

REGAL: researching Work-Life-Balance for vulnerable groups



EU Storybook



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1. REGAL: the project- empowering vulnerable women through storytelling

For vulnerable women, work-life balance is a different kind of problem than for ordinary women. Although Europe is indisputably one of the world's leaders when it comes to women's rights and gender equality, the vacuums for underrepresented groups are still there in the current work-life balance legislation. The European Pillar of Social rights however, assures that equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered. Seizing this EU aspiration, REGAL aims to emphasize the need for action towards vulnerable women, already struggling to even get access to the labour market. Once they succeed their entrance into the labour market, their working conditions tend to be often vulnerable and discriminatory practices due to parenthood or pregnancy are often witnessed.

This project aims to raise the awareness for a more specific work-life approach for vulnerable women and will at the same time develop creative approaches to overcome the work-life barriers. This through an empowering participatory approach in collaboration with the vulnerable women themselves.

The NGO partnership in REGAL, with a daily practice of working with vulnerable women offers a wide scope of the target group (being vulnerable women) and of the different situations why these women are/ became vulnerable and experience difficulties and vulnerability in work-life balance conditions: women with low qualifications (BE), sheltered women (IRL), vulnerable women with a migration background (FR), vulnerable women with very low income (PO), vulnerable women living in deserted rural area (ROU).

The main innovative aspect of REGAL lies within its positive constructive nature: through an empowering participatory methodology rebuilding aspirations of vulnerable women in the area of work-life and inspiring with these aspirations employers, trade unions and policy makers, resulting in applicable good practices and policy recommendations.

Through storytelling with an emphasis on coping strategies and aspirations, this participatory method tends to offer positive and constructive solutions for work-life balance in the field of care responsibilities, flexible working arrangements, effective legal protection,... that should end their vulnerable work-life situation.

The REGAL-methodology is based on the findings of Arjun Appadurai. The driver of the methodology is the storytelling. Storytelling allows to decouple the concrete situation of the vulnerable women and the contextualisation of the problem. This allows them to develop a generalization of the specific problems, such as the discriminatory practices, the exclusion from work because they are poor and want to start a family. The storytelling opens at the same time the door for creating aspirations. How do they see the realization of their rights? Through writing or visualizing stories using the structure of "in a far, far away city, ... country, ..." they think about possible and concrete solutions. Solutions not only for themselves, but through the methodology specifically created for their group of vulnerable women.

The different stories are published in this book and can also be found together with the aspirations, translated into policy recommendations in the five different national aspirational books, free available on the REGAL-website: www.regalproject.eu.

Next to the stories, you can also read in the first chapter our interpretation of storytelling and how we used this as methodology for the project. This story-book opens the discussion and the awareness about the situation of vulnerable women who want to start a family or have children.

2. Regal project: introduction to our story telling method

2.1. To tell a story¹

"The researcher does not find narratives but instead participates in their creation"²

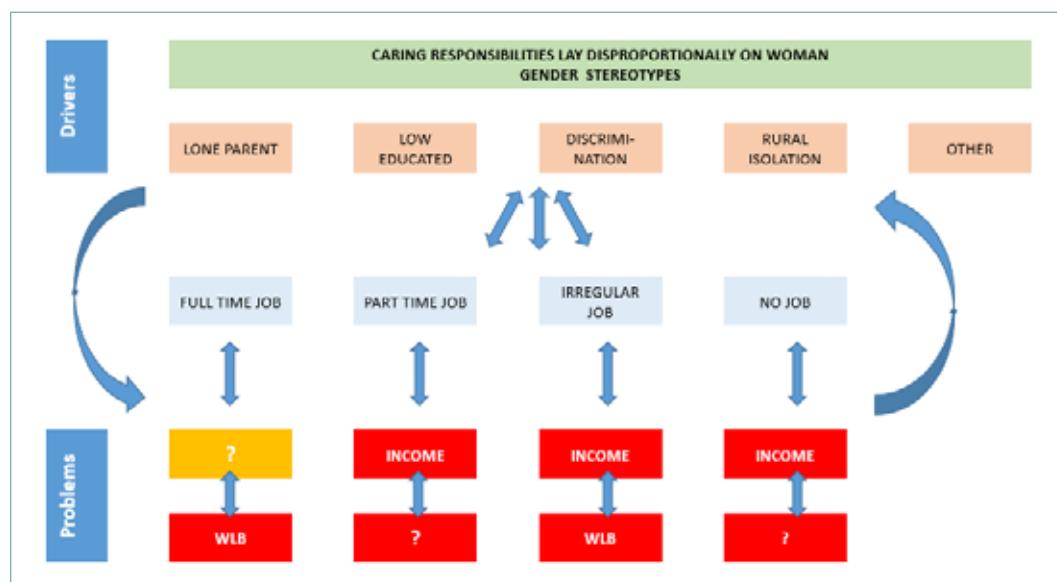
Daily life is an amalgam of several moments, some of which have an importance all their own, some only an importance when combined with other moments, and a lot of moments which are easily forgotten. To give a meaning to these moments, people talk about them. During this telling they link events and ideas about those moments, or reflections on these moments. There emerges a story. Stories highlight these moments which can be linked with other moments, actions, activities, remembrances, places, etc.

Stories are a consequential linking of events or ideas; imposing a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected. The amalgam of facts, deeds, ideas, etc. is unreadable if it is not linked together.

REGAL researches the Work-Life Balance (WLB) of vulnerable women. This research is based on the stories of these women. The stories REGAL wants are constructed: normally these women don't talk unprompted about the links between WLB and their families and their income, for example. At the same time, our method demands that the interviewers go along with the interviewees; we let them talk.

REGAL uses the above scheme diagram to help to broaden the telling. This scheme diagram summarises the relation between Work-Life Balance of a person, his/her income level, job status and some poverty characteristics indicators. All of these elements are necessary to understand the WLB of the interviewees. Using open questions, when necessary, we let the women talk about all of them.

By bringing in these elements via open questions, REGAL hopes that the women begin to link them during the telling.



1. Based on several works

- Catherine Kohler Riessman, narrative methods for the human science. Sage. London. 2008
 - D. Jean Clandinin ed. Handbook of Narrative inquiry. Mapping a methodology. Sage. London. 2007
 - Fiona Whelan, TEN, territory, encounter & negotiation. Dublin. 2014
2. Riessman, 2008, p 21

The link between the moments described above, can be induced by a kind of (a positive or negative) rupture or disturbance in the normal course of events, an unexpected action that provokes a reaction or adjustment. This experience of rupture or disturbance, ... demands an explanation. At that moment there is a need to link all the parts and the storytelling thus begins.

The stories show a kind of rupture each time: the birth of a child, the illness of a child, the illness of a spouse, the loss of a job, the move to another country, etc. They are not always linked with WLB, but they all have consequences for the WLB of these women.

Through the telling the women talk about their vision of their well-being, of their obtained kind of life. To explore this vision further, their obtained kind of life, REGAL uses the Capability Approach³.

The Capability Approach departs/start from the question, 'what has a person achieved in her/his life; what kind of well-being has (s)he obtained?' The result of her/his ambition is what the CA calls 'achieved functionings or to make it simpler, "a kind of life". A person's capability thus represents the effective freedom to choose between different kinds of lives that s/he could obtain and that s/he has reason to value. Vulnerable people don't have much freedom to choose; in most cases their kind of life is a life of dependency, while others are describing what to do and how to live.

These kinds of lives depend on people's resources, conversion factors, individual capacity and the reasons to value a kind of life. Resources can be many things: income, access to social services, access to public transport, (social) housing, etc. Conversion factors refers to skills, talents, handicaps, ambitions, the capacity to aspire, etc., but also to social conversion factors such as the availability of public transport, educational opportunities, etc. and to social and cultural beliefs, ideas, etc.

The intertwining of resources and conversion factors gives people capability sets. The "richer" both are, the more capability sets or possible kinds of life you have: if you develop your talents, if you become skilled, you can develop an ambition and create the conditions for flourishing. An essential conversion factor is the capacity to aspire. The kind of life people aspire to influences their capability sets and their choices.

The interviews showed their obtained kind of life, showed the several elements of their story and the links between these.

A story is linked, or even better, structured. How it is structured depends on the purposes of the story. Stories often serve different purposes for individuals than they do for groups.

Individuals use the narrative form to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain or to mislead. Groups use stories to mobilise others, and to foster a sense of belonging. Group stories are constructed stories, the interaction of different stories. The aim of REGAL is to arrive at recommendations based on a common story or common understanding of their WLB. Group stories or a dialogue to create a common story are the next step.

3. Amartya Sen. A comprehensive explanation of the Capability Approach is found in Sen's Capability Approach | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (utm.edu)

2.2. A story is a second reading and becomes “objective”

A story is a second reading or telling of the experience. The storyteller relives the experience, and this must be considered as truer than the experience itself because it adds to the experience a consciousness of the experience, it adds the linking of the experience with other experiences, etc. The re-living through storytelling is thus a qualitative step further. The story is for the storyteller an enhanced experience and more valuable than the experience itself. It becomes truer through telling the story.

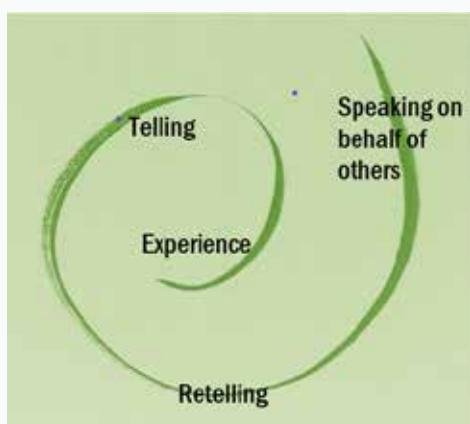
A story thus has an objectivity for the storyteller, although a positional objectivity⁴. People observe from a specific position of observation, or experience from a specific position of experience. What is observed can vary from position to position, but different people can conduct their respective observations from similar positions, even experiences, and make much the same observations. The positional parameters need not only be locational and can include any condition that may influence the observation, the experience, and can apply parametrically to different people. Different types of examples of positional parameters include being myopic or colour-blind or having “normal” eyesight; knowing or not knowing a specific language; having or not having knowledge of particular concepts, being able or unable to count; having or not having experiences; having or not having had an education, having or not having a broad social and cultural context, having or not having enough income, having or not having aspirations, ...

Thus the “objectivity” for the storyteller must be seen as position-dependent: not a “view from nowhere”, but one from a delineated somewhere. Positional objectivity explains why a common story or ground for a common story is (im)possible. To have a common (ground for a) story there must be some similarities in the experiences, the observations, etc ... The positional variability explains why decisions about what and how a story is told are made.

4. Sen A. Positional Objectivity. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. 1993

2.3. From an individual experience to a common story

A story starts with an experience: an experience that is worth telling. In the telling the person relives the experience. The story is always told to someone, an active listener; s/he can ask questions about the experience, s/he can describe similar experiences, etc. Through this dialogue new ideas can emerge and grow ; a conclusion about the experience(s) can be drawn.



This feature of the process of telling, leading to a conclusion, can now be used to create a common story and an enrichment of the storyteller and the listener.

REGAL starts with simple interviews⁵, just listening to the women. In the telling, stimulated by the open questions, they create a story. The interviews are then transcribed. We use a more literary form of transcribing, omitting hesitations, repetitions, or unnecessary side stories. Subsequently, the transcribed interview is shown to the interviewees in order to discuss the transcription. The interviewee is master of her story: she can change the story, omit some parts, or

stress other parts. She can rephrase some parts. This rephrasing enriches the text so that it looks more like a narrative.

Finally, she must approve the text in its entirety, and give her consent to especially the its use.

This approved, rewritten text can now be used in a group session to retell it to other interviewees. The purpose is to find common elements, common ground between the different stories. The retelling also creates a common ground, a common position between the women. They hear in each others' stories some similarities, but even in the differences you can find something in common.

The retelling and the dialogue sessions should now enhance the women: they feel they are not alone. People are standing behind them. They can all speak on behalf of the other women depending on their capacities.

This retelling creates a common positional objectivity. It creates common ideas about WLB. From this point on REGAL wants to stimulate their aspirations.

5. See also the paper on the methodology of REGAL on www.regalproject.eu

2.4. The relation between story and voice: the capacity to aspire

A story can be used to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain or to mislead. Groups use stories to mobilize others, and to foster a sense of belonging. A story told with a goal to change, to respond or to confront is a manifestation of the capacity to “voice”.

Hirschman⁶ defined “voice” as an attempt to repair or improve through communication of the complaint, grievance or proposal for change. “Voice” refers to any attempt to change, rather than escape from, the dissatisfying situation. Voice can be constructive response, such as recommending ways to improve the situation, or it can be more confrontational, such as by filing formal grievances.

“Voice” is a cultural capacity. It is a capacity to engage in (social, political, and economic) issues in terms of metaphor, rhetoric, organisation, and public performance that work best in own cultural world. To have a “voice” depends on the resources and the conversion factors described above.

The capacity or “voice” is connected with the “capacity to aspire”⁷. To aspire is to explore a future, a kind of life you aspire to, and to share this view (in a story). With this capacity you use the norms and axioms that exist in your society to explore this future, the possible kinds of life, frequently and realistically. The problem now is that this capacity is unequally divided among the population; the poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures), have a more brittle horizon of aspirations. The other members, precisely because of their opportunities to practice, have a broad horizon of aspirations and have the possibility to realise these aspirations, to build the world on their view of the future and to influence the existing norms and axioms. Their enhanced capacity to aspire enrich their capacity to “voice”. They have more responses, more recommendations to change, more ideas about change, ... they have also the metaphors, the rhetoric and the organisation and the public performance.

Otherwise, the poorer are caught in a situation where triggers to this positive acceleration are few and hard to access, the less they have “voice”. To be voice-less is equivalent to not being able to change the situation in where one lives, not being able to see another kind of life, or to choose another kind of life. Voice-less people don’t have the freedom to act or to bring change to their own situation. “Exit” becomes the normal.

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6. Hirschman, Albert (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Harvard University Press. pp. 176
 7. Appadurai, A., 2004, ‘The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition’, in Rao, V. and Walton, M., (eds.) *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, California, pp 59-84.

2.5. To enhance aspirations

The capacity to aspire is related to the position people have in society. Vulnerable women, because of their limited capabilities, have fewer aspirations and at the same time less voice to change their situation. REGAL starts from the assumption that by enhancing their capacity to aspire they will have more self-confidence and more “voice”. In this, stories play an important role.

REGAL uses stories as a medium to talk about the conditions that make a certain kind of life possible. REGAL wanted to look for unrealised possibilities, to examine new possibilities, to open an imaginative space to identify alternative ways of life. Stories could play a role in opening this imaginative space, the foremost aim not being to reproduce reality but to actualise, to enrich, to transform and to explicate it, to bring meaning into being in such a way that another world is made visible.

REGAL demanded to move beyond telling schematic stories, of the sort we have heard many times before. REGAL tried to push the vulnerable women beyond their daily life.

The women showed a kind of fatalism; one of the sentences we regularly heard during the interviews and discussions was: ‘this is life’. Overcoming this common “this is life” attitude and to overcome the consequentially limited aspirations was a challenge.

The retelling of the first story, the dialogue that follows the retelling, the view of other realistic ways of a WLB must, and this was the assumption, open the imaginative space. REGAL asked the women to think about a possible kind of life, more specifically a realistic but imaginative WLB.

REGAL wanted to use the format of a fictive story (written or oral) that can help them to imagine another WLB. The rewriting promotes space for knowledge and for empowerment.

But as Appadurai showed, everyone is limited by her/his conditions to aspire. The ambition of REGAL was that these women really surpassed their daily life but at the same time remain realistic. Their stories must start from their daily conditions and try to seek solutions beyond these daily ones. To help and to create the conditions to surpass themselves REGAL used telling rounds with the group. Questions about their daily lives could be used, items from their home that have something to say about them, creating a fictitious life (dressing a doll with words), using pictures from newspapers, etc. ...

With these group sessions REGAL has the aim to create an atmosphere, a group-feeling of creativity, by asking women to challenge one another. The result is a common ground for realistic WLB solutions vulnerable women are looking for.⁸

8. The group sessions were foreseen in spring 2020. COVID and the lock down measures have put restrictions to working in group. The results are despite these restrictions interesting, however the full potentiality of the method was not reached.

3. Stories

3.1. *What women say*

Romania

*The power is
in you woman!*

Discover yourself!



“Sacrifices, out of love” by N.D.

Autumn.... October 9, 2013.... What a wonderful day! My husband is coming home from Germany. My four-year-old boy and I are looking forward to seeing him again. I am on prenatal leave and I am going to give birth a second time. It was hard without my husband, but now I feel that everything will be fine. He was missing for three months. Three months in which he worked hard, far from us, for money, because he could not find a job in our country. If everything is in order, he should be home by October 10, in the evening.

October 10, 2013.... It is 7 o'clock. I am getting ready to make breakfast for my little boy and take him to kindergarten. But plans are changing. I need to get to the hospital urgently. The little girl is coming!!! What happiness! All four of us will be a happy and fulfilled family. I was the happiest person on Earth. I gave birth to a beautiful and healthy baby girl. Me with the girl in the hospital, the husband and the boy at home. On Saturday, October 11, the “boys” came to see the “girls” at the hospital. Joy!!!

I thought the sun had finally risen on my street. With the money earned, my husband was going to buy the long-awaited car that was so necessary to the family, especially now that our family had grown up. But it wasn't like that. When my husband came to visit the hospital to see us, I noticed that something was wrong.... he was very weak and changed. Of course, he told me everything was fine, he's just tired from the long road. I knew and felt that it was not good. When I got home after about 4 days, I found him in bed, very weak. His back hurt a lot. He had a herniated disc due to excessive physical work (in Germany).

Everyone said it was an increasingly common disease in the XXI century and that we should not worry. But how not to worry?! You can just pray and hope it's okay. Visits to various doctors began, hospitalizations, recoveries. I was hoping he would pass without surgery. I at home with two children (the one-month-old girl and the four-year-old boy), he in the hospital. He did not escape surgery. The hard-earned money went to treatments, surgery and recovery. Not being employed in Romania, he had no insurance and we had to pay everything (treatments, hospitalization etc.).

We kept wondering if it was worth this decision to go to work abroad, and if not all our sacrifices were in vain. But at that time, we did not seem to have a better alternative. Being a graduate of the agro tourism management specialization, when he graduated, my husband tried to find a job in the field, close to home. He searched for 6 months but the offers he had received were 60 km from home.

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We thought then to transform our house into our own agritourism pension but our enthusiasm was quickly extinguished by bureaucracy and the multitude of documents required for accreditation. The house also required an important rehabilitation and we could not afford this investment from our own funds at that time.

Eventually, my husband got a job as a substitute teacher at a high school with a nearby tourist profile. I also worked in education and at that time in education the salaries were very low. Our salaries barely covered food, clothing and monthly bills, living a modest life. We could not

save money in any way to invest in renovating the house. The prices of the necessary materials and labour were the same as in the West, but our incomes were 10 times lower. That's why, when the opportunity arose to go abroad to work and earn in a month or six in Romania ... the decision was not long in coming...

I accepted that it was the best decision at that time and that we have to get over her husband's illness. Time passed. The husband was recovering. He was not allowed to make an effort for at least a year. We had to manage, to have a decent life. We were four people with the money from parental leave and child allowance. I don't know how much it was then, but of course the money was not enough. We also got to have debts to relatives.

One day, the husband receives a phone call from work in Germany (at a vegetable cannery) and is asked to return because they needed labour force. He politely says he can't come back because he's sick but the bosses ask him to send some seasonal workers. The difficult situation I was going through then made me make a sudden and very difficult decision for myself: "I am leaving in your place!" It was a desire and personal initiative, the only way out of the crisis at that time but a difficult moment that I will not be able to forget. I had to suddenly leave my 2 children, the little one still breastfed and next to whom I had not left even for a day and to go away for a few months, in an unknown place, without knowing what I had to do and without knowing a word in German.

At home, in Romania, I couldn't find jobs or if they were, they were very poorly paid, so I left. I left with 3 more people from the locality with some clothes in my luggage, a list of important words made by my husband (it didn't take too much because there was a lot of work and there was no time to talk) and with a dictionary and a lot of soul, a lot of sadness. That's how I got to work in Germany. I worked for three months as a seasonal worker in a cannery. My parents helped me a lot during that time taking care of my children. I can't describe in words how hard it was for me, as a mother, away from the little ones! Now that I think about it better... I don't know how I was able to leave ... I am comforted by the thought that in the end everything was fine.

If there were jobs in our country, many mothers would not have to go through such moments. I'm not saying that children suffer the most in such situations. Now ... Thank God! My husband has two jobs, I work too and that's the only way we can handle the expenses. The boy is a student and the girl is in high school!

In order not to end up in situations like this, I pray that we are healthy so that we can help the children and ourselves.

Now, after 15 years, I find with regret that mothers still leave their children for more or less time but if in your country you do not have the opportunity to earn a decent living for the family then you leave, work abroad, suffer...

"The power is in you, woman! Discover yourself!" by S.L.

I was young, or, anyway, I was about 35 years old. I had managed to gain some life experience, because until this age I finished school, I had a job, which gave me some satisfaction, I had started a family, I had made a house and last but not least, I had a special child. According to the Romanian prejudices, I had made a house, planted a tree and given birth to a child! Seen from the outside, I had an ideal life, if I were to relate to the environment in which I live, in a rural mountain area.

However, I had a lot of desires that I could not fulfil. Of course, the financial part was the main impediment. That's why, driven by the urge to have more and the ambition to prove that I can, I launched into the business world. More specifically, I opened a mixed store in my hometown and as my husband's profession did not allow him to do business, I got involved in this activity.

I made this decision with the consent of the whole family, who were delighted and decided to get involved and support me.

Without knowing what I was getting into and without any notion of management, I woke up "overnight", a company administrator and saleswoman during the summer (because time allowed me to do this).

I had started to learn to complete accounting documents, to work with distributors, to deal with the supply and why not, to argue with customers who did not understand that they had to pay for the goods purchased. It seems strange, but having a small store, in an area that is not very commercially attractive, a large part of the sales went "on debt, in the notebook" until the customers received their pay checks. Unfortunately, it took some months for some to remember to pay off the debts accumulated at my store.

However, I also had advantages. The material situation of the family had grown significantly and each member of the family felt this change in a better way.

I went after the goods and often the personal consumer basket was as full as the one for the store. We went on vacation, without having to fit into a specific budget, we bought all kinds of things that we didn't necessarily need.

In other words, the whole family benefited from this new activity. I was appreciated at work, I was respected in the community and I tried to behave normally, without showing that "I am rich".

I thought our lives changed for the better, but one day I realized that this was not the case for me. I was starting to get busier, more stressed, more tired and I didn't have enough time. This happens when everyone knows you can and they have high expectations. You can't compromise on quality, neither in family life, nor in professional life, nor as a mother, nor as a wife, nor as anything because you risk being replaced. My husband also helped me with some activities, but the burden was on my shoulders, the child being too young to help me.

At work I had to be at least as good as before because it's hard to get up, but it's harder to stay at the same level. At home I had to fulfil the responsibilities of a housewife, which are not few: food, cleaning, washing, ironing etc. As a mother, I had to take care of the child: education, time spent together etc. I also had the role of wife, but I think I neglected it the most.

In addition to all this, the controls from the authorities started to appear in my small shop, which often came as a result of complaints, more or less well-founded, due to people's wickedness.

I had become a robot, planned by the hour and who had to work at maximum intensity to fit in time. For a long time I worked like this and I found that we were more and more unhappy. Revenues had started to fall and we could see from one month to the next that the income/expenditure ratio was no longer balanced. Taxes and fees on the state have increased and I can even say that they have become a burden for my small business.

Moreover, my husband felt lonely, neglected, and blamed me. He had begun to seek his happiness in other things. He was away from home, preferring to spend time with friends. He had made all kinds of friends, which I didn't like. There were people with nothing in common and not agreeing with his new lifestyle, even quarrels began to arise between us.

On the other hand, the child felt free. He had no one to control him, no one to keep him short, and he found refuge in computer games. He lived in a world of his own. He had become, I might say now, addicted. He was no longer that conscientious child.

I felt like I couldn't handle the situation anymore. I felt like I was getting out of control... I used to be in control of everything. Many times, having no one to complain to, I asked God to work a miracle to change my life. But I understood that His plans did not coincide with my plans and that the help requested was delayed. That's why I was looking for solutions.

I hardly realized that I am the only one who can help me: I mean "Help yourself"!

I needed that dose of lucidity and objectivity to figure out what to give up. It wasn't so hard to be aware of, but any decision I made has made me feel ashamed that I couldn't. After realistically evaluating the situation, because it was no longer profitable, I made a difficult decision to give up the company. I admit it wasn't easy for me at all.

We also made a family council to consult, to make a decision together. The family's reaction was not what I would have expected. I wanted him to agree with me, to really understand the situation. But they perceived this decision as a punishment, as if I had stood in the way of their happiness. Finally, they told me to do what I wanted. They did not come up with other concrete solutions, leaving me to find solutions and make a decision on my own.

I tried to identify a guilty person in this whole problem. You are generally looking for guilty persons on the outside. Everyone is guilty, except you. Blame the system, the others. Now I think I was partly to blame. My fault was that I wanted too much and out of the desire to prove that I may not have assigned responsibilities to everyone. Now that's it!

It was harder, or just as hard, for me to relearn to live in other conditions. I woke up that I had time, maybe too much and I didn't know what to do with it, what to fill it with. So, finding nothing at hand, I went back to my old habits. I started learning. That's what I knew how to do best. I enrolled in a master's degree and at the age of 46 I was a recent graduate.

But I woke up alone. The child grew up and, in the meantime, had finished high school and was a student in Bucharest. He came home during the holidays. I realized that I had lost perhaps the most beautiful moments of his life. I realized that at the end of my university studies I will stay in Bucharest. And that's how it was.

I woke up with a husband I didn't have much in common with. I tried to accept the man as he is, I struggled to regain him and I had to make some compromises. I didn't succeed at all, but I admit that we have a decent life and a stable relationship.

So... I adapted, I say. Man is the being who adapts perhaps the easiest. What I learned? I learned that in life you can't have them all and that's why every person has to make a hierarchy of his own needs, ideals. To know what you really want.

I learned that you have to make sacrifices, that you have to weigh the desire very well, to figure out if it's really worth it or not.

I have learned that man does not change for your sake, no matter how hard you try, as long as he feels good as he is. Change occurs when it comes from within one's own being.

I learned that nothing is impossible, or almost nothing, only that for that you have to fight, to sacrifice, to work because nothing is offered to you on the tray.

I understood from my own experience, the reality of the proverb "Be careful what you wish might happen." It's just that, I would add, your desires are fulfilled much later and then you may not enjoy them anymore, or you may not need them anymore.

I understood that every stage of life has its advantages and disadvantages and that at a certain age, the only advantage is maturity in thinking, life experience and wisdom. Unfortunately, this does not apply to everyone.

I learned to be content with what I have, which some time ago seemed inconceivable to me and that happiness lies in small things, as long as your other basic needs are met.

Without being considered immodest, I have learned, or proved to myself that I can, that I am valuable, and that I need to appreciate myself more. I learned to respect myself! And yes, if I were to start over, many of the things I did, I wouldn't do.

"Closer to Heaven" by M.D.

If you put God in the beginning, you'll be happy until the end!

What beautiful is the beginning of any story...! Each of us have our own story, the story of our life, with good and bad, with ups and downs for so is every man's life.

My story begins so: We are a simple family, with fear of God, composed of 4 members. I live with my husband and our two children in a mountainous area with nice hardworking people, with still alive ancient traditions and touristic attractions.

In our culture, to have your own house is not only a dream but mainly a must that why, several years ago we started to build a house with our own low resources.

After marriage, we lived for some years in the husband parent's house. There were good living conditions but I didn't had the freedom and independence that would be provided by my own home. I think that I have been the one that wanted more a house and slowly, talking with husband we have decided that a new house of our own is the best solution for us. As I was expecting a child, I had no job that time. In fact, the arrival of the child made us hurry to start building the house.

Because the places of work in our area are few and my husband didn't have a stable working place, we decided that is better for him to leave the country for working abroad, with hope in better and to finish soon the project that we have started.

My husband found a job abroad due to the help of a friend. Abroad is not easy for Romanian workers. Usually, they have low qualification that's why they do hard works mainly in constructions or agriculture. Also they work in difficult conditions. When said conditions I mean both in terms of work, outside, on any weather but I mean also the conditions of living. In order to be able to make more money aside, workers are gathering more in the same accommodation for

sharing costs but making the cohabitation more difficult. It is important to have people that you know and have good contacts because otherwise can arise often all sorts of conflicts. It is hard also with the meals. If at home my husband was accustomed always with warm food, varied food meals, working abroad he couldn't benefit from the same alimentation conditions. Rarely have time to prepare himself warm variated meals and for many times, on the run, served only sandwiches and even cheap food category.

Even if often husband and other compatriots work a lot they are paid under the native workers. It is difficult and complicated not to have the dear ones close, longing for the loved one is even greater but we do not have another single option right now.

This was a hard decision that involved a sacrifice from all of us. Missing the children, the family, thinking at your native place, longing for "home" this are the consequences that we all have to bear being especially more difficult for the one that is away, alone. We have luck of technology, internet, phone for that we are able to communicate quite often, we advise each other and we relieve longing. We are together in prayer and in thought.

I'm at home and I'm a housewife. Although I have no job, I cannot say at all that I do not work. I am in the first row a mother and this thing takes much time to cook, wash, iron and to take care of the education of children (homework, free time, go to church). In the same time I am farmer and the garden and animals we have provide for us a good part of the needed food, a fresh and healthy food. I am also taking care of everything that involved the works for our house: employing craftsmen, supervision of works, negotiate prices and payment. My husband sent money through bank on a card, and I was empowered to account and manage costs. This makes me also the accountant of the family. When my husband sees that things go well at home, that money are spent wisely, he has confidence and courage to continue working on. The monthly salary from abroad allows my husband to ensure a decent living for himself, also for myself with children at home and we succeed to put some money aside for investment in housing.

We sustained each other in good or difficult times and we continue to do so. There are already some years of living in this way and for several times we said: "Ready! That's the last time you go away!". But it seems like always appear new challenges, new things to solve and realize. Maybe we are somehow used to live so... maybe we wish too many things...

I look with concern around, to our village and I cannot wonder: What can my spouse do here to earn an income? Where can he find work day by day?... I have no answer... Maybe there, in government, they will find solutions to bring us the fathers, husbands and brothers back home.

However, we step in with confidence and the hope that the dream of having our own house will be ready soon and that we can provide support for our children in future. In any imbalance we must be united, support each other, communication and trust between partners of life is crucial and with the help of God, with patience and hope we can achieve a lot in life.

"Between job and mother's duty" by B.S.

It was the beginning of a warm and rich autumn. The fruit-bearing branches of the apple trees hung so low that they almost caressed the earth. The orchard sounded of the coloured voice of my 2 years old daughter, happy to run and to pull the tail of our neighbour's old cat.

Amira, a name inspired by the Jewish religion, proposed by my mother-in-law who worked in Israel for many years, means leader and translates as “tree top” but also by voice. Amira, usually called Ami, is definitely a voice and a born leader. It is a cheerful child, active, always put on joke and childish things that has big blue eyes, which made me to forgive her, almost every time, after a punishment of her silly things. She was a delicious little girl with whom I had to be very patient since she was born, with a natural contrasting character swinging between ambition, boldness and sensitivity, shyness. Despite having a complicated nature, after you begin to know her, it is a real pleasure to interact with her.

That autumn day, I was dearly watching the play of the two “kitten” and I thought with regrets that the next day I had to go to work for a time that seemed infinitely long (24 hours) without my little one.

In the night that followed, Amira didn't have a peaceful sleep, as if she didn't find her place beside me and I became agitated, permanently watching her, to see what she was transmitting in its sleep. In the morning I barely got out of my bed with the feeling that I have to stay with my daughter. But finally, I thought, that however all is well and that just the mother instinct is giving a wrong idea.

I kissed my daughter's forehead, I left on the nightstand beside her favourite cup with tea and hardly have started to go to my working place. On the way, I kept thinking as a mother and nurse, about the way it manifested overnight and when I reached work, the first thing was to tell the doctor I was working with, my fears. She tried to reassure me especially that my daughter did not show any serious symptoms, but waiting to see the evolution. Taken with the job duties and after talking to the doctor, I calmed down and even forgot about my worries.

The working day was as usual, without end... The 24 hours shifts, always full of emergency, because that time there was no emergency line as 112, and all that was happening in the village: accidents, crises of asthma or epilepsy, children with all sorts of ailments, crossed the threshold of the office where I worked.

After 10 eventful hours of work, I received a phone call from my mother-in-law, that took care of my baby while I was gone, that firmly told me that my daughter felt sick, with fever and vomiting, and that I should do anything to come home because she didn't want to assume for a single minute the care of a sick child. Panic has installed in my mind, and also the frustration that I am not near to my child when not feeling well.

Without to sit too long on thoughts, with the risk of being fired, I phoned the lady doctor and told that I must leave the working place, to be along with my child.

I started down by foot because that time I didn't had a personal car and no other means of transport were easy to find. It was like my feet had wings, for that I reached the 1.5km distance in no time to be near my daughter.

Arriving near my little one and looking how she kept her eyes hardly opened, as neither had the power to tell me what was the pain, I was like having forgotten everything I learned in healthcare classes that could help me that moment. And if in the medical cabinet I could deal with serious medical problems for the people, in that moment I was just a scared mother with a sick child. But I mobilized. I prepared a new one tea, I took her out of the bed and put her to walk while I was telling her little stories about her preferred pets, about games. I managed to make her eat some soup and she managed to sleep quietly in my arms. I stayed beside her until the next day when was obvious that her state improved.

I was lucky that the lady doctor understood the situation occurred and why I had to leave from the place of work mainly that in the night haven't been requests of services.

In order to not repeat the panic episode, I have taken all the measures of precaution and safety of health. I stocked the cabinet with drugs of strict necessity, I tried to call more often at home to check the state of health, my husband understood that I couldn't always be near the baby because I didn't have an easy job and in my full working days, when time allowed, he passed on at home to check for the situation.

Today, things have changed a lot compared to that day. I have a car and, in the village, there is a taxi service that might allow to get more quickly at home. All members of the family have mobile phones so that we can communicate fast, even by broadcasting live, for to see a particular problem. The emergency line 112 allow fast medical services access. There are legal stipulations with regard to the granting of leave to care for a child sick, but they are referring mainly to the situation of serious disease or disabled. For one or two days of care for child at home is important to receive the employer's understanding and to establish the way in which can be recovered or compensated the missed work hours.

3.2. What women say

France

*About trajectories
and expectations*



Adele

2015. Following the family reunion process, Adele joined her husband. Three weeks later she was pregnant of Gabrielle. Her first year in France was therefore completely devoted to her future maternity.

When I started to look for a job, I was immediately confronted to the problem of modes of care.

At the city hall they said: you must have a job in order to get a place in a childcare center.

At their turn employers said: you must have a place at the childcare center to get a job.

I've been obliged to hand over my child off the books during six month before getting that through. Once Gabrielle was in a childcare center, I worked as a school aid assistant and also resume my school life in order to work in the sector of handicap.

It was very difficult to harmonize household life, lessons reviews, homework, to enjoy myself when trying to get good marks during my training.

We are four in an apartment of 24 meters square. In addition to time, what I need most is space. A personal place when I could enjoy working.

As my husband was been trained close to his workplace, we had to rethink our organization. At the morning while he was taking care of the children, I worked in the bathroom and we change the role on afternoons.

In fact, for a man it's relatively easy to work hard, to undertake something else, to do millions things at once

From the moment a child comes the wife is almost completely the one in charge of him; this made that her professional life is dull and doesn't reflect her expectations.

When our daughter was ill, I was the one to take some days of leave and sacrifice my professional life to take care of her. It's the case of women whose pay is inferior to the one of their partner

The main hindrance on my way to look of a job is that I spend more of my time to my children care than to the one of my husband.

To get into the employment market when one is a mother can quickly become complicated if the male partner doesn't involve himself in childcare it's often the case in our African cultures where the role of woman has been in the threshold of family care

What European politician can do to help is to encourage enterprises to put in place special paths towards professional and long term integration for women in search of a job or already with a job and that wish to be available to their children.

You might vote a law to safeguard women employment by forcing enterprises to take back women after maternity leave at a position at least equivalent to the one they held during the period of pregnancy and this for a period of at least 6 months...

Encourage the flexibility of working hours for women with smaller children or enable them to do teleworking once or twice a week if they want, in order to help them harmonize their role of mother with their professional activity.

To better compensate maternity leave so that the compensation is equal to the salary. The observation is that women suffered from a cut on their salary during maternity leaves and that might put them in a situation of precariousness if not of vulnerability.

To extend the duration of maternity leave from 3 to 4 months and half to enable women to recover physically from the consequences of delivery.

It would then be for them to take over their position with more time to take care of their children while being productive. So a solution might be to take the smallest one to care centers as soon as they are able to eat everything.

Finally I think that enterprises actually have an educative role to play for men in order to help them understand the merit of a man-women balance in household duties.

It could be implemented particularly by systematic paternal leaves and teleworking shifts as soon as the first child is born.

Adeline

I left Brazzaville in 1976 when I was 15 years old because my junior sister is deaf and dumb and because my parents wanted her to get the appropriate care we couldn't afford in our country. We settled in Rouen where I had a quiet teenage period and education.

After my VD, I went to Paris to look for a job. I started by modest jobs and later when I wish I could have more responsibilities in enterprises that I was sacked because of the color of my skin.

I work in telemarketing, phone sales, then I became a team manager and production manager in a call center

When I came back from my maternity leave after the birth of my first child, I was informed that I could not take over my position.

I was therefore downgraded to tasks with no relation with project and customers. It was then that I started to ask myself if I was at the right place.

Some time later I was dismissed for serious misconduct. I received my payoff, what permits me to think about my professional project and I signed up for a training for entrepreneurship. I set up a first company, Atoukids, with the mission to put in relation nannies with parents. After five years of activities I closed down Atoukids due to a litigation with a user. I ceased this opportunity to make an accreditation of work experience and I went back to university. Once I had my degree in associative structure management I set up Cityzen Mômes.

The goal of that association was to help children from their early age to develop social emotional skills useful for their fulfillment by providing them with edutainment activities of welfare, awakening and apprenticeship.

The organization has been existing for five years; there are 89 member families. In 2019, I received a hundred children. But with my part-time in the association and the other as coordinator of a school for the City council, I barely have the minimum wage

Because my husband had a comfortable salary I could easily devote myself to my projects even on a voluntarily basis.

A year and half ago he was dismissed, I'm then compel to urgently look for a full time activity and above all for more pay.

The situation is fairly complicated at this moment and could worsen if we don't find solutions to financially balance the family cash flow.

To reconcile the desire of entrepreneurship and regular pay is not at all easy, particularly when you're a woman in her fifties.

I would like to find a place, an organization, an institution that will provide me with a framework that will help me to harmonize my professional project, list what I have to do, prioritize the tasks to come.

I clearly know where I want to go but I need to be supported for my business plan, to complete my market research tools, discuss the feasibility of my project, develop my overall approach in a context of financial urgent needs.

The groups of women entrepreneurs can obviously help for this but after years of training and assessment of my own professional practices, a customized coaching thoroughly dedicated to the achievement of my project is a pathway I would like to explore today.

Hawa

I'm the third of a family of nine children. My mother and I left Mali when I was 11 months old. I then spend my first nine years in France At 10 was sent back to Mali where I was brought up by one of my aunt. I stay with her till my 16.

At the beginning because I'm a French woman, I was subject to many curiosities

But my difference gave birth to jealousy

There they did everything to change me and show me that I worth nothing. And then at 17 I got back to France and was married to a first cousin.

I was forbidden by my ex-husband to work and train myself. I say ex because we are now separated.

I'm from a Soninke background. And when someone has difficulties everyone is informed and the community pressure is then so strong.

For ten years, I've agreed to please my parents and stayed with that man. We had four children

And then finally, in spite of the denial of my ex, I decided to go to the local house to carry out activities, have leisure's time and meet with other families of the quarter. I thus learn sowing, cooking and even French I had already forgot.

When I give birth to my third baby, I would have wanted to make money by myself because my ex-husband was not taking care of us as a father. It was at that time I started fighting to gain my freedom.

I got my CAP certificate in early childhood and got a position in a childcare center of my city.

After my first pay, my ex became more and more hostile and I then filed for divorce!

During the three years' process that followed, I prepared myself to work and take care of my children on my own.

And recently, during the lockdown, I started my association of support to parenthood and education for women that want to stop their situation of segregation

My family, my culture, my community, my husband have been largely responsible for the difficulties I faced because in our culture woman is infantilized and reduce to a minimal duty.

Gossips are more valued than a person.

But today, I'm a specialist nursery school agent and it makes 9 years that I'm living with my children in a single parent situation.

My dream is to become a family referent in a parent's house.

I could therefore dedicate myself to support parenthood, moderate parents-child workshops, and could parents to identify the best care modes for them.

It's obvious that I've chosen this job, to cure my child's wounds! (Smile).

It's also a way to thanks people that have support me when I was in need and to give back to others parents what I've received at the appropriate time for them.

To sustain the professional integration of women-mothers is give much means to local housed and to social centers so that they will have the capacity to support every person looking for help.

This support has many forms: orientation in the construction of a professional project, assistance for administrative procedures, psychological assistance, and financial assistance.

The goal is to allow women for gaining financial autonomy so that they could take care of themselves.

The PMI also plays an important role but they are increasingly closing down. Their missions are often delegated to generalists at the expense of the relationship that childcare workers and childcare assistants had with parents.

Ensuring the sustainability of these organizations is providing young parents and particularly mothers with the capacity to use listening place as factors of social emancipation.

Mariame

After the separation of my parents, my father decides to send us back to Mali my brothers, sisters and I. I was 15 and I wished I would be a fashion designer.

And then I was married at 18

Five years later I returned to France following a court ruling. But on my arrival I had to rebuild my life alone, without any psychological assistance.

I had to face people's opinions that were not the same. I felt myself misunderstood and scorn by the society. From that moment on, I shut myself away and stop showing my feelings.

I had no degree, I was just at the level of secondary school certificate. And as I was under 25 years old, I was guided to the local mission. But I lacked confidence in me. And this was a great barrier for my employment searching.

At the local mission, they helped me to find a job as assistant cashier to help meet my basic needs but after one year, I found out that it was not a suitable job for me and I resigned.

Then, after a second marriage, I became pregnant of my daughter. When she was 1 year old I decided to go back to work. At that time a career counsellor suggested that I should return to my cashier assistant's job though it was not what I thought to do. One more time I had the feeling that I was not understood.

And then after some searches and many interviews, I got a diploma course to become an administrative agent and succeed to be part of the Caisse primaire d'assurance maladie with a permanent contract after two years of mission.

My work? It consists mainly of paying sick leaves, maternity leaves, handling of complaints but I see myself growing to others responsibilities.

I'm truly happy for this job because it helps me to live in a suburban area and if my children can benefit from this comfortable and fulfilling living environment it's thanks to this job.

I took responsibilities in associations because I wish I could help others, change things, develop mindsets with commitment.

But for my woman's life... forget about it, I've clearly set it aside. Daily, it's work – home – children.no time for the rest. Or let's say I don't care about...

Let's say that the fact of have been witnessing the great difficulties my mother faced awoke in my mind the almost obsessive desire to succeed.

After all these difficulties I dare not peer in people's eyes. I gradually regain confidence in me over the years. But what truly helps me since one year are my drama classes. They help me expelling out my hidden emotions.

When I'm on the stage, I like to get out from my comfort zone, drop down my shell. May be it's a way to do things I wouldn't do in my true life.

After a court ruling concerning one minor for facts that affected his freedom or psychic integrity, his family and him must at least benefit from a psychological care.

For a woman that has suffered such difficulties in her private life and professional life as well to feel fulfillment is not a small matter.

The walls she builds then to protect herself are her house and jail as well. It becomes more difficult for people outside to get in. And for her to go and meet their realities.

So, as a woman, an office worker, a mother of two, twice divorced, I expect to e go deeply in every part of my life including my womanhood even if I still think it complicated for the moment.

Aïssata M.

I came in France in January 1981 to reunite with my husband with a holiday's visa, he was already working there for years.

We were supposed to go back home within six months but I was admitted in a hospital after two months of stay. And our first child came. A second followed. Then we decide to settle there definitely.

At that time, I made the choice to stay home to take care of my children. But my husband died in April 1987. I was 26. To become family head upsets my plans.

I was in the healthcare profession. I passed the exam of assistant childcare agent and started to work in 1989 at the Paul Parquet foundation till December 1991 and then a childcare center in the city of Paris that employs me till today

When you're a Muslim, you must keep widowhood for 4 months, dressed in black, no working. I however started procedures to know how my children and I were to live.

Many people help me. Even neighbors. From that moment on I weave very strong ties with Grigny inhabitants. I think it's thanks to that that I have taken membership in associations. At the beginning I do cleaning in supermarkets, sales in DIY stores and shelf arrangement to display products.

As I wish my children could be better educated I register them in a private school.

To become assistant childcare agent enable me to be safe, to have a salary every month in order to take care of my family.

I was involved in politics in my country so I continue here. To have been a widow at a young age make me learn about every difficulty of this condition though I was lucky enough to have a better care.

To return the ball to others, I launched an association dedicated to first arriving, to women separated from their country, in order to help them to adjust to their new life and know better their rights.

Today I send on a regular mood clothes, drugs, to my family in Senegal and Mauritania. I also send books to primary schools and high schools.

In our hospitals you find nothing. Sometimes you're expected to come with your matters. If the medical doctor prescribe a drug and we don't have money for it, we can't be healed.

Therefore I collect donations to equip our hospitals in Senegal with medical instruments.

My professional life overpowers my private life. People flocked to see me when there's a small concern, as if I were a social assistant. No timetable, no frontier, because I didn't set or didn't know to create barriers.

With seven children to care at, I've often taken sick leaves. And when I returned to work, I observe how my colleagues were looking at me, as if I were a liar...

Mum is a superwoman. She always brought me with here to her meetings. I followed her everywhere. But sometimes, I would have loved to make things only with her that we simply spent sometimes together.

I always taught myself that to make progress in life, there are things we have to sacrifice. Communication is critical in my family planning but I acknowledge that I was not always sufficient.

There are women who didn't choose to have children and live as single parents. To have people to whom to speak is to permit to those women to bounce back in life and find a place in the society while being the mother they want to be for their children. But for that, devices must exist.

And then, when our children are ill, we are always obliged to stop working to take care of them. I always have 12 children ill. It's simple when it's a mere flu but not for the rest. The

number of sick leaves would have been customized for every woman: single, entrepreneur, multi-employment, etc.

So, I don't forget where I am from. That's why I also want to be useful to women of my country Senegal. My company deals in agro-industry and employ 10 persons, but transport is expensive. Why couldn't they apply clearance measures the first two or three years for French people that have projects for their country of origin?

Anonymous

I left Mali on the 22 of March 1991 to join my husband in France. I was 29. I was obliged to leave children over there though they were so small. It's hard to handle, so hard. And then, here, I didn't have a close family, only my husband, and some cousins of my mother.

I didn't have a degree and was not learnt in French. So on my arrival I was offered to be a cleaning lady. But even this was not easy because I didn't know the name of cleaning products.

I was registered for a training of one year. I trained for the first six months and was compelled to stop. It was complicated, I was to fetch children from school, to do household duties. I made so few stuff but it helped.

Later, I worked for seven years in a laundry service. I ironed from 9am to 9pm. I often spent hours standing. A friend, one day, came back from a training and talk to me about Fongecif. I also asked for one. And went for the training.

Learnt the alphabet, I started to write, to read, to fill cheque, even to work with computer, I learnt. I was then crippled, they sacked me and all that I learnt went away.

The Assedics offered me 140 hours of training. But the only ones I found was those for people who had degrees and already have a job

I can read everything, all, but to write is not easy. There are words I can't write by my own. I can turn a computer on but I can't go on using it.

The problem is that I've a herniated disc, a sciatic and arthrosis. I can't lift a load of more than 5 or 7kg. I must avoid lifting weight. That's why I can't no more taking care of children. Therefore I can work only for four hours a day. Not eight. To live like that, in disability, at home, doing nothing, it's not nice.

Today I'm 58, soon it will last ten years that I've been sacked. I get the RSA, but it's not sufficient, I've been working since the age of 8. I need to do something.

Not to master French language is a problem if you want to get a job that is not painful for the body

All my illnesses; it's my body crying that it's suffered too much from hard work.

My invalidity is good, it's acknowledged but I hadn't a status of worker in situation of handicap yet. The file is not moving forward

Every day, I hope I should be offered a job, a training, something that's comfortable for me. But nothing yet.

I've been offered many jobs but few corresponds to my profile.

To talk, to read and write the language of the country is important to work and feel free to choose a job.

May be there's something to do for migrant women mothers who are not alphabetized in French could in spite of all this take a training at their pace? Alternatively? Or in shortest terms?

Therefore there is thing to get from people like me in invalidity. We want to work. But employment doesn't want us because we don't match perfectly to what it want us to do.

Chanda

I arrived in France in 2006 aged 35 years for an eye operation. I already got operated in Guinea Bissau but it didn't work. So as I was living in Portugal with my mother since 2002, relatives said to me they I could find good clinician in France.

Upon my arrival as I had no degree, I worked one year and half off the books in buildings for cleaning of floors and windows.

In 2013, a Senegalese friend of mine found a job for me in a hotel. In order that I was to be registered, a cousin lent me her papers.

And then after two years, my daughter was born. I got my papers of mother of a French's child. It's then that I told the truth to my boss.

I'm not the one you know, I'm Chanda. Someone lent me her papers to work with.

His office, I cleaned every day. That day was the first day to me to sit inside the office.

I truly love my boss too much, he did many for me. But now, with the lockdown, I didn't work enough. And now we are closed up to December.

I would like to cease this opportunity to train in an accommodation center for children in invalidity, as it's linked to my project.

Here I've an association for people in invalidity. And in Guinea Bissau, I've a ranch of j15 hectares I want to convert into a center for disabled people.

But I want to get back to work, even if it's a job with no relation with my project, just for not to stay like this. The past month, I earned euros 130 from Pôle Emploi. Before it was euros 400. It's not enough for my daughter and me.

The father of my daughter and I got separated after the 4th month of pregnancy. A good friend offered me shelter but I noticed that if I was to remain there the social Samu social would not take me

So I went to sleep in the hospital during fifteen days. And then I was placed in a social Samu hotel.

But the room is small, not even 10m2. My daughter cries too much because she has no place to play. But if no work no decent apartment. Here I don't pay a cent.

I work well, I do everything: rooms and breakfast. But if there's no customer, there will be no job and then no pay. Luckily I got the tontine not long ago. So I can buy meal and clothes.

When someone knows the path better than you maybe you will find your way out, but for I, I'm single, it's difficult to succeed.

As long as I don't have resident permit, it's not easy to train. And even which training? I don't know At last... No training, no job. No good job, no house.

I would like not to live like this one day; get a house, have my driving license, but a car, get some to my daughter. Does it exist an organization, a program, help for women in my situation?

Francine

My son was only 8 months when he became ill. With my husband we go from hospital to hospital in Cameroon during six months without cure.

I was denied the visa thrice because as a partner of a French man I would have better asked for a visa installation but we knew nothing about that.

So in July 2018, we went in France. It was not my initial project and against my will, I was compelled to leave everything behind.

The two to support us were the parents of my husband, but they live 500km away from us. Some of his friends turn away when he settled with me, the African, because they said Black consider that White are purses .

In 2015, I was invited as a French language writer to launch my first book during a meeting in Brussel. It was there that I met my future husband.

He was an engineer working for the atomic energy commissioner. He resigned and joined me in Cameroon where we lived for three years.

Here we had to start anew everything, starting from scratch. My husband couldn't help me for the procedures, he never did that before. And then one day I came across the CNED.

Because of my validation of experience certificate I came to know that the work I was carrying out in Cameroon for long was called here: copy writer.

Because I didn't find a job, I'm working on my own account since 2019, and I offer my services to transcript, proofread, translate, reread for various enterprises and web sites.

Difficulties? I've had some and I still have.

You exactly know what you want, we can't truly help you. But as you finds nothing to do and that you haven't any experience in France, why not accept this proposition?

And then some day, following an interview in which I succeed with great score the recruiting manager said to me...

Then decided to create my own business.

With two young children no care solution for the youngest, I was obliged to stop prospecting new customers because I don't have the capacity to satisfy their demand. Today I work home by managing her sleeping times.

I would like to train more on software used by some of my customers in order to develop my provision of services.

But there are two problems. The child care. Auto-entrepreneur women would have been able to be supported so that they could go to customer's appointment during child care, participate to trainings and canvassing for prospects.

And the procedures as well as the continuous training fees for foreign students: an average of euros 3000. It's so expensive.

Maybe Europe and companies interested in diversity in their recruitment processes could put in place training scholarships for women entrepreneurs that are both migrants and mothers which want to have a good professional career?

Judith

In 1997, I was sent to France to my junior sister's mother house to follow up my studies. I was 17.

I had then a touristic visa but I was not conform to my studies projects. So to regularize my situation, I started to work, to make replacements in hotel as maid.

One and half year later, I met my ex-husband and our first child arrived at the same time. I wanted to start back school but it meant to give the child to another person's care so I delayed my project.

When I was young, I wanted to be a lawyer or a journalist and then at last life decides otherwise.

It was only after my citizenship that I could follow an assistant child care agent program and then divorced and became a single parent

In order to be close to my house, I left the childcare center where I was working because I spent every day 3h30mn in transports.

I passed an exam in order to get a position in a collectivity near my house so that I could take care of my children.

In addition to my job as assistant, I launched an association with the mission to encourage cohesion and dialogue within families. In short I support some families in their daily life by using various techniques of family mediation.

One year ago, I also create a business dealing in rental of party equipment. With the lock-down its activity has slowed down for the moment.

My elder son is 20 years old and helps me a lot, particularly to take care of his younger sister of 14. It's because of these various helping hands that I can be involved in many businesses. For me, to start a business is to answer to a need, it's to exist, it's to do before all what one loves.

To set up my projects, I've make the choice not to work with relatives but with women that have the same vision like me as well as others single women. And it's suitable for me.

To be a black woman is an obstacle in France when you want to get into business. Therefore we have difficulties in believing to what we have undertaken.

And then, at night, when we got into the bed, we feel the burden of being alone and of doing everything on our own though when in the company of others we behave as if nothing is going wrong.

It's undoubtedly the price to pay. To conclude, I don't think that one has to sacrifice one's private life to succeed professionally but it seems capital to never accept to live in an environment that prevent us from feeling fulfillment.

We, women from Africa, residing in France, being French citizens or not, want to have access to trainings. In our countries of origin, we have the reputation to achieve household duties, manage family economy, carry out businesses, and develop many activities.

We want to be able to involve ourselves in entrepreneurship, to create enterprises in order to put our know-how and ambitions at the service of our quarter, city and society

For that, we need, my sisters

and I organizations that promote women leadership, cooperation with our countries of origin, so that we reveal all our capacities, that we, fighting women, are capable of sharing our experiences to constitute the entrepreneurship strength that France as well needs.

Martine

My father was a soldier. We lived in Senegal when I was between 3 and 15 years old. And then at the moment my parents divorced, I got back to France, in a country totally unknown to me and where I didn't want to live.

Côte d'azur is a particular place where there(s so much racism. I found it very difficult to accept to go back. It was only at the fact that I started having the feeling of being integrated, to have friends. I think that's the reason why I've never felt myself as being part of the inside .

I became a nurse a bit by chance, after being failed at the exam of specialized educator because I was too young.

When I got my degree I left Antibes and went to Paris. I spent two years doing interim job because I didn't want to settle anywhere. And one day, the clinic I was working with offered me a permanent contract. I worked with them for more than sixteen years.

I met my first partner, the father of my first child, in the pan African communist-Leninist party. Having to manage my job, my political activism, my maternity gave me the feeling of having lost something essential.

I worked 12h per day. When I got back home it was already 9.30pm. So, for family life it was complicated. That's what drove me from activism. But not only from that.

As years passed on my role in my workplace changed. We have to do bandage after bandage. To run against time. We therefore didn't have enough time for our patients.

I'm not a technician. Where have gone the human aspect of healthcare?

So in 1997, as I was once more pregnant, I decide to leave the clinic and to put an end to the profession of nurse.

Very soon, my second partner left. I found myself in a single parent family with twins. I was 42, I didn't yet know what I wanted to do but as I have worked for 20 years, I knew that my indemnities would permit me to think more.

And if mother spend more time with you; what do you think about this?

In 2007, I was diagnosed with a firs lung cancer, I was 49 and my children were 7. It's clear that I've paid for my dependence to nicotine.

But when one is single, one is at the same time father and mother. Life goes forward no matter what happened. So cling to life and we manage school, duties and birthdays.

Went back to the fact not truly to have a degree but to re-socialize. But at this age, I had few illusions concerning my employability after long term study.

Besides I developed a business of copy writer and I opened an associative restaurant. But when one is sick one lives in anxiety.

Anxiety is normal, it's part of life. It's like a wave. It goes up and down.

For many years, as soon as I have the least symptom, I imagined that it could be serious.

In France, there are so many types of discriminations. I got many difficulties in my effort to get an apartment though I was a nurse and that I didn't have any problem of pays lip

But more generally when one is a woman, one is discriminated. And you're a Black woman, you're twice discriminated. When you add single-parenthood and the fact that you're living in Seine-Saint-Denis that shows immediately what people think about you.

To improve single women conditions with children, I propose that they should get a specific remuneration that will enable them to get rid of daily stress. They would then have the possibility to devote to the essential: to manage their children and their career.

Sitou

I lived in Togo, with a degree in Anglophone African literature, and a little by chance, my brother who was a film director for television offered me to join his company. Because I've studied literature, I attempted naturally to write screenplay. One of them became a feature-length film projected at the French Institute of Togo. And, in 2011, I was offered a scholarship to study in France. For one year I train myself to become a production assistant for film and television. In Africa, it's complicated to make film. All decisions concerning African movies are taken in Paris. So after the training, I decided to stay in France in order to build my network before going back home. To stay in Europe, one has to have his papers right. So I completed more trainings to keep my resident permit. To stay with relatives started to be a burden. I wandered in hotels for four years, from Paris to Grande couronne. Your accommodation have not been renew. This is your new address. Where am I sent now? ...At the 91? The contracts I was offered were either traineeship for a few weeks or permanent contracts. And then one day, I became aware of the fact that what I need was a contract related to my training and pays lips in due form. Since five years I'm sociocultural facilitator and school life assistant. These two jobs offered me the sustainability I need to live and get back gradually to cinema. There are many barriers when you are a foreign student and want to stay in France to work. Europe must stop stigmatizing women from Sub-Saharan countries and rethink the true sens-es of living-together and social integration. We are not migrant, we are nomads and the earth is our planetary village. When Europe adopts this concept, many things will change. Foreign students must have more freedom than illegals. And yet there are so many restrictions in their resident permit that their precariousness is reinforced. Migrant women must also been able to live with their partners without having the difficult choice to go back to their country to be with them or stay her single with their children. At last, a Black woman, African in Europe must be able to occupy high positions in sectors for which they've graduated without any discrimination gender or race.

Aïssata T.

I'm the third among 4 siblings whose parents left Mali during the years 1970s and settled in Argenteuil. As a teen, I was used to many things: homework help, colonies, cultural activities at the quar-ter. Very earlier, I was fond with accounting. I wanted to manage projects, build things. Started at high school, I began to get out from my social class, to get interested to others cultures and above all to those of my parents they didn't transmit to us for fear of not being integrated. It's at that moment that I started to go to Mali, to get interested in the history of my parents, their past, and their culture. After my vocational degree in audiovisual, I worked for a company of production as artist's manager. This makes me to travel a lot. Six years later, the company closed down. I underwent economic layoff. I was 26. At the same time, maybe it's time to set up my project... Because I love crafts, I launched a concept store around African crafts. I was backed six months by the Boutique de Gestion. Between 2006 and 2014, I did fair trade with 80 entrepreneurs. But the creative space were was located my store at Forum des Halles in Paris was wiped out from the new project of the organization then I closed down.

I started to visit the Club Cosm'Ethique du GRDR. There I got in touch with two others women entrepreneurs that also work in cosmetic in an informal way.

It's crazy the interest for the ingredients and more, African productions have success here but in Africa no change in terms of life conditions of the farmers is noticed.

It's then that in association with others women entrepreneurs in situation of multi-activities, we launched Maison de la Cosm'éthique.

What's nice is that each of us develop its professional project within the collective; what enables us to share our experiences to help each other to overcome some difficulties.

Difficulties arose when I was 37, when comes the time to make my first child. It was an opportunity to stop and think more deeply at what I truly wanted to do.

I suffered from many administrative controls from CAF because they suspected of undertaking undeclared activities. Yet all I wanted was to have time for myself, a place in a childcare center and a support for my project.

After two years of unemployment, I went to RSA. There I knew what social precariousness means. My fear was to give birth to my child without benefiting from the general regime of social security.

To get out of this mess, I got back to a remunerated activity within a fixed-term contract and then a permanent contract. Now I have pays lips and a right pay and I hope I would get an accommodation in two years' time.

One cumulate many frustrations when one's a woman entrepreneur because there are many choices to do and to manage all this brings insomnia.

The society still considers that to get in own business is a risk. But at the same time, if we don't do it now, it will be difficult to do it later. So one falls in precariousness and auto-limitation arises.

I dream of a co-working platform with a mode of care near, where one could go and visit one's child and breed him, where awakening activities will be provided, a place where one could work as long as desired and where one could train and meet others entrepreneurs.

To respect the choice of the woman which want to earn a living by entrepreneurship is to put in place structures of childcare before school with customized tariffs, fees and packages that match our economic reality, that's to say without a pays lip the first year! And it's the project I'm dreaming to implement in Africa.

Page 1: closed flaps / Exterior plan of the house



Page 4: Back cover / Aspirations & recommendations



S'insérer dans le marché du travail quand on est mère peut être très compliqué si l'homme s'implique peu dans le quotidien des enfants.

C'est souvent le cas dans nos cultures africaines où le rôle de la femme est généralement perçu comme à l'avant-poste de la gestion familiale.

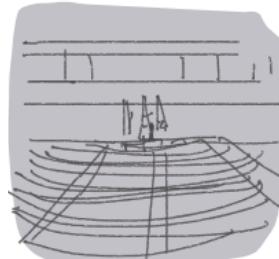
Il faudrait inciter les entreprises à faciliter l'intégration professionnelle et/ou le maintien dans l'emploi des mères en recherche d'emploi ou déjà professionnellement actives, qui souhaitent travailler tout en restant disponibles pour leurs enfants.



Aussi, peut-être pourriez-vous voter une loi pour sécuriser l'emploi des femmes, en obligeant les entreprises à reprendre sur une période au moins égale à 6 mois et sur un poste au moins équivalent à celui qu'elles ont laissé au moment du congé maternité.

Encourager la flexibilité des horaires pour les femmes avec des enfants en bas âge ou leur permettre de faire du télétravail une à deux fois par semaine si elles le souhaitent, pour concilier leur rôle de mère et leur activité professionnelle.

Mieux indemniser les congés maternité pour que le revenu de la femme corresponde à son salaire. Pendant leurs congés maternité, les femmes subissent une baisse de revenus qui peut les placer dans une situation de précarité, voir, de vulnérabilité.



Étendre la durée du congé maternité à quatre mois et demi pour permettre aux femmes de se remettre physiquement des conséquences de l'accouchement.

Quelles pourraient reprendre leur poste en étant productives et en ayant plus de temps à consacrer à leurs enfants.

Aussi, une solution pourrait être de confier les plus jeunes à la garde collective dès le moment de la diversification alimentaire.

Enfin, il me semble que les entreprises ont véritablement un rôle d'éducation à jouer en direction des hommes afin de leur faire prendre conscience du bien-fondé d'un équilibre homme-femme au sein des foyers.

Cela pourrait notamment se traduire par le départ systématique en congés paternité et la mise en place de journées de télétravail dès le premier enfant.

Pages 2 and 3: Interior /personal, professional, family trajectory (the private and the true life)

ADÈLE

2015. À la suite d'une procédure de regroupement familial, Adèle rejoint son mari. Trois semaines après son arrivée, elle tombe enceinte de Gabrielle. Sa première année en France est alors entièrement consacrée à sa future maternité.



Quand, j'ai commencé à chercher un emploi, la difficulté a été de trouver une garde pour ma fille.

La mairie me disait qu'il fallait avoir un travail pour obtenir une place à la crèche, et les employeurs qu'il fallait avoir une place en crèche pour obtenir un emploi.

J'ai dû faire garder la petite au "noir" durant 6 mois avant d'obtenir gain de cause.



Comme mon mari était aussi en formation à côté de son travail, on a dû adapter notre organisation.



Le matin quand il s'occupait des enfants, je travaillais dans la salle de bain, et l'après-midi on inversait.



Une fois ma fille en crèche, j'ai pu travailler comme auxiliaire de vie scolaire et reprendre des études dans le secteur du handicap.

Ca a été très difficile de concilier gestion de la maison, révisions, devoirs, et de dégager du temps pour soi...

On est quatre dans un appartement de 24 m², donc ce qui n'a manqué, en plus du temps, c'est l'espace : un lit à moi pour travailler.



Pour un homme c'est assez facile de beaucoup travailler, d'entreprendre, de faire un million de choses à la fois, car la charge d'un enfant repose surtout sur les épaules de la femme, ce qui ralenti notre vie professionnelle et nous force à revoir nos aspirations à la baisse.



Quand notre fille était malade, c'est souvent moi qui ai dû prendre des jours de congés, et "sacrifier" ma vie professionnelle pour n'en occuper.

C'est le cas pour beaucoup de femmes quand nous rapportons moins d'argent dans le foyer.



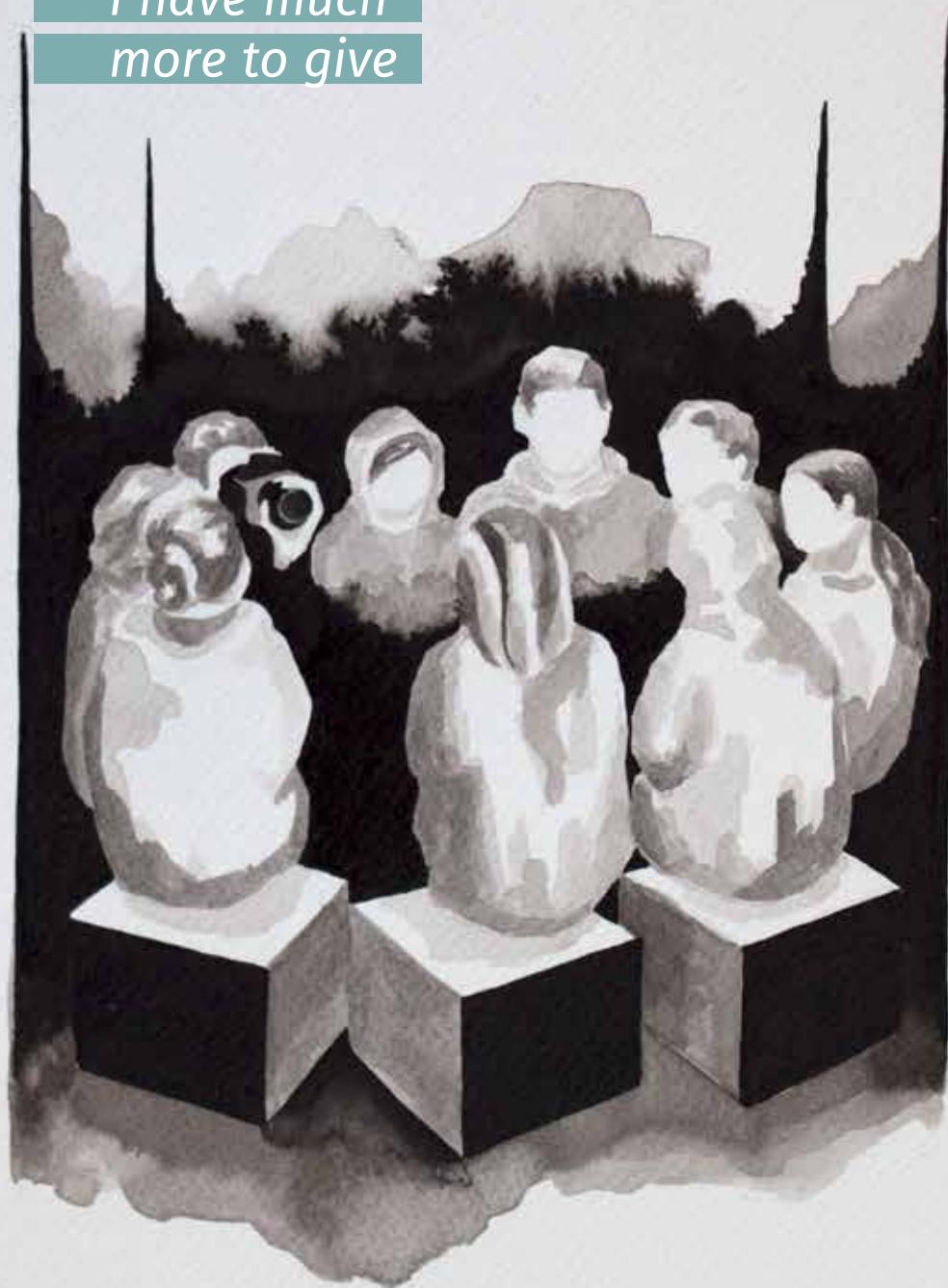
Cette répartition inégale de la charge des enfants, c'est le principal frein dans ma recherche d'emploi.



3.3. What women say

Belgium

*I have much
more to give*



I am the eldest of a family of 5 children. We lost my mother. I got married 28 years ago. We have no children. My dad lives our street. As he is old, he comes to our house quite often.

I also have a very young sister who had her children a little late and who doesn't know how to take care of them very well. After my work, 3 to 4 days a week, her children are at my house. I try to follow them in their homework. So, in fact, we are about 10 people in the house most of the time. My brother, my sister's children that I look after, my sister herself, my dad come to eat in the evening. I make sure they all eat well.

My sister and her husband have a Turkish pizzeria. I haven't had the chance to have children my own. I welcome my sisters' children to manage their studies, and that they can eat a little more varied and healthy. I take a lot on myself in the family, I have to. When I see how my sister cooks, how it's done, how she buys food... I told myself that the children should have a varied diet and a school life. Daddy is always at the pizzeria. It's the same with my brother. Dad lives 3 minutes away from my house, he's 85 years old. I always start cooking as soon as I get home, defining first whether it's for 2 or 4 or 6 people. It's very tiring. You don't feel it when you are 20 years old. But now I feel it. It's becoming to be a bit difficult. I do the cooking, the cleaning up afterwards. I'm tired. I'm 49 years old now.

Even though I'm in the cleaning sector, I have a diploma to be a secretary and was able to enter university. I've been doing a lot of training while I was working; it's been very hard for me to combine. I did this, hoping that it would change something. But that wasn't my first goal. My first goal was to know how to speak. I had a language problem. My father was a former gendarme in Turkey. He came here in 1965 with the aim of earning a living. He was a very strict person. And women didn't have much to say. It was 'shut up'. When you dared to say something... I was always stopped. After I got married it was more or less the same thing. It went on and on. And after realizing the injustice behind it, I said to myself one day: "No, it can't go on like that." I decided to come back here as a union delegate in 2012. When I took the floor, I realised that something was wrong. I couldn't speak, it wasn't coming out. I could speak with my colleagues, my sisters, my husband. But not in public. To solve this, two years ago, I went to the Haute Ecole. I told them: "You have to teach me how to speak. I can't speak, I can't speak in public because I've been silenced all my life. "The coordinator listened to me, she registered me. That's how I started studying. I was fine, I was learning and then I said to myself: "We'll see what happens".

At one point I said to myself: "I'm sitting next to this toilet paper, what am I still doing here?" I continued anyway.

In the Brussels group we started the lessons with 22 people. We ended up with 5 people. It was very heavy to combine with my family and professional situation: you have to do research and take the time to write. By that time I had finished working at 11.30am. then I went home and prepared the evening meal with my husband. At 4 pm, it really starts: the children come home from school, daddy comes for dinner. My writing work for school, I organised on Monday, Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. On Wednesday afternoons I would also come here to the building to study in isolation. On Friday and Saturday I studied very late at night. And Sunday morning very early because it was quiet. I finished these studies in 2018. One day I got an interview with two persons: the Walloon minister who told me if we were still here and the director of the PCSW in Schaerbeek. "When you have finished you can come to my office. I can't promise you anything. We will try". I have finished now and was successful in my studies. But I didn't get anything.

It's been a year now that I've been in charge of cleaning. I am replacing the main chef who is ill. Before I was only doing the ground floor, the toilets. That was it. Now you have to keep an eye on all the girls, check if the floor is well done. Dealing with complaints all the time. At 2pm I go home. It's a huge difference compared to my function before.

Since I became the main responsible at work, my husband helps me a little in the household. He does the lessons, he takes out the rubbish. He vacuums twice a week. Often he already prepares the salad. He never did that before. He was a 'real Turkish man', a real macho. This year he realizes that I'm really struggling.

For 24 years I've also had part-time work, less than half time. Now it's full time. I always wanted to work full-time. I've never had the opportunity, every time I asked, in vain. Last year, when the boss fell ill, they needed a replacement for her. They offered me the job. I accepted. I had a conflict with my husband, he told me that in my place he would never have accepted. "You've been asking for years and he's only giving it you now." All that time before, they told me it's a man's job. I don't think so. The person I am replacing now was a man. There is always a way to realize something.

I try to combine family care with full-time work, but it's tiring. Before my father and the others arrive, I ask myself, "can I take a nap?" If they had given me this full time 10-15 years ago, I'm sure it would have been different. But now, after 25 years of cleaning, I'm already tired. It's not a sitting job. You move all the time. It hurts all over.

This full time job that I always dreamed of doing is a handicap at this stage. And what's more, with the studies I've done: I'm not made for cleaning. That's my conviction. I have a lot more to give than just handing over people toilet paper and checking if the paper's there.

I wanted to break free

I finished secondary school in Portugal. My mother wanted me to go to university. I'm an only child and I didn't want to study any more. I wanted to break free for a while. My aunt had been living here in Belgium for 20 years. She proposed me to come over. So I did; my boyfriend followed me. I was happy to leave the country. That was the start of my experience.

When I arrived in Belgium, I looked for a job. I first worked in the archives of the mutual insurance company. But there wasn't much budget and they couldn't keep me. Then I worked in a clothing retail shop for 6 months. I didn't like this job because of the hours and the fact that I needed to work on Saturdays and Sundays. Besides, walking on high heels all day and in a suit: that's not me.

In 2018, I came here for cleaning. I left after 13 months, as I didn't have a fixed contract at first. But the head chef called me after a while to come back to work in the kitchen. That's where I am now. I'm helping them out because there are a lot of people absent because of covid-19.

I've been living in Belgium with my boyfriend for 7 years now. Since I was 19 years old. When I graduated from general secondary school, I had the idea to become a lawyer and start studies for that. But at the same time I wanted to have some money of my own. And in my home country, job opportunities were scarce. Now I'm a bit sorry. But once you start working, you can't stop. That was my choice at the time. Sometimes you don't think much when you're young.

Now I would like to continue here. Because I like it. The work, the colleagues. As I'm used to working, I don't see myself going back to school. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think so. After a long day, doing classes in the evenings and then again starting early here. I can't combine this job with studying in the evenings.

The problem is that I still have a fixed-term contract: either 1 month, 4 months or 6 months. So it's not definite. I think you can do 2 years with a fixed-term contract and then it is binding. But with the corona, it becomes more difficult. There's a lot of uncertainty amongst the personnel.

My boyfriend works as a truck driver in the construction industry. He starts at 7.30am until 4pm. He can go home earlier if necessary, his boss is flexible. I start here at 6.15 am and finish at 2.10 pm. That's a full time. I'm convinced that with this work timing we'll be able to combine it with a baby. Our wedding is planned for next year. I have set my limit of becoming a mother at 30. And maybe having our house here. We rent all the time. But our budget doesn't allow us to buy. Maybe in 10 years. I need a fixed and stable contract at first.

If I'll have a child, I could also call on a Portuguese group in the neighbourhood with whom I go out. We are friends. Sometimes I also look after my girlfriend's child. The child is now 4 years old. I would lose too much money with child care facilities; they're not even open the time I start working.

I come home around 2.30pm, I take something out to make some food, I shape up a bit the house, I watch TV, I make some food, I take a shower and I go to sleep. During the week we don't have much choice. During the week there's no energy for something else or to go out.

My aspirations for the future: that's having a stable contract and to earn enough to have a family. And having our own house.

Another job would be good for my health, but financially more difficult. Then you enter in poverty.

I have been doing the same job for 32 years now: cleaning in a large office building in Brussels. The years are starting to weigh on me, the heavy physical work has already kept me at home for 9 months a few years ago. Today I am fifty years old and I still have 14 years to go. That seems like forever. The doctor said that restarting full-time with this heavy physical work unfeasible. But it soon became a full-time job again anyway: the idea of having to work even longer and the financial consequences weighed too heavily on me. People don't realise that this is a tough job. Caring is a hard job, but cleaning is also a tough job. In fact, politicians should take into account of the fact that cleaning staff also have a hard job. And that they shouldn't be considered to work the same amount of years as 'normal jobs'. I already started working at the age of 18.

The Corona-situation now, ensures that I can do some more varied work. Many maintenance staff have been placed on technical unemployment; fortunately not me.

I am now allowed to make mouth masks, a welcome change of scenery. And this job fits me better: in secondary school I was trained for the clothing sales and shop window dressing. Studies which my mother did not allow me to complete: a girl that studies was out of the question. "you should be contented having a job". That history marked me: I told my children to get a diploma. No matter what they learn, but they have to get their diploma. I did not have

that chance. My son is an international truck driver, he still lives at home and has irregular hours. My daughter is still studying: caring. There is no place for real leisure or hobbies in my life: the dinner hour is set in the evening according to when the son has finished his truck day and after that I am even too tired to follow something on television. It are long days: I get up at 4 a.m. to start work at 6 a.m. and finish at 1.45 p.m.; that's a full-time job. I go by car, then I reach the building in 20 minutes. By public transport, I would be on the road for 3 hours. When my daughter was born, I took a career break because the crèches opened too late. Once the children could go to school, my husband went to work later, so he could take the children to school. Now the children are grown up, but still live at home. We still adjust our hours at home according to the children's needs.

The work itself gets tougher and tougher to deal with the older you get. Every day I am exhausted. Providing other work for me is difficult. I cannot stand by, I have to move. There are 2 cleaning people on one floor responsible for 4 blocks. I do all the work on the -1 floor. There are about 20 toilets to clean. I am constantly bending over, also for cleaning the showers. I am glad that corona allows me to do the cloakroom and the sewing at the moment. But with the new regulation now, you have to work longer. Staying at home for 1 week, coming to work for 1 week. It is not well distributed. The more you work, the less you earn. The less you do, the more you get paid. Then there's my sick leave, and the start of my career half-time. That all counts for your pension scheme. At the end of October I will be 50 years old. Normally I still have 14 years to go. And I've already started from the age of 18.

Actually, I'd rather do something else. But I was never offered any extra training. There have been several vacancies, I have applied for all. The last time I was the only candidate and was not selected because they assume I wouldn't be able to do that job as an assistant in charge of maintenance. I have been very disappointed about this. I was allowed to go to Vokans with the permission of the director. There will be another vacancy in September. I asked him if the vacancy was suitable for me. He can't promise anything, I'm not alone. I'll put myself forward as a candidate and if I don't get it, then I'm out of here.

I could also do some PC work, but I have no diploma in my hands. In fact, that is where the problem lies. If I look for another job now: I am 50 years old. Who else is going to want me? Especially if they know my background. You start to doubt yourself.

I have the feeling that the director is starting to realise that he needs to have some consideration for and that's why he has now given me the corona sewing job. Moreover, the contact with VOKANS has gone very well, frankly. At some point you know where want to go, but you have to dare to take the step. They are helping me with that, they guide me. I'm thinking more and more in the direction of family care. I like to have social contact. It's something completely different, a different rhythm of life. My daughter is in the same field of study, she is now in her 7th year. Family care: my husband said that this would really be something for me.

I have been union delegate for a couple of years now. The first time I got elected, you have to follow a course of 4 years. Some people of other firms were there. When you hear them talk, you think 'we're doing well here'. Another job might be physically better, but financially more difficult. Then you are in poverty.

But still: if I don't have that other job here in September, I'm going to apply for family care. Family care would be better for me. I'm tired of cleaning now. But as far as the benefits and the financial story are concerned, it's all very well here, but you don't get any opportunities to move forward.

And at the end of the month our financial situation stays tight: a house has to be paid off, the electricity and water bills to be paid off, food and clothes for four people, And there are the costs of 3 cars necessary for our jobs. Fortunately, our son does hand over part of his wage. We each have our own banc account. But we share the costs.

A stable life

I start my work at 6 in the morning until 2.15 pm. I like working for the coffee service. And I like to start work very early. I pick up the left overs in the meeting rooms from meetings that were held late in the afternoon. Or buffets from the evening activities. At the coffee service, I start at 6 o'clock. The other colleagues start at 7 o'clock. Another one starts at 8 am. I take all the trolleys, in all the rooms and on all the floors and start collecting plates, crumbs, cups,... I sort them out and put them in the dishwasher. Then a colleague comes to vacuum and clean the tables. Sometimes, it's a mess and not easy to do. So I prefer to start early, it's less stressful.

I come from Romania. I am married. I don't have children, but my husband has a child from his first marriage. My husband is older than me: he is 62 and I am 48. This year we will be celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary.

Before Romania joined the EU, we came to Belgium with 4 people. Me, my husband, my sister and my brother-in-law. We applied to the Belgian embassy in Romania. We filled in all the papers to get a visa. My husband has a self-employed status. I had the right to work in the Benelux as an employee. We left our country, because there was no future and a lot of corruption. I worked in a beautician's salon, but every year the clientele was shrinking more and more. The country, the region, our city, had completely fallen into disrepair. That's why we left. We've been living here for 14 years now.

In Romania I finished the industrial high school. Afterwards I completed a training course in aesthetics. So I'm a beautician by profession. When I arrived in Belgium, I opted for an intensive French course. I also had a Dutch and IT training course. This was my own choice: as I'm a Belgian resident, I should have a basic knowledge of both languages here; that was my conviction. French was easier to learn. The courses lasted until 10 pm. I always got up at 4.30 in the morning and went home at 10pm. Studying and working: it was difficult to combine.

My husband started working as a self-employed person, in the demolition sector; a really heavy job. Thanks to a Romanian man we met on the tram in Belgium, he found another job. I sent several CVs myself. I never received a reply. Thanks to someone related to us, I was able to do an interview here. I was accepted. During the day I cleaned and in the evening I went to school.

At first I didn't want this job. I wanted to practice my profession. But I understood that the system here's different, I was still used to the communist system. I asked myself: what is a stable life? When you get a salary every month; that you can count on that.

I informed myself on the criteria for becoming a beautician, but then I would be self-employed and I would have to work on Saturdays as well. So I decided not to refuse this permanent job and to give up my other ambitions.

At a given moment, there were reorganisations in our company. I tried my luck and succeeded: now I work for the coffee service and can therefore do more than just maintenance. I like the coffee service: it's another contact with people. It's also a different position: in cleaning there

are people who haven't studied. They can only clean. There are people who are not so intelligent. Everyone has her own character: I try to show all my abilities, that I am capable of managing a job. I think I have also a form of "appearance", and of respect towards people. That has brought me this progress in the work.

But at the same time, I have to see my limits: I am in a country that is not my mother country. I know my limits, linguistically too. The studies I have done are not enough to progress further on the professional ladder. Realizing that, I would like to stay here: I like stability.

I work full-time. We are very careful with our budget. First of all we pay for everything that has to be paid for. What is left, we manage to do with it. If it's possible to put something aside, we do it. We don't often go out to restaurants. We were educated to be careful with money. We don't buy something to show off. We also don't have the opportunity to buy a house with our salary. We rent a small flat. But that allows us to keep our freedom. It also gives us the possibility to leave again.

Around 3.30 pm I go home. I do errands, do the laundry, prepare food. I like to read and listen to music. For my husband and I, it's very important to eat and talk together; we are still very much in love.

Sometimes I take care of elderly neighbours whose husband has died. I do errands for them, I help them with the stairs. I live in a small building where there are a lot of old people. When we need something, we can ask them too. To write a letter, or, when we go on holiday we leave the key with them.

Nowadays, my husband doesn't work. A good year he worked for a construction company, after the period when he was self-employed. But afterwards he couldn't get the job in a recycling station, for destroyed buildings. He tried several times, but the work was reduced. Considering his age too, it counts a lot in order to find a job. He found a temporary job in Liège for a while, he replaced a person who was ill as a mechanic. Now the question of age is there again in the quest for work. But it's OK. We are a family that knows how to manage the salary.

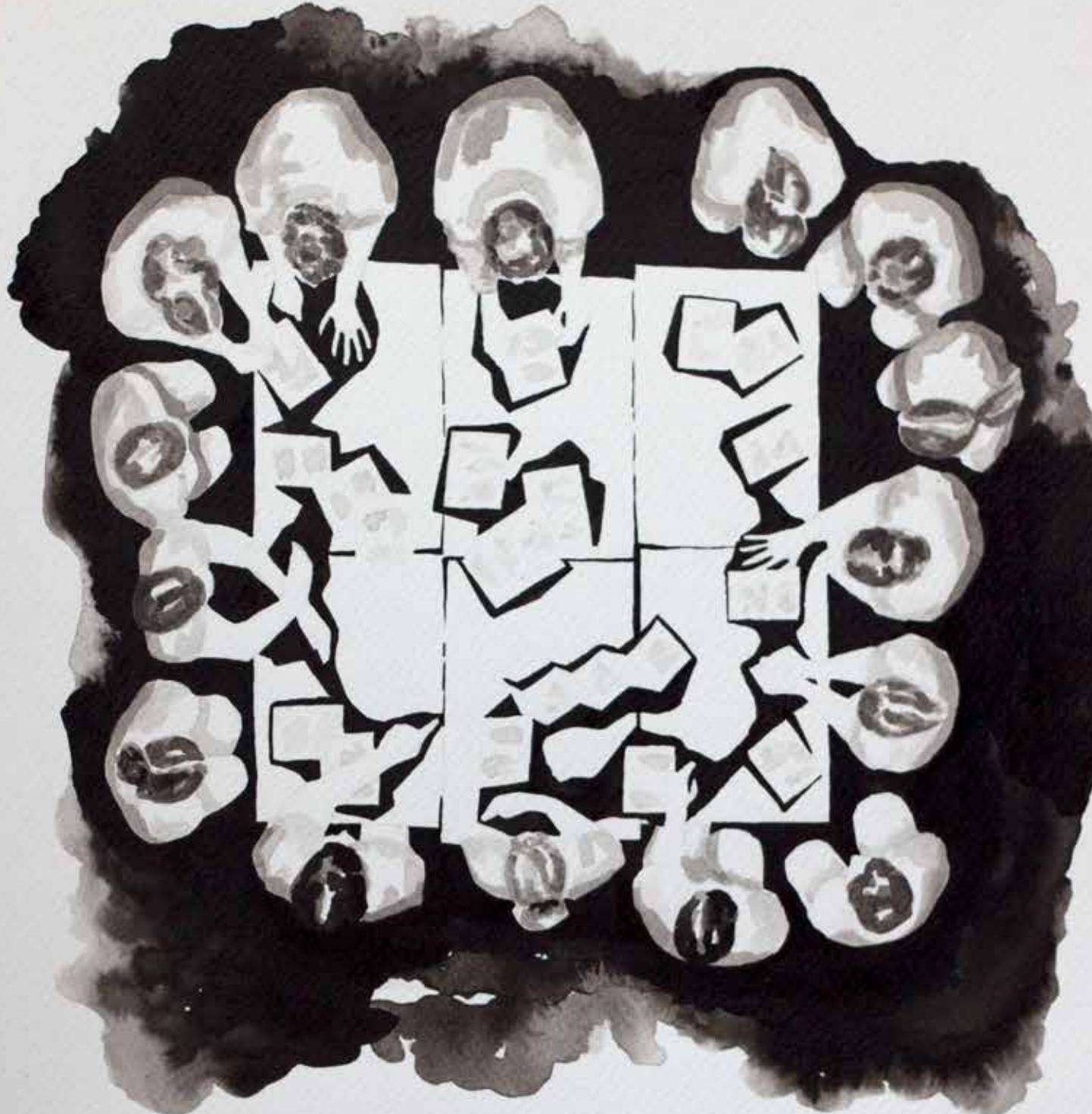
3.4. What women say

Ireland

I still have like ambitions.

I never lost them...

I haven't closed them down.



'Lorraine'

One of the most engaged women in our group is a lone parent of four children and had lost her fifth child in infancy many years ago. Lorraine is now in her “forever home” with her children and is a tenant of Focus Ireland but became homeless a few years ago due to domestic violence and lived in a supported refuge for women and children before coming into contact with Focus Ireland. For Lorraine, she says that she is 100% focused on her children. In addition to being a lone parent, her children have disabilities and she spoke in the focus groups about feeling a constant burden because her children will always need her in the future due to their disabilities. As a result, Lorraine spoke about the future being a worry and source of fear for her. It is important to her to always focus on planning ahead and being prepared for what could go wrong in the future. In contrast to many of the women who were almost solely focused on the present and living in survival mode, aspirations for the future were integral to Lorraine’s mind-set. Although she said she did not have a solid plan for the next few years, she was focused on ensuring security and stability for her family in the future.

She stressed the importance of being organised in order to stay on top of her current responsibilities. This was rooted in fear of what could happen to her children if something happened to her, especially as her oldest child has a disability and although he is an adult now, he does not have the mental age of an adult. Many of Lorraine’s fears for the future are based on her own experiences as a child. Lorraine was fostered herself and was forced to leave her foster home when she became pregnant at 16, so her focus on the future is rooted in fear of her children going into foster care if something were to happen to her.

Aspirations as a Parent

Many of Lorraine’s aspirations for herself were also closely tied to aspirations for her children. She spoke frequently about the aspiration to be a good role model to her children by pursuing things that interested her including further education.
they see me working away...they see me interested. They see me shout and scream when I pass my assignments

Lorraine viewed her achievements in pursuing education as not only self-development, but also opportunities for being a better parent and teaching her children that they can achieve whatever they put their minds to as long as you put the hard work in.

Lorraine spoke about her kids being her reason for getting up every day and at the lowest parts in her life it was her children that kept her going. However, she also acknowledged that this was a burden and acknowledged the restrictions in her life as a result of focusing 100% of her time on her children. Speaking about relationships, Lorraine said she would not have the time and effort to put into a romantic relationship until her kids were grown up. At the same time though, her children will always need her due to their disabilities, so it is a further burden. When the group was asked what their proudest creation was, Lorraine spoke about being a role model for her children and specifically teaching them that it is okay to ask for help.

Aspirations for her Career

Lorraine’s aspirations for her future are currently focused on how her financial situation will change once her youngest child turns seven in three years. At this point, she will no longer qualify for the One Parent Family Payment and will then be transferred to the Jobseeker’s Transitional Payment, which is a payment that aims to support lone parents to get back to

work. Lorraine recognised the necessity to upskill in order to go back to work in a job that will bring in sufficient income to support herself and her children. She spoke about her fears of being faced with the barriers that will make it difficult for her to get back to work without support when that happens:

So, it's only another three years, what am I going to do and that kind of scared me because I'm like I can't go out to work you know, in the sense of it's not like I can just walk out the door and go to work

Despite this, Lorraine is constrained in her circumstances right now due to her caring responsibilities and has limited options to upskill: If I could walk out tomorrow and you know, go into college I would but I just, I can't. I physically can't.

For Lorraine, the ability to upskill at home in a flexible way was a key pathway to gaining the skills necessary for her to pursue her passion. In terms of education, Lorraine has recently started an online course in psychology and counselling. The positives of this course are that it is low cost, she can do it at home and she can do it in her own time, which is crucial to allowing her to be flexible around her caring responsibilities:

So, if one of my kids is sick tomorrow, I don't have to you know, do it tomorrow, I can pick it up the following day or the next week.

Lorraine recognised that despite this positive step, she is starting "at the bottom of the ladder" and that it will take a few years to achieve her goal of working in the field she wants to. In the meantime, Lorraine recognised that she would need to get a job that she will be able to do while her children are at school. At the moment, she plans to get a cleaning job as it is flexible and accessible to do within her schedule and given her caring responsibilities. She spoke about this not being a job she really wanted to do and that would fulfil her, but said that it is important for her to think practically in this regard as she needs to be realistic about what jobs are available to her currently.

Despite this, Lorraine has a positive attitude and spoke about feeling like she still could aim high and had options available to her, although it was a fear that she was not sure exactly what she wanted to do and felt like she was lacking guidance in this regard. She spoke about how it would be beneficial to have someone to sit down with her and map out the steps that it would take to get to where she wanted to be, and to figure out what different pathways there were and what her options are.

There was a recognition of the impact of being out of work for a long time. Lorraine spoke about her fear that when her children are grown up and she has the time to go back to work again, she won't have the skills that would be suitable for the type of job that would be meaningful and challenging to her.

Aspirations for Self

Lorraine was one of the few women in the group who spoke about her aspirations for herself and her personal interests. She was aware of how her identity was linked to being a mother and a carer and spoke about wanting to do something for herself.

obviously my kids are my reason for getting up every day but you have to have something for yourself

She spoke about it being a privilege to be a mother and a carer but also said that she is beginning to work on what she would like to be. Lorraine spoke about her hopes, ambitions, and dreams with a very positive outlook on the future. However, she did acknowledge that she was

not always like this and had struggled with her mental health in the past. She spoke about losing her identity while being consumed with being a mother and a carer. She empathised with others in similar situations:

I think there's a lot of people that you know, have lost hopes and dreams and have lost what they want to do and they've just become so accustomed to "this is my life": I'm a carer, I'm a mam and yeah - same thing every day

Although she spoke about having to "rebuild herself up from scratch" after reaching rock bottom, Lorraine spoke very positively about the relationship she had with support services which have helped her. She described the staff in support services as being like a family to her and gets a lot of support from going to counselling and her housing support worker with Focus Ireland. Although Lorraine is to be credited with working on her mental health and herself, it is clear that when there are appropriate long-term supports for people who have experienced homelessness, domestic violence and foster care, that there can be a positive impact on their lives and their ability to plan for the future. Key to this change for Lorraine was the belief in herself: When we believe in ourselves, we can make anything happen

In terms of aspirations for personal skills and personal development, Lorraine had a broad set of things she wanted to achieve in the future; from working on being a make-up artist, to photography. Previously Lorraine had an opportunity to pursue her interest in makeup and beauty by enrolling in a part-time course, and she had planned to be able to work from home when her children were at school when she completed this course. She was accepted into the course but was unable to accept it as she would have lost her social welfare payment. Under the half-rate carers payment, she can only be in education for up to 18.5 hours a week and the course was 20 hours. She felt that this was unfair as her son (for whom she receives the payment) is in school for 30 hours a week, during which she would have been able to do the course.

She spoke about her passion for theatre and how she previously did a course in drama in a centre where there was onsite childcare for her sons which she described as a "fantastic solution" as she could learn and do something she was passionate about while being confident that her children were being looked after and if there were any problems she was in the same building as them. She spoke about picturing herself on stage when the children are older, and she has more time for herself.

I still have like ambitions. I've never lost them... I have dreams and I still have ambitions and they're still there you know. I haven't closed them down. They're still a part of me. It's just about you know, finding the right key to open the right door or you know, finding the right pathway. That's the way I view it

Like many women in the group, Lorraine sometimes felt very alone and she did not want to burden people with her problems or hardships. In this sense, she found the focus groups to be a very positive experience in which she could voice her experiences and opinions in a safe place without judgment, amongst people she could identify with:

It was so empowering being able to go and you know, to be able to feel like we were making a difference, are making and our voices really were heard.

In this sense, one of Lorraine's aspirations for her life was to inspire other people. One of the ways she does this is through a Facebook group in which she shares positive quotes or affirmations in order to help lift other people up. Despite all of the challenges and difficult times in her life, Lorraine wants to use her experience of persevering through all of this and becoming a stronger and more resilient person to help others who have are going through hard times.

It is important to note that Lorraine is one of the few members of the group who has a secure, long-term home after experiencing homelessness both as a single person when she was preg-

nant and with her children. Lorraine describes her home as her sanctuary and a crucial component to Lorraine's journey back to education is that she has a safe and secure home in which she can do her classes and assignments. Lorraine's experience is an example of how having a secure, safe and stable home serves as the foundation to pursue education and a career path that can provide not only financial security, but self-development as well.

'Joy'

Joy was a very engaged and active member of the group throughout the research. Originally from Nigeria, she has three children and a partner who is currently working. She has been in emergency accommodation with her family for three years since coming to Ireland, and during the pandemic was moved from hotel accommodation to "own door" emergency accommodation, meaning it is a self-contained unit but still emergency accommodation. Joy spoke a lot about feeling judged for being in emergency accommodation and she felt people looked down on her as if she was not intelligent because she is homeless. She felt that it was also a barrier when applying for jobs because she would have to put the address of the emergency accommodation when applying for a job. She said she does not hear back from employers a lot, even though she has a lot of experience and qualifications. Joy has recently started a course in Healthcare. The course she is doing is broken down to short courses which are done over 3 months, meaning she gains qualifications along the way. It will take 3 years for her to gain the full qualification in healthcare. She spoke about her desire to work in the healthcare sector stemming from her experience caring for her grandmother before she died.
I think once in a while we need someone to care for us and then you know, when they are old like that, sometimes they need that company. Someone to look after them, someone to talk to, to communicate

Joy had spoken about the costs of caring in a letter she wrote to 'Faith'. Caring for someone can be likened to going on a roller coaster ride. You don't need to apply for the position especially when it involves family because it is thrust upon you and it comes with no manual or job description, so you have to work with your instinct

She understood one of the costs of caring being that it can have negative impacts in the future – 'never try to be a superhero if not you will blow up some day'.

Although this is something that she cares about and feels connected to, this is not Joy's true passion or career aspiration. She has always wanted to study law or be in the army. When questioned about whether she will pursue this, she said that when the children are teenagers, she will go to pursue her "dream of being a lawyer".

Aspirations as a Mother

Joy said that right now she is focused on taking care of her children and "seeing the children grow up and be responsible". She spoke about the importance of teaching her children how to make the best of the opportunities they have, but she felt that she had a responsibility to lead by example in this respect. Similarly to Lorraine, she spoke about the importance of her children seeing her studying and working hard.

Take their studies seriously, focus on being a better person, get a better job and be better people.

This was partly rooted in her own experience of being discouraged by family in relation to pursuing her dreams. She spoke about her aunt discouraging her from pursuing her dream of

being a lawyer and she did not want to do the same thing to her children.
she used to discourage me which is what I don't want to do to my own kids. At least, if that's what they want...I leave them to pursue their dreams. Not interfere because that's the problem I had which is where I am today

As a result of her aunt disapproving of what Joy wanted to do, her aunt encouraged her to pursue linguistics and filled out a form for her to study this. She said that she never liked it and she ended up stopping halfway through the course because it was not what she wanted. A similar situation ensued when her mother encouraged her to do accounting.
I went into accounting and I did, I finished certified accounting technician course and then went for ACCA but I didn't complete it. Because it still wasn't what I wanted.

Joy recognised the cultural factors which influenced this, as in her culture she said there is a high level of respect for your elder so she felt she must obey what she was being told to do or she would be seen as being disobedient. As she has realised how this has held her back in pursuing her career aspirations, this is not something she wants for her own children. She spoke about the desire to focus on her studies and who she wants to be so that she does not have any regrets in the future.

I don't want to live a life where down the line, I will have to think that I can regret oh I wish I did this when I had the time.

Aspirations for Career

With regards to pursuing her dream of becoming a lawyer when her children are older and after she has been working in the healthcare sector, Joy indicated that she still has to research it and find out what the requirements will be. She knows that she will have to go to University but is not daunted by this:

It's never too late to learn

For this reason, Joy is pursuing the more manageable healthcare qualification right now so that she does not neglect her caring responsibilities. She worries about how the children would cope without her if she is not around as much. Even though Joy has a partner, she spoke about the problem not being that he was working, but that when he has free time he does not try to help with looking after the children or the housework. In this way, gender conditioning has meant that despite having a partner, Joy is doing the majority of the parenting because it is expected of her as a woman.

Joy also spoke about being constrained in her circumstances which is limiting how much she can work or study right now. Due to the current emergency accommodation they are staying in being further from the children's afterschool club than the previous emergency accommodation, it takes them longer to get home in the evenings meaning it is a very long day for them all. As a result, the children are not going to the afterschool club right now which limits the amount of time that Joy has without the children in which she could work.

The problem of childcare in Ireland has also caused Joy to miss out on getting more experience and qualifications. She spoke about having the opportunity to do Safe Pass training, which is a health and safety training. This would have given her more opportunities for work, however due to not being able to get childcare for her youngest child, she was not able to attend. This was one of the opportunities she received with the support of the Focus Ireland PETE (Preparation for Education, Training and Employment) Programme. The current course she is doing in healthcare was suggested to her by the PETE staff, as well as previous training programmes she did in manual handling, mental health awareness training and infection control training. For Joy, the support service from the expert staff to help her get back to edu-

tion and work has been vital to enabling her to plan for the future. This shows the impact that specialised support services can have for women who have are struggling to get back to education or work and have experienced challenges such as homelessness. However, in Joy's view this cannot happen unless you are prepared to ask for support:
it all boils down to you willing to accept help

Joy stressed that her ability to go to work with the current course she is doing was dependent on flexible childcare that she could rely on. She is currently applying for jobs for things like cleaning as this is something she has done before and would have time to do as the hours are flexible. She plans to look for work in the healthcare sector when she has completed her first module, as jobs in the sector require at least one certificate to be considered.

One of the barriers Joy is currently facing with being able to work more is extending her youngest child's hours in his crèche. She said there had been delays in the processing of the CHICK number (as part of the National Childcare Scheme to subsidise the costs of childcare), which would give her more flexibility to work.

Now look at for example, I have three hours (free time). So, I have to find a way around that three hours most time and there is no work... If you drop him by nine and the job says you have to start by nine, there is no way you can link up

An additional factor out of her control which has led to delays has been ineffective communication from childcare facilities regarding waiting lists. She spoke about not hearing back from childcare facilities where she had hoped she would get a place for her youngest child, but she did not hear back which delayed her in applying for places elsewhere. Currently, she has found a childcare facility with spaces close to her where they live, but because she does not have the CHICK number, they will not accept him until they have the number.

Aspirations for Herself

Despite all of the challenging situations Joy has been in, she has maintained a positive attitude. She spoke about looking for the bright side and making something good out of bad situations. She goes through her life feeling that choices she makes now affect her future and can impact on plans for the future, so she spoke about the need to make good choices to avoid being in bad situations in the future.

when it feels like the weight of the world is on your shoulders, think of it as a phase. It will pass.

The judgement she has felt from people with regards to being in emergency accommodation has affected the way she sees herself and her self-esteem. She spoke about not feeling good enough because of the way people saw her:

You allow other people's opinions, you look at yourself from other people's opinion which you know deep down you have something to offer, you're good enough. But because of the treatment you receive from people you now let that put you down

Motivation was something that drove a lot of Joy's determination to work on herself and continue to pursue her dreams:

So, those things they motivate me because one thing in life is if you don't have motivation then you can't do anything. So, you need to motivate yourself and then you need to fill your mind with affirmation; something to lift you. In life there is nothing you want to do you can do it. Everything depends on you.

She spoke about how she does not want to dwell on what could go wrong because "it is always when you least expect it that everything starts crumbling". Her mind-set is focused on getting through challenges and looking towards the future in order to learn lessons and move on. Something that she spoke about doing for herself was practicing mindfulness and watching webinars on how to do this at home. Similarly to Lorraine, looking after her mental health seemed to be the foundation for being able to cope with the demands of her work-life balance.

Joy spoke about the positive factors in learning from other people's experiences in the focus groups and to express how she feels and what is on her mind:
As they say it's who wears the shoe that knows where it hurts

Although Joy is positive about the future and has made many efforts to pursue her aspirations for her children, her career and herself personally, it is clear that many structural barriers are making it difficult for her to progress with these aspirations at the moment due to living in emergency accommodation, unaffordable and inflexible childcare and stigma. Due to factors out of her control, Joy is currently locked out of the labour market and pursuing a career that she is passionate about.

'Maria'

Maria was the youngest member of the group, is originally from Romania and was 18 at the time of the focus groups. She has one child, a daughter who was born in November 2019. At the time her daughter was born, she was living in emergency accommodation after a relationship breakdown and she could not return to her parents' home. Despite this, she still does have the support of her family for herself and her daughter. Prior to this, she had left school and not obtained her Leaving Certificate . At the time of the focus groups, she was in the same emergency accommodation for nearly six months with her new-born daughter. She spoke about the difficulties of living in emergency accommodation with a baby and not being able to cook or wash clothes. When the individual interview was conducted with her in October 2020, she had been living in the private rented sector with her daughter under the HAP scheme for several months.

Financially, Maria has struggled since having her daughter. As a result, she spoke about her aspiration to get a part-time job to get some experience and increase her earnings. She cannot work full-time as she can only work three days to maintain her social welfare payment. She was worried she would not be able to find childcare for her daughter, and the cost of childcare was a big barrier for her. Due to Maria not having a Leaving Certificate or any work experience, she spoke about being concerned that when she gets a job it will not pay well and therefore whatever she earns will be spent on childcare. She expressed that she sometimes did not see the point in working in an unstable job for poor pay, especially when this is balanced with the costs of childcare. In addition, being a lone parent and being alone together in emergency accommodation with little support has possibly made Maria distrustful of leaving her daughter with someone else and she has expressed anxiety around leaving her daughter with a stranger:

I wouldn't rely on someone else to take as better care as me

She felt that she can only do jobs like cleaning at the moment, as she hopes this is a job she will be able to do without qualifications or references. However, she worries about whether this will be sufficient income to pay all of her expenses. She felt that there should be more job opportunities for people who do not have experience. In order to increase her chances of getting a better job, Maria's current goals are to get her driving licence so that she can apply for

jobs which are further away which she would not be able to get transport to without a car, and therefore increase her options. Although getting a car would be an additional expense, she felt that it was best to at least have her licence and it was best to do it now while she is young. She spoke about wanting to use whatever income she has left over when she gets a job to save up so that she can invest more into her career and use the money to do courses so that she can get a better job. In terms of areas of work that she is interested in, Maria spoke about wanting to work in the beauty sector or as an accountant, because she was good at maths in school. For now, she knows that she has to look at what resources she has that will get her to the next step in pursuing one of these as a career:

I was thinking after I get my driving licence to do a course or something in the beauty or nails, and after that like with that course to get a better job

Maria spoke frequently of the stress of not having enough money and how she worries for her future. Many of her current aspirations are based on having enough money to be comfortable in order to ease her stress:

But I think if I had a better financial situation and didn't have that much stress with...keeping a shelter above your head and...taking care of children and just, if I had just the stress of feeding myself and that's it, then it probably would be much, much easier

As such, with Maria experiencing being a lone parent and having experienced homelessness at such a young age, her current struggles are so rooted in worrying about having her basic needs met that it is difficult for her to focus on her mental health and self-fulfilment needs. With the current income she has, after she pays the rent, she spoke of something else unexpected always coming up that she has to pay for as well. Currently living in the private rental sector, she receives a housing support payment, however she is aware renting is not stable and she could possibly become homeless again. She spoke about her fears of returning to emergency accommodation and fears of not having enough food for the week. Her fears show the trauma that can arise as a result of being homeless, particularly for lone parents. Due to the negative experiences she has had at such a young age, when questioned about whether she focuses more on the present or the future, Maria said she always thinks about the now and the day-to-day things she has to worry about. She said she focuses on her expenditures, paying her bills and taking care of her daughter. She spoke about this being more difficult due to being a lone parent and it is difficult to get what she wants. As a result, she spoke about forgetting to take care of herself and putting all of her work into caring for others. She spoke about the importance of having opportunities for women like her to do something to take care of themselves as well, such as going back to school:

And to have like something for women, you know, so they can take a bit of care of themselves as well, to have like free time or something, to have like a back to school programme or after school programme

She expressed a desire to go back to school and get a diploma and qualification once her daughter is older and is in school.

Aspirations for Self

With regards to personal aspirations, Maria spoke about wanting to learn the violin. She said it was something she was looking into as a career and she wanted to pursue it as a hobby as it is something she has always wanted to do. She spoke about wanting to do it as a child but because of her family's financial situation she did not want to put pressure on her mother by asking for this:

You know I wasn't that open to my family to tell my Mum 'I want that and I want that' because I would feel her financial situation, you know, and I didn't want to stress her out or something.

Like many of the women in the group, Maria expressed in the focus groups that she is proud of getting through hardship. She also expressed fear in the focus groups about being judged for her parenting:

we hear so many cases of Tusla taking children; we are afraid we are being watched and scared that children will be taken away

This feeling of being judged as a parent is a sentiment that came up very strongly in the focus groups from the women. Many of the women were afraid that their children would be taken into foster care. For Maria, she felt that the children were able to pick up on their mothers' anxieties and used this as an opportunity to misbehave.

'Josephine'

Josephine is a lone parent of a baby son and is originally from Guinea and has been living in Ireland for six years. Josephine was in emergency accommodation for single people up to the point of giving birth and once her son was born, they were moved to a hotel. Josephine spoke about the negative experience she had when she was homeless, such as not having any space for the baby to play. She spoke about how her baby's development was negatively affected because he could not play or walk in the room because it was too small. She felt lonely when she was in emergency accommodation because she was not allowed to have visitors. She also spoke about having her autonomy stripped when she was in emergency accommodation and would have to say where she was going and when she was coming back. Since the focus groups ended, Josephine has moved into a local authority house with a garden for herself and her son. When we spoke to her in October 2020, she spoke about the freedom she feels now that she has her own home:

Here I am just free, I can do whatever I want

Now that she has a stable home and knows that her son has the space and safety he needs to grow and develop, Josephine has felt like she can restart her life. When she was in emergency accommodation, she could not focus on her aspirations and goals because she was so focused on how to cope:

Because when you are homeless you are not planning your life. Your life just stops

This echoes the experiences of the other women, who are either constrained by their housing situation or have more opportunities due to having a secure home. However, the future is still something that Josephine worries about, and is aware that she cannot anticipate what will happen in the future, especially regarding factors out of her control:
you know about today, but you don't know about tomorrow

Aspirations for Child

Josephine's son is not currently in childcare and she is currently parenting full time and not working or in education. She has the support of her brother and sister who both live close by and spoke about the difference it made being able to invite them into her home and have visitors. Josephine is trying to get her son into crèche so that she can go back to education.

Josephine spoke about her fears about letting someone she does not know into the house to take care of her son. Her preference for her son would be for him to go to crèche and then she would be happy that he is being taken care of and is safe. She spoke about the challenges of being a parent for the first time and how she is still learning what her baby needs and how to be a parent. Her main focus is on herself and her son:

If I focus on myself and my child first, I am free of mind

However, she acknowledged that when the baby is so young it is a challenge, and it is a balance all the time to balance her needs with the needs of her son. Similarly to other members of the group, Josephine often felt judged by society. She felt that other people try to dictate what is out of reach for her as a mother and as a woman. She spoke about the importance of being her own guide and realising that it is important to respect her right to live her life the way she wants to live:

Yeah, but everybody has their own things to do in their life, you can't even teach somebody what to do, they have their own life, you have your own life

Regarding social welfare payments to support her financially, Josephine also spoke of slow processing times for receiving the Child Benefit and she felt it was a lot of paperwork. Particularly around the issue of housing, when she was still in emergency accommodation she expressed a concern around the cost of housing, as it is increasing all the time. She felt it was difficult as a lone parent to earn sufficient income from working while still getting support from the State:

If you are not working it's okay because they will help you, but if you are working they don't help you

She gave the example of when she was working previously and was not earning a lot of money, but because she was working her Medical Card was taken off her.

Aspirations for Career

Since she came to Ireland Josephine has had experience of both working and studying before she had her son. She has previously worked as a carer in a hospital and nursing home and spoke of her dream to be a nurse

Yeah, yeah I always had an interest in working in as a carer. I also have an interest in working as nursing. That was my dream when I came here but it didn't come true but I will go forward and try again

She was halfway through a two-year diploma in social care when she had her son and hopes to finish the last year when she gets childcare for her son. She said this has been a struggle and she has put her son's name on waiting lists in a few crèches but will likely be waiting until next year. The course is full time and would require work placement as well as classes, therefore she cannot start it until she has adequate childcare for her son. Before she got pregnant, she was studying nursing full-time and working part-time in a nursing home and has not been able to return to this since having her son. She expressed a passion for education and learning and throughout the focus groups was very engaged in the exercises in which the women were learning, particularly the rights-based exercises. As such, she expressed her desire to both study and work, but this is all dependent on getting the place in crèche for her son.

Although she is a lone parent, she felt that she still had the agency to help herself and be proactive about getting back to work:

Even if you are alone you should help yourself sometimes, just not even to sit and you are waiting for something but you can do part-time jobs, three hours, two hours whatever

For Josephine, she did not have an interest in doing online courses and valued the social aspect of education:

I prefer to go to school. I don't like online things, yeah, I like to go to school and meet people, I don't like online stuff

Given the career path she has chosen, she recognised that there may be challenges in the future regarding organising childcare to cover shift work, especially as some nursing jobs would require availability for night shifts:

you know some shifts you have the night shift...but if there is only that option you can't do the job, you have to mind your child

This shows the importance of childcare being flexible for working mothers in order to allow them to pursue jobs that they are passionate about.

Her current plan for when she gets the crèche space for her son is to return to education and then when her son is in school to pursue part-time work in nursing or social care.

Aspirations for Herself

Now that she is settled in her home, Josephine said she was looking forward to driving. She cannot afford her own car because she is not working but for the time being her brother is going to add her as a second driver to his car. She hopes to be able to buy a car when she is working and is earning enough money.

She spoke about the hobbies that she enjoys and that she can do now that she has her own home. She spoke about her love for reading, watching movies, cooking and running. Now that she has her own space, she is grateful to be able to cook and watch movies. She stopped running when she had her son, but she said this is something she would like to return to and intends to run with her son in his buggy.

She also spoke about how feels about Ireland. She said she had learned a lot since she came to Ireland and that it is home now. She expressed positive feelings towards Irish people and said that she has not experienced discrimination and felt that people in Ireland were honest and genuine. She said that as this is home she intends to stay for the rest of her life.

3.5. What women say

Portugal

*Remember the employer
that they work
with people*



An initial portrait

The average age of the women who participated is thirty-nine, the youngest being twenty-one and the oldest seventy.

Eight women are from Cape Verde, seven from Portugal, one from Guinea Bissau and one from Brazil, eleven of whom are Portuguese, three Cape Verdean, one Guinean and one Brazilian. Regarding the level of education, one woman did not provide information regarding her situation, six indicated that they had completed secondary education, nine indicated that they attended university and only one indicated that she knew how to read and write despite not having any formal level of education.

Regarding the employment situation, one woman indicated she was retired, another was unemployed and the rest were employed.

The profession/occupation that three women claimed to have is that of sociocultural mediator with the Foreigners and Borders Service, two are educational assistants, one is a nanny, one is a psychologist, one is a documentalist, another identifies herself as a business prospecting technique, another is a receptionist, one woman is a geriatric assistant, another is a free time occupation monitor, another is a sociologist and one woman is a kitchen assistant.

In terms of household composition, six women live in households of three, five women in households of two, two in households of six, two in households of four and two women live alone. The majority of the households are made up of women and their children, with one woman living with three uncles / aunts, one woman living with her parents, one woman living with her mother and daughter.

Four women have no children, eight women have only one child, three women have two children, one woman has five children, and the other seven children.

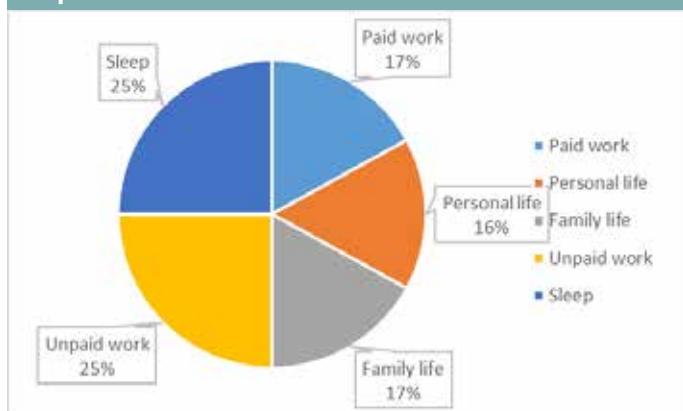
Not all mothers have indicated the age of their children, but some are babies and others are young adults with the smallest child having fourteen months old and the oldest thirty-one years old. We also do not know the age of fathers, mothers and uncles / aunts who live in households, but in some cases, we do know that they are people to whom the women in the group provide care.

The story in two times

Patrícia's history

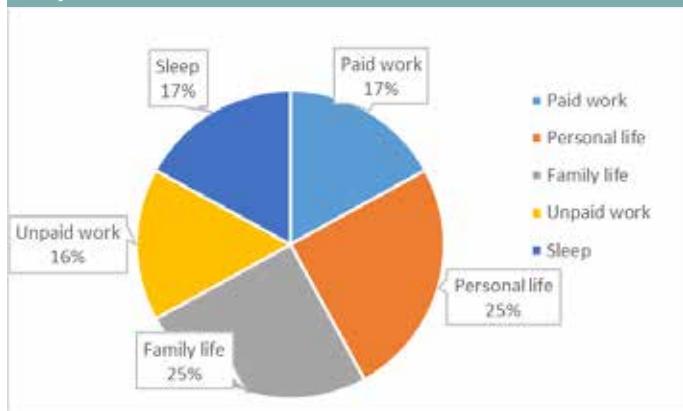
Patrícia is a 55-year-old woman, born in Cape Verde, who completed high school and works as a nanny in a family day care centre. Patricia is married and has five children. When we ask her to draw the way she reconciles in one day all the dimensions of her life we realized that a quarter of her time is devoted to unpaid tasks and that half of her day is split between paid work, care work and that only the smallest slice of the day is reserved for the development of activities and personal interests.

Graph 1a – Real Time



With little time to devote to herself, it is not frequent to dream and to aspire to a different life, or at least to redistribute the use of time. Challenged to recreate her day, it is visible the will to maintain the levels of participation in the labour market but to be able to enjoy more of the family and time for herself.

Graph 1b – Ideal Time

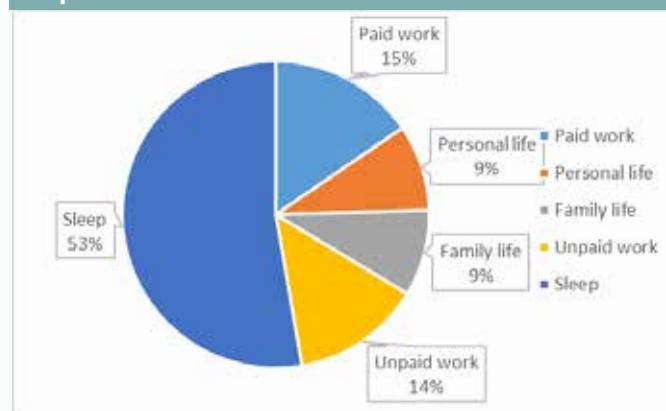


Alexandra's history

Alexandra is a 32-year-old woman who came to Lisbon from Portimão. She attended higher education and works with elderly people as a free time occupation monitor. She is single and has no children.

The low intensity and low wage allow her to sleep most of the day. Paid work only takes up 15% of her day, more or less the same time as she devotes to unpaid work. Even so, she devotes some time to family life and, in the little time she devotes to her personal life, she has agreed to participate in the REGAL project.

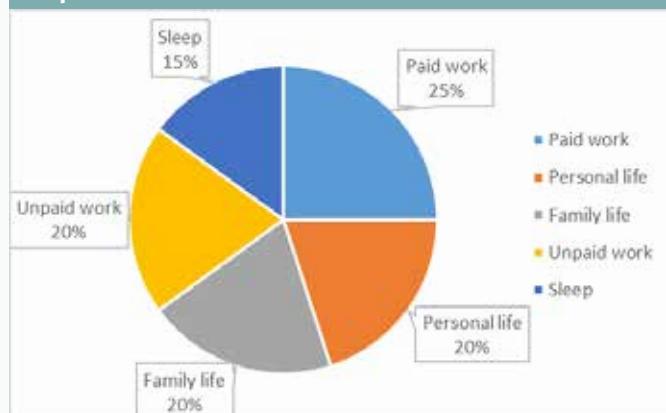
Graph 2a – Real Time



The enthusiasm with which she reshapes the distribution of time indicates that she probably spends more time devoted to personal life and less time sleeping.

Independence and irreverence are characteristics that are visible and that translate into the desire to work more hours and redistribute her day so that the new sleep pattern may even be insufficient from the point of view of well-being.

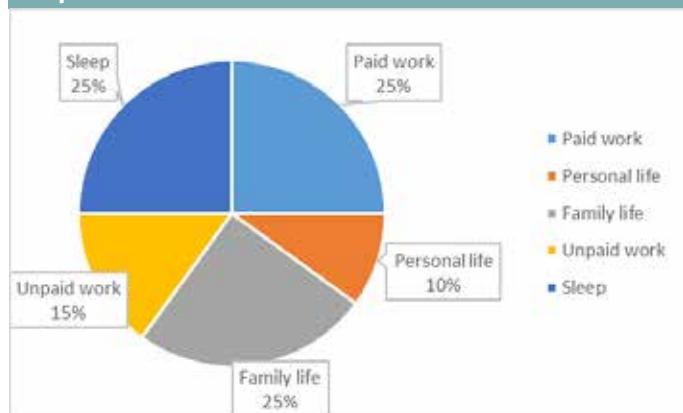
Graph 2b – Ideal Time



Isabel's story

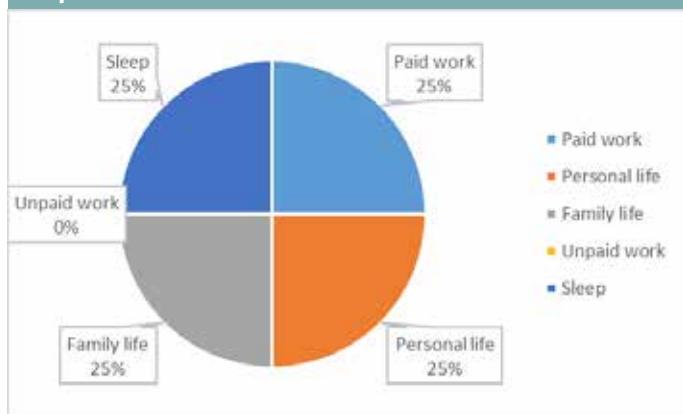
Isabel is a 38-year-old woman, born in S. Jorge de Arroios, Lisbon. She attended higher education and works with business prospecting techniques seeking to match the needs of companies with the capabilities of the people she supports when looking for work. She is single and lives with her 11-year-old daughter, which requires a very balanced management of paid and unpaid work time to ensure she can still be present for her family and devote some time to her interests.

Graph 3a – Isabes Real Time



The capability to dream exists and for Isabel the aspiration is to study again. The solution is utopian since it is not possible to eliminate unpaid work, but the challenge of finding solutions that allow to outsource some domestic tasks or compensate women for the time spent on these activities will be taken into account in the recommendations.

Graph 3b –Isabel's Ideal Time



Sónia's history

Sónia is a 41-year-old woman, born in Cape Verde. She is single, lives with her young son. She attended higher education but is unemployed. Among her different professional experiences, she has worked as an administrative assistant, working at the counter, was a cashier and worked in catering.

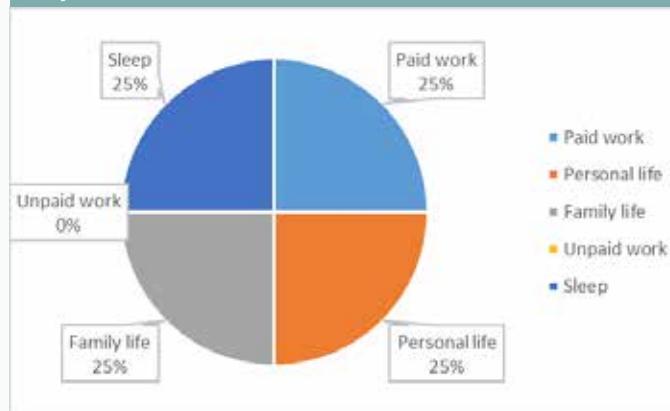
She devotes a large part of her time looking for work and the vulnerable situation in which she finds herself does not allow for sufficient rest. Family life occupies a significant part of her day.

Graph 4a – Real Time



Just as Isabel, she dreams of a life free of domestic chores, with more time for the family, but above all with a professional activity that will allow her to achieve and aspire to a different time management with less worries.

Graph 4b – Ideal Time

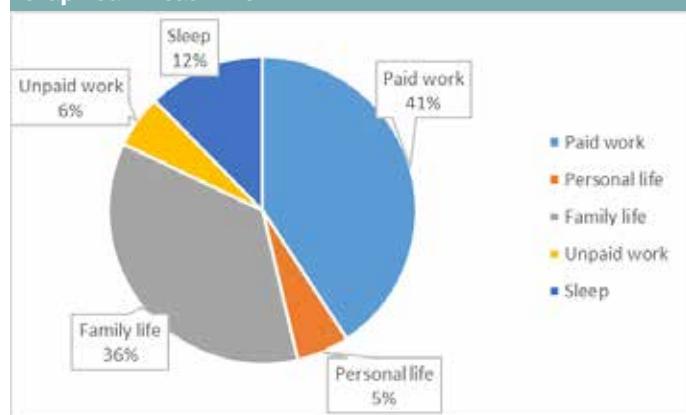


Ana's history

Ana is a 37-year-old woman, born in Brazil. She is married and lives with her husband and daughter who is not yet two years old. Ana is a sociologist and researcher. She is aware of discrimination and has worked with vulnerable populations.

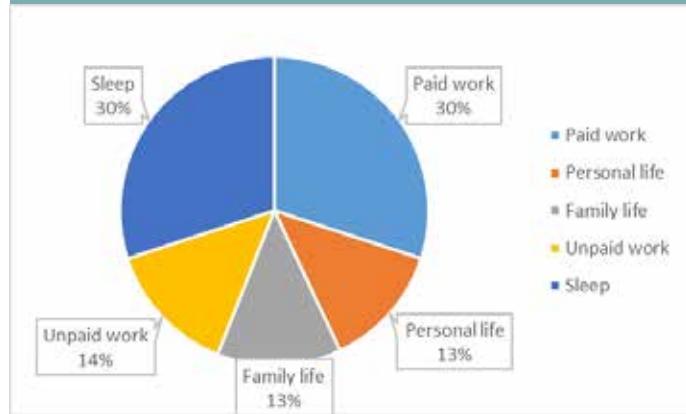
She is currently unemployed but maintains research and social intervention activities. She devotes much of her time to activities that should be paid for, which is a denunciation of the precarious academic and research careers.

Graph 5a – Real Time



Family life occupies a significant part of her day but the goal is to return to paid work in a more balanced way and increase the time to devote to herself and meaningful activities for her personal life.

Graph 5b – Ideal Time



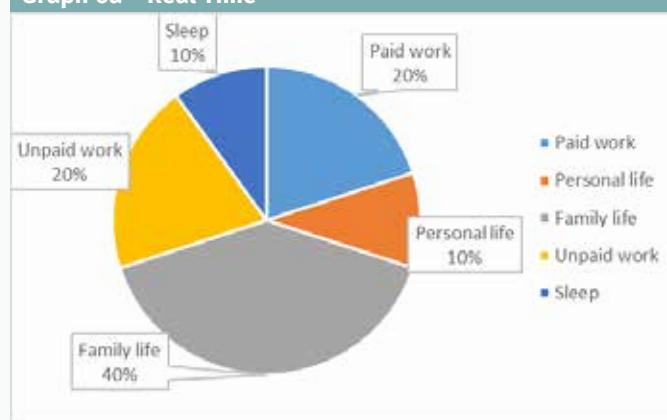
Helena's story

Helena is a 43-year-old woman, born in Cape Verde. She is single, has two daughters and lives with one of her daughters and her granddaughter.

Helena is a mediator at the Foreigners and Borders Service and is committed to training as a way to progress in the labour market but also as a means of personal fulfilment.

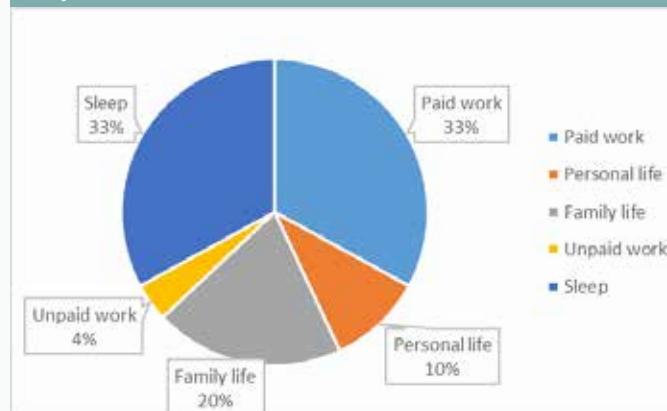
The migration trajectory forced a period of separation from her daughters, which was painful but allowed her to find strategies to overcome them. Reconciliation requires strategy and the definition of priorities.

Graph 6a – Real Time



The aspiration is to be able to devote more time to paid work and self-care, which depend on greater family independence and autonomy. Domestic work is another activity that should be reduced in an ideal daily life.

Graph 6b – Ideal Time

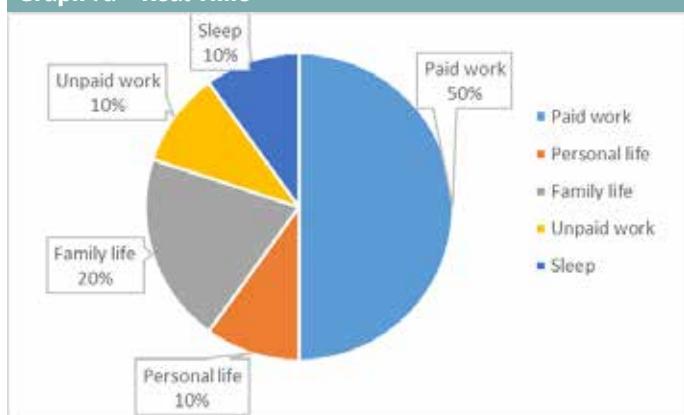


Catarina's story

Catarina is a 33-year-old woman, born in Cape Verde. She is single but lives with her uncles in a four-person household. She is also a mediator at the Foreigners and Borders Service.

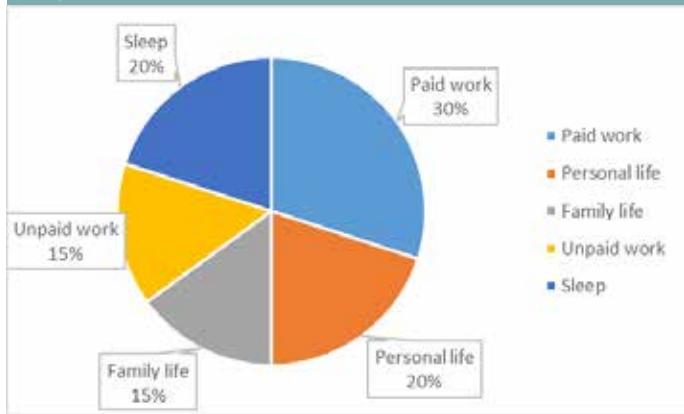
The professional dimension has a particular meaning in her autonomy and independence although she devotes a lot of time to family life.

Graph 7a – Real Time



The aspiration is to reduce the intensity of work in order to be able to devote more time to personal life and self-care without abandoning work responsibilities or caring for the family.

Graph 7b – Ideal Time

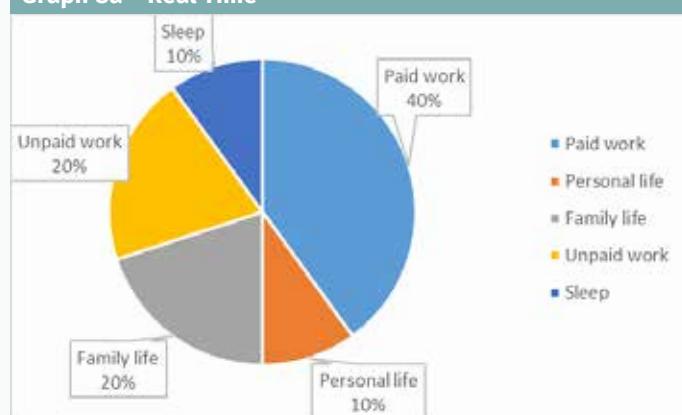


Sandra's history

Sandra is a 33-year-old woman, born in Guinea-Bissau. She is single and lives with her daughter because her partner emigrated to France to work.

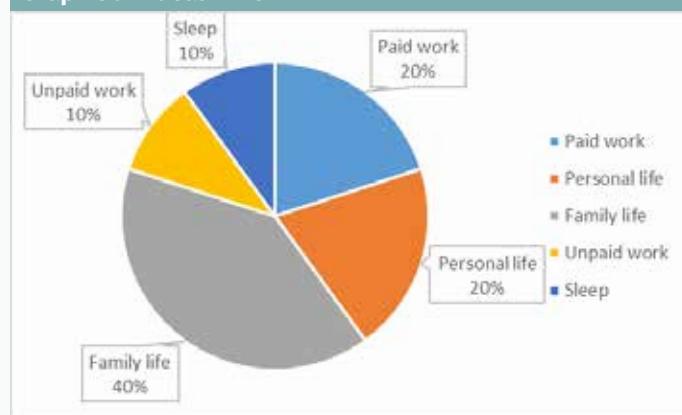
Sandra is a kitchen helper and like many of the women we spoke to, she occupies about 40% of her time with paid work and has little rest given the accumulated investment in family life and unpaid work.

Graph 8a – Real Time



Also, for Sandra, the aspiration is to reduce the intensity of work and her choice is to be able to devote more time to family life but once again without leaving the job market.

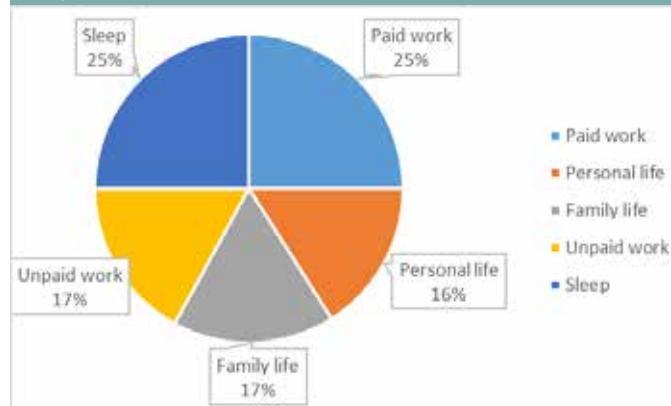
Graph 8b – Ideal Time



Paula's history

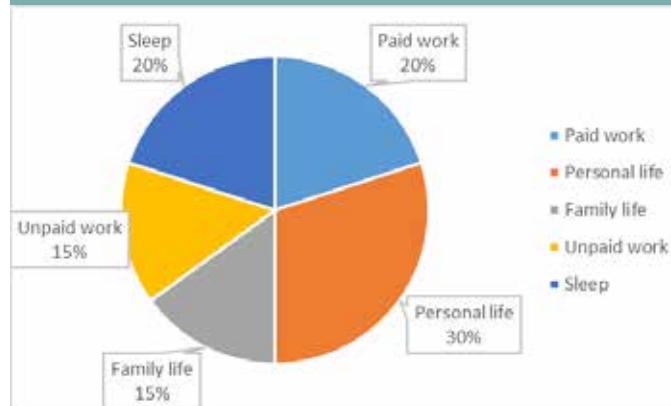
Paula is a 32-year-old woman, born in Lisbon. She lives in a *de facto* union with her partner and their son. Paula is a psychologist and works with people in a vulnerable situation and in employability projects. The reconciliation strategies allow a balanced management of daily life where, although with less duration, she does not give up time for her personal life.

Graph 9a – Real Time



Perhaps because the appeal to the capability to dream and aspire inspires continuous improvement and experimentation, Paula does not dream of radical changes but of more time to devote to her personal life.

Graph 9b – Ideal Time

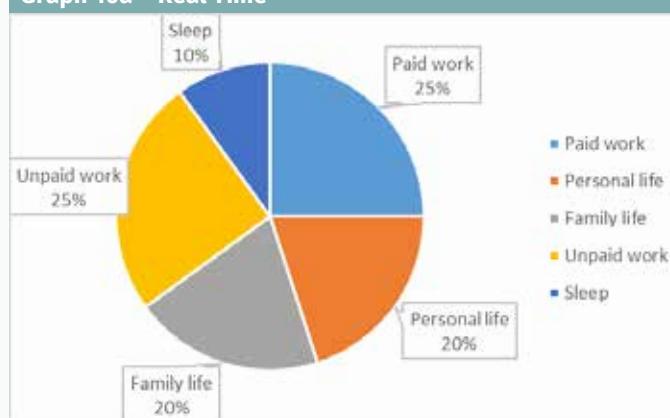


Elisabete's history

Elisabete is a 35-year-old woman, born in Lisbon. Single, no children, she lives with her boyfriend. She has a university degree as a documentalist but is a social intervention technician.

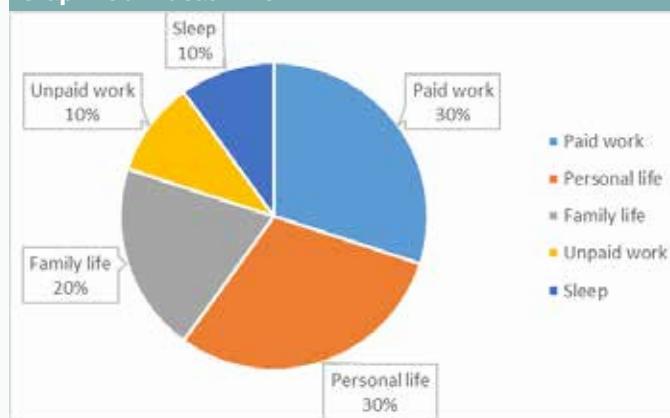
Time management indicates the need for a better reconciliation strategy that allows her to devote more time to self-care.

Graph 10a – Real Time



However, Elisabete's choice is to have more time for paid work and personal life, so she chooses to join the participants who demand more support in order to reduce the number of hours devoted to unpaid work.

Graph 10b – Ideal Time



Direct Speech

Paula

“It was difficult in the sense that I stayed home for five months, and until then it was super quiet, and even during the pregnancy phase, the preparation for my departure was all super peaceful. Concerning my partner, it was more difficult because it also coincided with the period when he changed job and therefore had more commitments and greater responsibilities with the entity he was leaving and meanwhile he started simultaneously to assume the new functions and therefore it was a complicated time”. Paula

When talking about her experience and about the exercise of the right to parental leave, Paula tells us that the moment when couples are parents for the first time is a moment of adjustment that can be difficult. To highlight also how it is not always possible to enjoy the rights in more vulnerable moments such as the beginning of professional activity.

“Of course, my role as a mother and the issues associated with maternity are important but my professional dimension was also important and that it could return to as normal as possible. And so being back on the regular schedule was also an important moment for me”. Paula

Paula also tells us that motherhood and dedication to family life do not eliminate the desire to remain in the job market and even to evolve in a professional career.

“Yes, yes, the extension of the day care schedules and that doesn't imply an increase in cost. There are day care centres and social answers that could receive children from 6am or 7am and until 7am or 8pm, but this schedule implies a higher payment and the overwhelming majority of families and women cannot afford it. Beyond the number of vacancies. It is a complication”.

“It's not simply because women have children that this should be an obstacle to accessing the labour market. I think that the social / educational answer should be free and should have a schedule that addresses what is the real need of women in relation to the labour market. It is an imminently public responsibility”. Paula

In these two excerpts we realize the importance of free or controlled public services for the maintenance of women in the labour market.

“I think the situation should be the same in the sense that if the family cannot, older people must have some answer. Here in the neighbourhood, it is obvious that there are many elderly people in isolation that, if it weren't for some resources that we were able to mobilize and projects that we have running during the period of confinement, would have been terrible. How would these elderly people have had access to food, medication, have minimal contact with someone, whoever they were. It's a very real need”. Paula

Reinforced by the social emergency situation we live, Paula talks about the importance of other support services for the elderly or other dependent people to keep women in the labour market.

“Vocational training financed for the unemployed people even foresees the co-payment and sometimes the full payment of the day care centre or the social answer where the child is, precisely so that mothers with dependent children can participate in vocational training, which I think is a great added value. The great difficulty for women is to find answers where to integrate their children, and therefore we return to the usual problem that there isn't a sufficient answer available in time for the needs of women in this sense”. Paula

In this excerpt we can see the importance of redesigning and resizing some of the answers that exist since they do not effectively address the needs of women in a vulnerable situation.

"I feel that it is a very stressful job most days and that it ends up having a direct or indirect influence on what my family dynamics is and to prevent it from doing it with greater damage implies a very large investment to try to delimit what is the personal scope of what is the professional context and the limits between the two; and what are my problems or difficulties of my work and the problems or difficulties of the family dynamics is not easy, it is very demanding". Paula

The importance of deepening public employment and social benefit policies is striking when we realize the real challenges in reconciling professional, family and personal life.

"Of course, we must continue to invest in projects like this that help the community and women to reflect on these issues of motherhood, family life, reconciliation with professional life and to have a more critical and active sense in these issues that, as we talked about earlier, often and unintentionally we may be women, we can perpetuate certain types of practices because we are unable to adopt a critical sense towards our situation and how we feel good. That is why I think it is a topic that is very important to continue to be talked about, deepened and to involve women and men in these issues. So, I think it was very useful!" Paula

One last comment reinforces the usefulness of the project and the importance of increasing the discussion and knowledge about the reconciliation between professional, family and personal life.

Elisabete

"In the past, especially when I was still living at my parents' house, I did many hours beyond normal hours, I took work home and obviously this separation between personal life was not that great. But when I went to live with my partner things changed even because we had to negotiate here so that I wouldn't stay at work until 9:00 pm and then I managed to keep a better balance here. Obviously, this is not always possible but it's much better than it was before without a doubt. And I really make a point of maintaining, of dividing the personal life from the professional life and to have found a cell phone even just for the professional part was a great relief let's say so, even psychological because when I leave work I hang up and I know that from that moment on and until I return to work again, I don't have to worry about professional issues". Elisabete

Elisabete, like many participants, always had long workdays and sought, on her own initiative, reconciliation strategies from the moment she started conjugalit. Simple and creative measures such as the use of a telephone devoted to work that should not depend only on the initiative of the workers.

"There is also one issue, that the pandemic has further aggravated, that is the closure of day care centres, kindergartens, ATL's where the first contact reference is almost always the mother, so it is almost always the mother who has to miss work, stay in prophylactic isolation with her children and obviously this has also created another inequality with parents. Because we know well that often the issues of education and even support and family control fall on women. And the pandemic made it even worse because, being in prophylactic isolation, obviously you're missing work, obviously you're getting less, and although the absences are justified, at the end of the month you get less for that. That's why we're talking about a wage gap between men and women that with this pandemic is going to get even worse". Elisabete

The emergency placed social problems under a magnifying glass and often under a gender lens that Elisabete uses in her reflection.

"But it is talking about gender from an intersectional perspective, that is, looking at issues of race, race as a social construct, looking at issues of social class, and looking at issues of gender identity. In other words, we do not think that, as many times when I see news of inequality and the news recently emerged that, as of November, women in Europe are almost working for free until the end of the year. And I wonder what kind of wages are they talking about? They are certainly not talking about women who have four, five jobs of about two hours each and who take home just over 500 euros and are working in four, five places simultaneously. They're probably not talking about these women. They are probably also not talking about women who are undocumented, who have no documentation and therefore have no social security discounts and are not counted as workers." Elisabete

This excerpt demonstrates the depth of analysis and the multidimensionality of issues related to poverty and the vulnerability that is required when talking about reconciling professional, family and personal life.

"I think that this work with companies in terms of raising awareness of human rights, of people's labour rights with a special focus on gender equality but also with a special focus on intercultural issues and the importance of diversity in the workplace. And besides that, I also consider it is important to do it within companies, to do activities, so to speak, in which the State institutions themselves can play this role in carrying out these activities, in partnerships with these companies". Elisabete

Once again, the participants highlight the need for public intervention and awareness raising among employers so that women in a vulnerable situation can balance family and personal life with participation in the labour market.

"I think that the focus groups that we did, despite not having completed them, confirmed that. To spend a Saturday, just to come and because they really believe that talking about these issues, debating these issues and finding solutions to some of the problems is extremely important not only for us but also for other women who unfortunately don't get this time. Only this fact and this project has shown exactly that, that there is this willingness to work on these issues and that women are available for that". Elisabete

Once again, the role of the REGAL project in the construction of a safe space for reflection that has allowed women's voices to be heard and solutions that go beyond their individual needs and seek to contribute to society as a whole to be discussed.

Isabel

"I finished my degree. At the time I wasn't working in the area yet, I worked in catering, I was a manager in a Pizza place. The possibility arose to move to the area by going to an employability office where I am still. I entered with other functions but it was my first job and I jumped into the professional area. In the beginning, besides reconciliating work with personal life, leaving one job and entering the other, I still put the letter in the middle. It was a more troubled time because there I had to have a rigor, a discipline that if I didn't fulfil it millimetrically I wouldn't be able to". Isabel

Reconciliation is a challenge and balance is often difficult to achieve.

"I have never given space to any employer. I am as I am. I am very frontal and I know my rights and I also like my work area very much for that. To be able to inform the applicants about

their duties but above all about their rights. I had maternity leave. I enjoyed the six months. I came back and had one year of breastfeeding but I still continued with the breastfeeding period until Tania had eighteen months in which I had to take the declaration". Isabel

Isabel's individual assertiveness has allowed her to overcome several obstacles and exercise her rights.

"I think it's remembering again that they work with people. What I feel is that most companies and institutions at this moment forget that they work with people. Because they forget that people get sick, that people have children. That people have the right to enjoy their vacation period. They forget! And the worker is seen as a machine that has to be available during the working hours but also outside the working hours, at least that is the feeling I have". Isabel

This image highlights the importance of greater intervention with employers and the need to raise awareness.

"I think these are all situations in which, although there is legal protection, in practice as it is not applied and is not accompanied by government bodies, I think people feel a little lost because they always have to put work first because it is it that at the end of the day will allow that family to have sustainability. So, I think it's important that if there were policies that were operationalized, but well, if there were proper follow-up, not punitive but educational, to work to achieve something better, yes, I think it would make all the sense and all the difference".
Isabel

Once again, the importance of supporting people in a vulnerable situation in exercising their right to reconciliation and signalling the discrepancies between the law and real life.

"What I most see and speak from experience is the willingness of many people to continue their studies and not be possible. I know it's a different quality but higher education brings a different value but the tuition fees we have to pay are such that no matter how much you want it, you don't get it and then it is related to reconciliation because the workload and higher education are still very well thought out for those who do nothing else and if the person is already a mother, a father, has his / her house, has his / her work, it means that out of the twenty-four hours of a day maybe eighteen or nineteen are already occupied. "Isabel

The low incomes and the schedules of the available training make it impossible to make many dreams come true while at the same time preventing access to really important tools to improve women's positioning in the labour market.

"I think it was very positive. First for us to become aware of what our life trajectory is. Because I think that during our daily life we don't stop, we don't evaluate what are all the goals we have been reaching, all the good things we already have, all our potential and then project forward. And being there and listening to other colleagues, their difficulties, how they achieved what they also have, how they fought each of their fights ends up giving us a boost".
Isabel

"And I think that many of the people who are now living their lives feel no encouragement, because they don't have that indication and have forgotten that if they speak, if they make known what their desires are, this could have a future result. Since they are not heard, no one asks them, no one wants to know that the person is just living, breathing". Isabel

These excerpts reinforce the importance of the REGAL project for the participants and validate the methodology used as a way to empower people in a vulnerable situation.

Helena

"But at the same time, I feel that I believe that for me it was very brave to free myself, to have the courage to say that despite this, and this being good, it doesn't make me happy and I will leave. And start again from scratch. And that's why at that time I had chosen that symbol of the key for being able to leave home and have my own home with my daughters". Helena

Single parent families are mostly led by women who have to ensure the livelihood and the family's emotional and social needs.

"This loss of employment came from the racist behaviour of a boss with whom I had a confrontation. I've always been like that, and I have even lately, I don't know if it's age or what, but I've been trying to curb that impulse in me to confront racism like that, because it has also hurt me a lot in some aspects. The beginning was like this, I lost my job because among so many women employees who suffered that, I'm one of those who went to the front line and discussed the situation".

The importance of intersectionality to understand vulnerabilities and face discrimination is very present in this episode of Helena's life.

"But I took advantage of that opportunity, took the letter to the unemployment fund, received an allowance and enrolled in those courses that were emerging from new opportunities and that was also how my return to school began. So, I enrolled in a professional course of educational action auxiliary that at the time also gave equivalence to the 9th grade, although I had done the 9th grade in Cape Verde previously, but as the equivalence was not equal, then I also needed to complete that level and it was from there that I began to study again." Helena

Helena's resilience shows how training and education are fundamental to creating opportunities in the labour market.

"Since I arrived here in Portugal, I've seen many women doing jobs that I like but not as a professional activity, I've always wanted to run away, and I think that deep down it's one of the reasons I want to be studying all the time. Because I didn't have many references here for work. Women I know are here in their twenties and thirties working from morning till night and not having an income that allows them to accompany their families. I didn't want that life for myself. I had few references. I didn't have someone with whom I could go to a bank and say this person understands." Helena

The importance of representativeness and references to enable the choice of better paths than those taken by other women in more vulnerable situations is also an important warning

"Even if you sleep, when you sleep because you really have to sleep even if it's four hours, you are constantly working and this happens deep down with most women, it doesn't happen with men as much as it happens with women. So, I think that at least and it's an expression to have a wage so it was already very good. First it made it possible to have a higher income and prevented them from having to work so much and maybe that time would be devoted to the realization of their own dreams, which don't always have to be with having more studies but sometimes women have other dreams that don't come true because they are busy supporting their families. So that would be one of the measures that if I could I would implement." Helena

Solidarity and creativity are two important factors in finding solutions for a better balance between work, family and personal life. A wage for domestic work is a subject for debate but it reveals the importance of income level and time use for women in a vulnerable situation.



