

“My Life in Recovery” – Experiences on Data on Recovery Journeys of Women Across Europe

Side Event at the 64th Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Tuesday, April 13th, 2021, 10-10:50 am CEST

Organised by: Proslavi Oporavak, HOGENT, RUN, San Patrignano, University of Derby, World Federation Against Drugs, and University of Ghent

UNODC Abstract

“My Life in Recovery” provided valuable insight into research and experiences of women in recovery, emphasizing the importance of gender perspective in future research and services for addiction recovery. Cecilia Hajzler, shared her inspiring personal story on the Photovoice project. She drew a parallel between the theory and practice of the recovery process. Wouter Vanderplasschen, presented the REC-Path research, examined gender differences, recovery pathways, and societal responses related to drug use, showcasing that recovery is built on many layered pieces enabled by experiences and facilitators. David Best presented gender differences in key facets of strengths and barriers to recovery including issues around family involvement and relationships, highlighting that there is a significant gender-difference in the experience of addiction and recovery between men and women. Jessica De Mayer, shared the results on the art-based research, photovoice “Recovery Pathways”, visualising and comprehending women in recovery, while highlighting four themes as building stones.

[Watch the Recorded Webinar here](#)

Introduction

The event was opened by Mulka Nisic representing Recovered Users Network - RUN. RUN is a drug policy platform operating on global levels and which brings together organisations led by people in recovery. RUN aims to raise the voice of the recovery movement, and promote and share the experience of recovery, on both political and practical levels. For more information and membership possibilities, email run@eurad.net

Second, Regina Mattsson, representing WFAD and its Gender Working Group, closed the opening. WFAD is an umbrella organisation of NGOs and individuals across the globe with a joint aim to strengthen prevention, increase access to treatment, and promote recovery. The Gender Working Group of WFAD focuses on the needs and rights of women and children within the field. For more information and membership possibilities, email info@wfad.se or visit www.wfad.se

Speaker 1 – Cecilia Hajzler

Cecilia Hajzler represented ‘Celebrate Recovery’, an NGO established by recovered drug users focusing on prevention, treatment, and full recovery, and presented her personal experience of the photovoice project. Photovoice is a participatory research method which focuses on lived experiences and sharing these experiences through the medium of photography and shared dialogues. It provides the opportunity for a ‘me-time’ and identity change. The pictures and the narratives created are a reflection of personal change and illustrate the way evidence-based research and lived experience of recovery are interlinked.

She perceives the process of recovery as “Two steps forward one step back – Transitions and victories are not accompanied with triumphal ceremonies, pomp, and confetti. They happen slowly, through small achievements in everyday decision making, through vulnerability and loss, falling and rising again, through two steps forward and one step back, through peeling back the layers and hiding again.

And the hope in my heart that one day I will realise that I am a caterpillar who has eventually become a butterfly.”

The photovoice project creatively presents the concept of CHIME (acronym for Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning, Empowerment), originally a concept from mental health, applied to the recovery field by Dr David Best.

The photovoice project is a powerful method that connects research, art, and personal change. It brings understanding of people in recovery and thus helps overcoming stigma. It elevates the cooperation of experts by training and experts by experience to provide service fitted to the needs of people in recovery.

[Link to the Photovoice Exhibition](#)

[Presentation Cecilia Hajzler](#)

Speaker 2 – Wouter Vanderplasschen

Wouter Vanderplasschen presented the REC-Path research where the recovery pathways and societal responses related to illicit drug use is shown. The research focuses on the voices of over 700 people in recovery. The life in recovery survey showed that there are no significant differences between gender in the recovery itself looking at different indicators. A significant difference can be seen in the recovery stage within those indicators.

Recovery is not about turning points or specific events. There are layered pieces of recovery that are enabled by experiences and facilitators. Hitting rock bottom, becoming a parent, starting treatment, being confronted with negative consequences of drug use, etc. can all be an important turning point towards recovery. Yet, facilitating these turning points is as important and the environment around is influential. Recovery is an ongoing process, it is complex, and has many turning points and events.

[Presentation Wouter Vanderplasschen](#)

Speaker 3 – David Best

Recovery research has become established over the course of the last 20 years and we are now learning what influences long-term recovery. Yet, more research will have to be done on the difference between specific sub-populations, particularly men and women, and more non-American (and non-Anglophone) research needs to be established. The research results David Best shared with us, showed that women and men have different addiction experiences, recovery paths, etc. For example, men have more strengths but also more barriers in active addiction. Women, on the other hand, have reversed this situation and so typically report higher strengths and report fewer barriers by the time they reach recovery.

Yet, women typically have a shorter addiction career and are better at health help-seeking in general. However, the actual time of ‘problematic use’ is longer, suggesting a more concentrated period of problems within their using careers. Across Europe, women are less likely to report lifetime use of residential treatment and more women than men have untreated emotional or mental health problems at the time of recovery. Also, women, and these are new findings, are more likely to remain in steady employment, further their education, participate in family events and regain custody of a child than men are. David Best also presented a paper which showed that the different types of relationships matter in recovery. Through relationships, there is a greater increase in strength and a decrease in barriers. A difference between gender and the type of influential relationships has also

been found in the qualitative findings of the REC-PATH study. Men, for example, base relationships on group-member identity and women on dyadic relationships, such as with family and children.

[Measuring capital in active addiction and recovery: the development of the strengths and barriers recovery scale \(SABRS\)](#)

[The Strengths and Barriers Recovery Scale \(SABRS\): Relationships Matter in Building Strengths and Overcoming Barriers](#)

[Presentation David Best](#)

Speaker 4 – Jessica De Maeyer

Jessica De Maeyer presented the photovoice project, Recovery Pathways, as an art-based research method. The project shows the point of view of women in different stages of recovery and sets out to capture and convey the point of view of the person holding the camera. The central aim of the project was to visualise and comprehend women in recovery, how do they experience their recovery pathways and in what way does their personal, social, and community capital initiate or support their recovery process.

It resulted in four themes as building stones.

- Rebuilding yourself
Related to self-esteem and self-acceptance. Recovery is about (re)discovering who you are, who you want to be, and taking the time for it. Socio-economic status and the living situations of women influenced this process. Their stories also revealed how social expectations towards women and beauty (e.g., body weight) and how they express themselves influence their own recovery process and how care and support often implicitly reaffirm these 'beauty' ideals.
- Entangling what is life and what is addiction
Important to see what is ordinary life and what connects to addiction and finding a balance between them. An interesting topic that was addressed by the participants is how the 'perfect' other is seen. However, when the participants start sharing stories about their day-to-day struggles with other persons without addiction problems, it becomes clear that most people struggle with similar issues and that these are part of daily life. Also, it is recognised that structure is important but sometimes becomes a reason for stress. There is the perception that there is no space for error.
Womanhood gets defined by a woman as a mother, even if they are not. There is an underlying idea that if you use drugs, you cannot take care of yourself nor be a mother.
- Becoming re-connected
Connecting and reconnecting with meaningful others. Women experienced that mainstream ideas on addiction are often build on emphasising individual responsibility and blaming those who struggle with substance use problems. In relation with women and womanhood, specific expectations and experiences were shared, such as being looked down upon more by society than men.
- Enacting future perspectives
Include seeing other worlds and the ways to get there, the discussion about the future as a woman. The conversations showed that the environment is very important and that the environment where they have grown up in have been influential in social, cultural, and economic context. For the future. it is often expected to have children, and, at the same time,

mothers in recovery are scrutinised. Also, there is a fear of becoming a mother due to the fear of failure or not being able to handle it.

The results highlight the complexities and positive and negative dynamics of recovery capital in relation to gender and other social structures. Overall, there is a strong interconnectedness gender, socio-economic status, age, and societal values, and expectations.

[Photovoice Video](#)

[EQUALITY//ResearchCollective](#)

[Photovoicing Recovery Pathways](#)

[REC-PATH Project](#)

[Presentation Jessica De Maeyer](#)

Questions

- *Do you have concrete recommendations on how we could incorporate the aspects in treatment design and implementation?*

David: What we are seeing clearly is a strong evidence for female recovery, women do recover and in very specific and distinct ways. There is a need to work on the translation to policy and practice since a gap still exists. Within practical recovery, when looking at the 12-steps group, there is an increase in the demand for women groups. The policy, on the other hand, it is still in the early stage. Overall, there is a need to look at how to translate the science into practice. This is a big issue and needs more attention and thought.

- *How can the recovery community also stand against the stigma and discrimination against people/women who use drugs?*

David: I cannot speak for the recovery community but for myself as a research activist. It would not be my place to comment on your life of life choices and if you use drugs without harm to you and others, they why should I comment. My work is on studying the miracle of recovery and the incredible power of reintegration and community building that I witness every day. Some of this has destigmatising power. I agree that you should not be shamed by your life choices. This seminar is about the incredible journeys that some people have made – not a moral judgement on those who make other choices.

Jessica: We had women in our project who are still using drugs. This was not an exclusion criterion, because recovery is about a process to have a meaningful life again, with or without controlled use of substances. Recovery is not the same as abstinence. Therefore, interventions should focus on a recovery perspective, rather than solely on drug-related aspects.