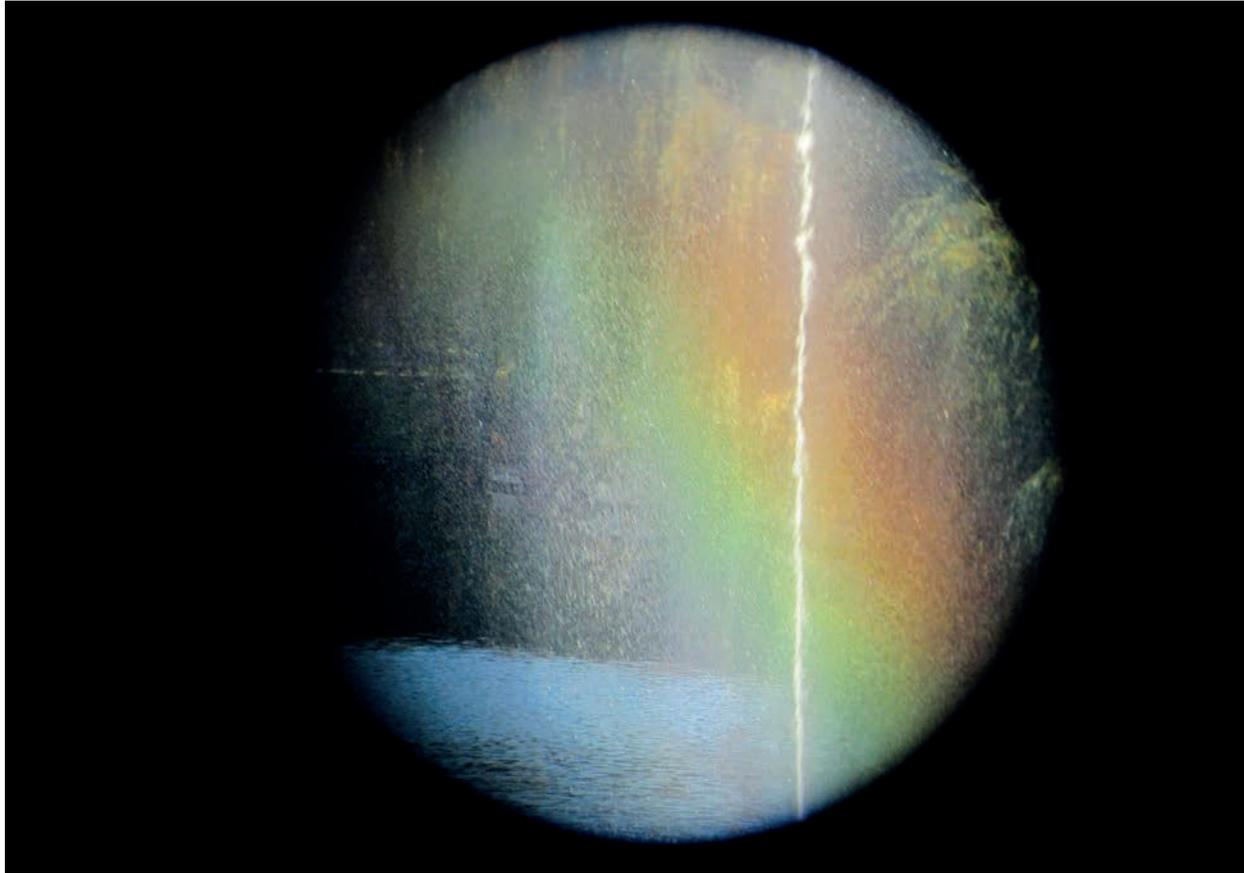
Recovery isn't a 'one pager'

I've learned that everything comes with time and that you have to take time for certain things. Not everything goes the way you want it and then you have to try again and maybe try another time and...

What life looks like is often different from what we desire. It's falling down and getting back up. Sometimes you fall really deep but because of all those experiences you get up faster and faster.



I had very low self-esteem and I was constantly searching for someone else who could make me feel better.



Not everything is black and dark

There is always a dark side to every story, but it can become more lively, beautiful and colourful by giving yourself compliments. If I would have listened to society, I would be an outcast. I don't want to live like that, I keep on seeing the good in everything and everyone. That's how I want to live my life and not through what others want.

I always had a sweetheart to be with.
The first or the best that came my way.
Actually, not the first and not the best,
because I just didn't want to be alone.
I thought that nobody would love me
and then there was 'the evidence'.
He does love me. He didn't love me.
I was just there.

