

REGAL: researching Work-Life-Balance for vulnerable groups



Methodological Toolkit

 This project is co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union



1.	REGAL Methodological Toolkit	3
2.	PART ONE Ideas, theories and principles	6
3.	PART TWO The case studies	14
4.	PART THREE Learnings and sample methods	33

This report constitutes as deliverable for Work Package 2 of the REGAL project.

March 2021

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p.a. REGAL

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This publication is also available via <http://www.regalproject.eu>

This publication is part of the REGAL project, this project has received funding from the European Union's REC-RGEN-WWLB-AG-2018 program under Grant Agreement No 831596.

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1. REGAL Methodological Toolkit

Introduction

This toolkit provides an overview and detailed explanation of the innovative methodological approach developed for the REGAL project. It is written for co-researchers; NGOs, trade unions, and community groups undertaking research with vulnerable people and the vulnerable as co-researchers themselves. The handbook is developed in a way that is 'user friendly'. It provides a brief overview of the theories and principles behind the methodological approach, case studies of how it was implemented in practice in five countries, key learnings and sample participatory methods that can be used.

This toolkit combines the knowledge of previous research projects like REInVEST, the participatory methodology known as the PAHRCA (participatory action Human Rights and Capability research), and the methodology of storytelling used in research about migration to innovate the methodology of storytelling.

REGAL was co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union under grant agreement number 831596. The project investigates the possibilities of achieving a better work-life balance for vulnerable groups in five countries: Belgium, France, Ireland, Portugal and Romania. The existing measures to achieve a better balance are based on a 'normal' life situation: families who have regular work and are not in a precarious situation. These Work-Life-Balance (WLB) measures aim to achieve a high level of employability among women and men through a good balance between the needs of the family and the requirements of work. WLB concentrates on the time shortages of families (and especially women) to reconcile work and life.

The REGAL project examines the precarious situation of families. The precarious situation is an additional barrier for achieving employment and a good work-life Balance. A precarious situation is determined in particular by poorer working conditions (irregular work), a poor housing situation and a poor financial situation. All these elements can be an obstacle to find a good work-life balance. REGAL examines how measures can be taken within the WLB to ensure a better balance for these vulnerable families and to give them an incentive to be able to work.

This toolkit is rooted in practice and, therefore, includes and reflects the experience of its implementation throughout. All of the participants in REGAL contributed in an iterative and participative way to coproduce the methodological approach set out in this toolkit. The research methods are based on the ones we used to undertake the REGAL project and they include feedback and reflections we learnt from our attempts to make the methodologies of PAHRCA and storytelling work in the real world with vulnerable groups and intermediaries. It is, therefore, principally an accessible and practical toolkit for the practice and implementation of participatory action research (PAR).

The remainder of this toolkit is about the REGAL methodology approach and advice for those co-researchers who are interested in finding out more about it and using it in practice. For readers who want to know more about individual country findings to the different research questions, or for overall analysis please refer to the publications section of the REGAL website¹. These publications also include the first-hand experiences and views of the co-researchers from the vulnerable groups.

1. Available at: <https://www.regalproject.eu/documents/>

For readers who want more detail and explanation of the theoretical concepts underpinning this research please refer to the **PAHRCA Handbook Part 1: The Theory**² and to a short series of briefing papers available on the **RE-InVEST** website³, and to the various works referenced in this toolkit on storytelling.

The main sections of the rest of the toolkit include:

- **Part One** introduces the key ideas, theories and principles underpinning the methodological approach including the theories of PAHRCA and storytelling.
- **Part Two** provides detailed case studies of the five participating countries. Each case study outlines the innovative methods used and reflections. These case studies can be used as a guide-for-practice in the implementation of PAR.
- **Part Three** builds on the learnings from Re-inVEST by examining the case studies, identifying key issues and outlining useful practical steps to overcome any challenges in facilitating PAR with vulnerable groups. This section also includes a selection of innovative sample methods used in the various research projects in the five countries.

We hope that this toolkit inspires you to implement a participatory action approach to your research and engagement with vulnerable groups. Our collective experience of implementing PAHRCA and storytelling has been one of enthusiasm toward its core aim of involving and empowering the excluded and vulnerable through a participatory human rights and capability approach. Our principal advice to those undertaking this approach is to 'learn to listen without prejudices, to learn to let people develop their story, to learn to believe in the creativity of experimental communities' (Jon Dewey)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

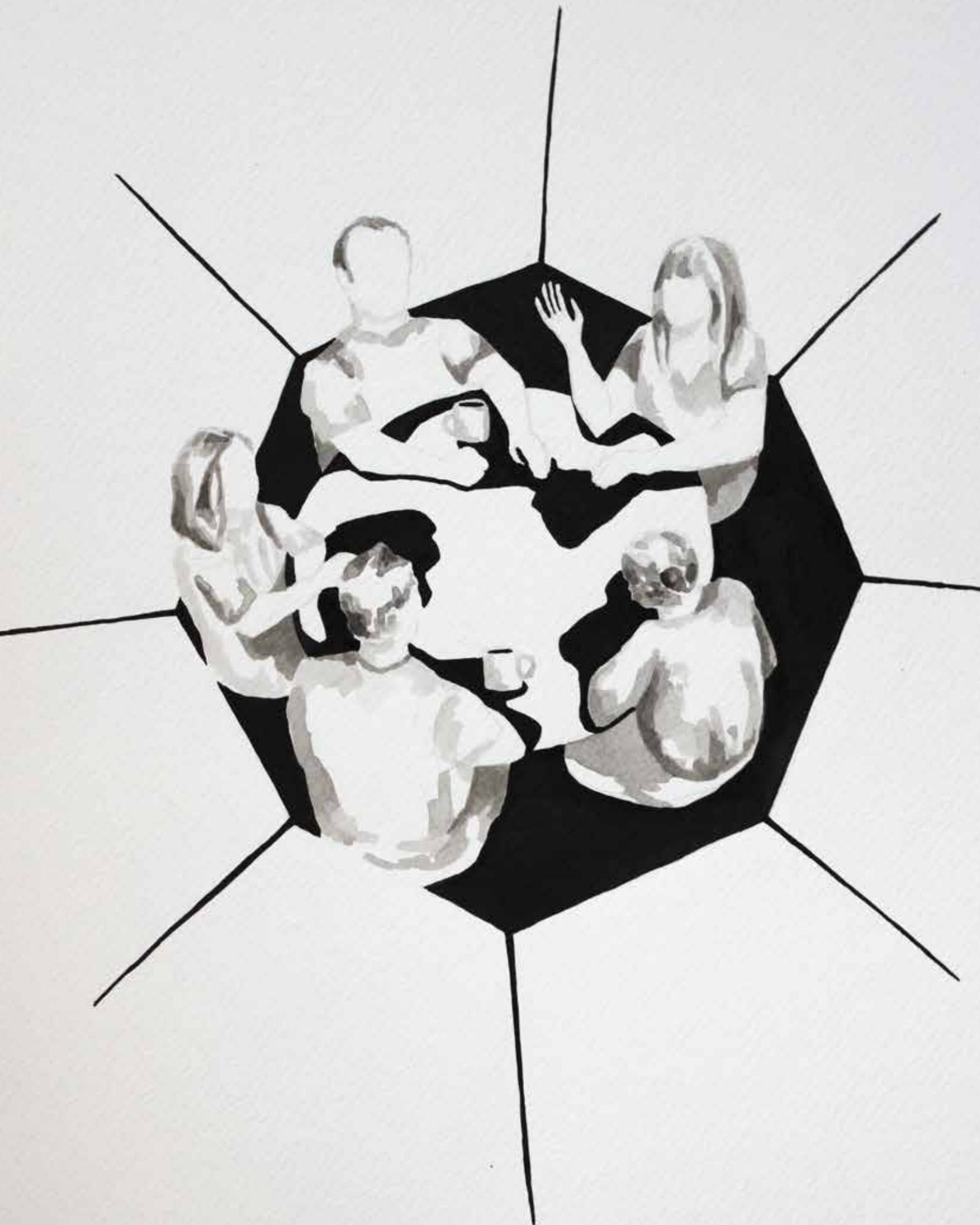
We thank all participants of the focus groups (or co-researchers) for their commitment and patience, and for their belief in the journey of REGAL. Despite the many obstacles COVID-19 has put in the way, all participants contributed to bring this project to a good end.

We thank the European Commission for the opportunity to realise a project like REGAL. Vulnerable people are seldom at the core of a project, and are seldom heard. This project gives them a voice and a public who want to listen to them.

We also thank the staff of all the research teams in the participating NGOs, they have done a great job, often in difficult and challenging times.

2. Available at: http://www.re-invest.eu/images/docs/books/PAHRCA_Part_1_The_Theory_2019_Digital.pdf

3. Available at: www.re-invest.eu



2. PART ONE

Ideas, theories and principles

PAHRCA

Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach or PAHRCA was developed within 'Rebuilding an Inclusive, Value-based Europe of Solidarity and Trust through Social Investments' – RE-InVEST project. The Re-InVEST project was a European Union H2020 funded research involving 19 organisations (13 universities and 6 NGO's – including research centres and civil society organisations working with vulnerable groups). The ambition of the Re-InVEST project (2015-2019) was to contribute to strengthening the philosophical as well as the institutional and empirical underpinnings of the SIP – European Pillar of Social Rights – with a view to fostering a more inclusive Europe.

PAHRCA is a methodological framework and it brings together participatory, human rights and capability theory into one research approach. The aim of the research approach is to bring people into processes which involve them challenging and changing their own world and participating in co-production. It involves a longer period of relationship building between the actors in the research; academics, intermediary groups like NGOs and vulnerable groups. Individuals are considered co-researchers, who are jointly co-constructing knowledge and then undertaking some form of collective action that brings that knowledge as a form of power into the public sphere. The goal is not only data extraction, or the production of knowledge, but is about working with vulnerable groups to empower them to understand and challenge the structures that cause their marginalisation and oppression.

PAHRCA is a flexible approach with five key steps:

1. Identify, meet and develop agreement with partner NGO/intermediary
2. Preliminary 'meet ups' with participants – trust building
3. Developmental & capacity building: educate & implement human rights & capability approach: capacity building
4. Inquiry/data gathering/analysis: method of inquiry
5. Undertake action/outcome

A comprehensive guide to PAHRCA can be found in the **PAHRCA Handbook Part 1: The Theory from the Re-InVEST project**¹.

Storytelling

"Stories are deeply serious, all about transformation. How we're changed by things. Or made to change. Or have to learn to change. And that's what we're working on, change".
(Ali Smith, Spring)

Stories are essential in our daily lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and who others are. They interpret their past, their experiences through these stories. So, a story is a portal through which a person enters the world and a means by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.

REGAL starts from this portal to understand the ways vulnerable women try to create a genuine work-life balance. Through storytelling these women describe their daily lives and their struggles. The act of storytelling also gives them the opportunity to step beyond their own lives. Stepping beyond their own lives is reaching out to a better life, better work-life conditions.

1. http://www.re-invest.eu/images/docs/books/PAHRCA_Part_1_The_Theory_2019_Digital.pdf

This ambition needs theoretical and practical bases. In this chapter we highlight some aspects of our theoretical assumptions.

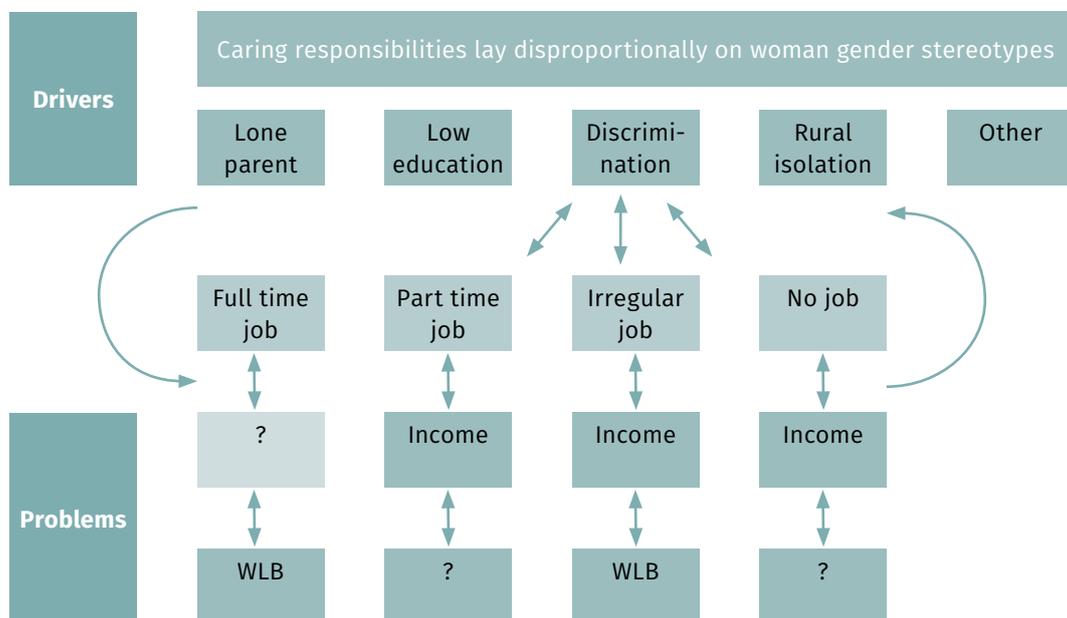
To tell a story²

*“The researcher does not find narratives but instead participates in their creation”*³

Daily life is an amalgam of several moments, some of which have sometimes 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.



2. 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
 3. Riessman, 2008, p 21

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.

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 Approach⁴.

The Capability Approach departs/starts 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.

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

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.

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 objectivity⁵.

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.



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.

5. Sen A. Positional Objectivity. Philosophy and Public Affairs. 1993

REGAL starts with simple interviews⁶, 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 other's stories some similarities, and 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.

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".

Hirschman⁷ 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"⁸. 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

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

7. Hirschman, Albert (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Harvard University Press. pp. 176

8. 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.

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 enriches their capacity to “voice”. They have more responses, more recommendations to change, more ideas about change, ... they also have the metaphors, the rhetoric and the organisation and the public performance.

Otherwise, the poorer are caught in a situation where the fewer triggers to this positive acceleration are available and hard to access, the less they have “voice”. To be voice-less is equivalent to not being able to change the situation in which 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.

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 not to reproduce reality but to actualise, to enrich and 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.

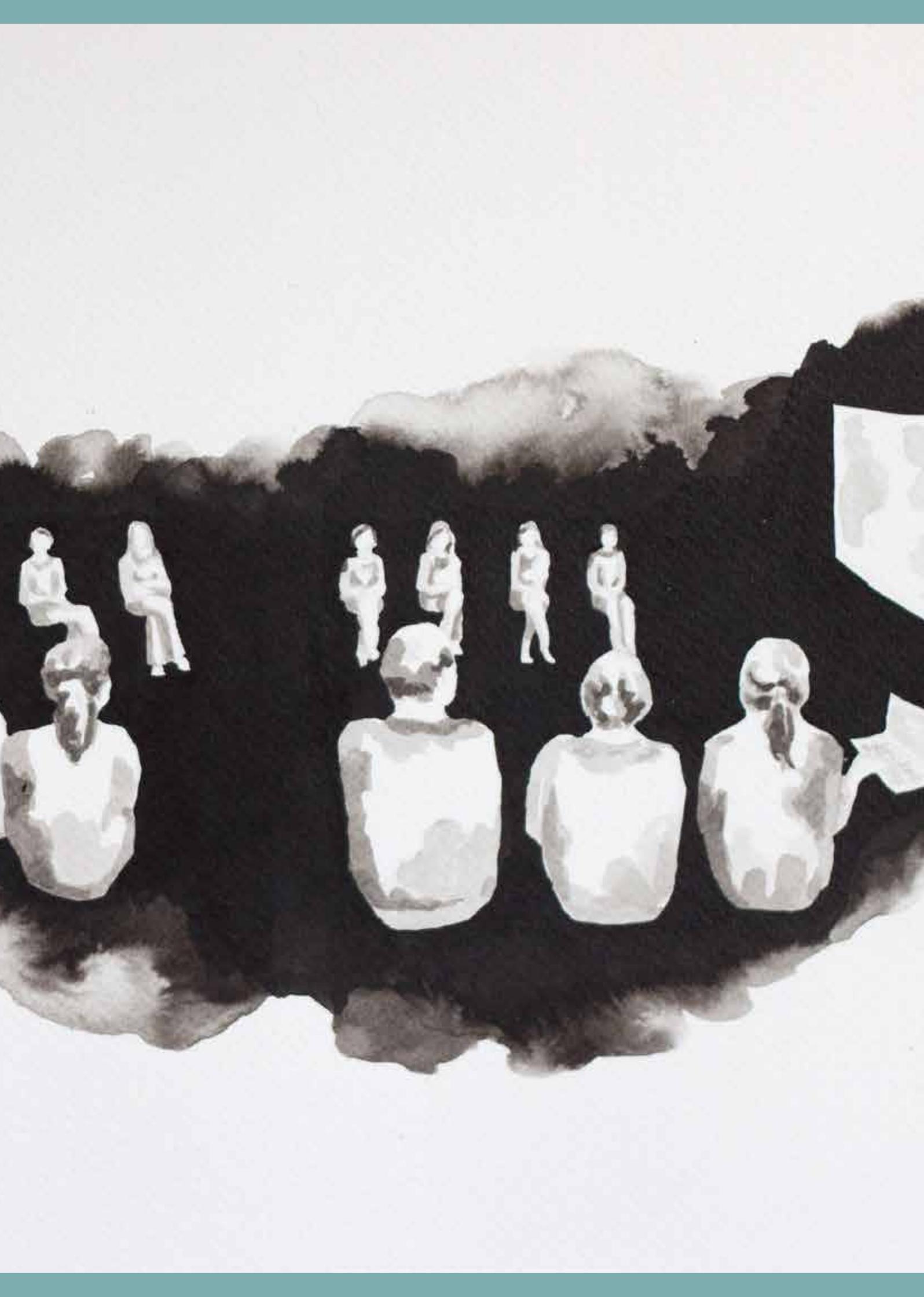
The women showed a kind of fatalism; one of the sentences we regularly heard during the interviews and discussions was: ‘this is life’. Overcoming this common “this is life”-attitude and to overcome the consequentially limited aspirations was a challenge.

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 base, a common ground for realistic solutions for a WLB vulnerable women are looking for.⁹

9. 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. PART TWO

The case studies

This section of the toolkit provides the case studies for the participating countries: Belgium, France, Ireland, Portugal and Romania. Each case study is an account of the professional researchers in the NGO, outlining their methodological approach and their reflections including any challenges encountered.

Belgium: low-skilled women in cleaning sector

REGAL adopts the methodology to work with vulnerable groups developed during the RE-InVEST project. This methodology is based on the Capability Approach, Human Rights Approach and critical social work methodologies, the so-called PAHRCA methodology.

In this approach we follow four steps from creating trust to capacity building, inquiry and outcome. These four steps, outlined below, guide us to develop an adapted methodology in each country.



Target group: adapting the methodology

A methodology always has to be adapted to the target group. Each target group has its own characteristics and own needs and requirements. The methodology of REGAL follows from working with a group of women in more or less the same situation. Starting with interviews, we wanted to create a common vision on the problems these women encounter. Through group sessions we sought to create different possible futures for the women. This concept of group methodology was unsuitable for the Belgium case. The characteristics of the women obliged us to adapt our methodology. The adapted methodology asked much more but at the same time featured shorter sessions than the initial group methodology, and it became much more work intensive. Simultaneously at a later stage, we created an environment to work in smaller groups.

All the women except one are employed in the same company as service personnel. These women see each other daily, from 6 am till noon, or often later. They work together in small groups; each group has a responsibility for one of the floors of the building or the kitchen. The women report that the atmosphere amongst colleagues is good. However, at the same time they do not consider themselves as friends, in the way friends might go shopping together, or to a pub in the evening. The atmosphere among them is fine, but nothing more.

One woman works in another company in another town. She has no connections with the other women. Similar to the other women working in the same company, this woman reports that there is an absence of friendship among colleagues. In this instance, their working relation is even more distant; they only meet each other once every two weeks. It was impossible to find a suitable time that all the women could come together in a group session. The conditions of their employment and its time schedule are strict meaning that a group session with all women was not possible to begin the project.

In light of this situation we started the project with individual sessions where we explained the project and its expectations. The individual sessions with the women varied in length.

From these first conversations we immediately experienced some barriers and a reluctance to talk. They didn't feel comfortable to talk. Building trust was a first challenge.

Building trust: overcoming mistrust

There was clearly a need to build trust between the individual women and the project leaders. In the beginning of the talks the eleven women saw the project as a duty, an obligation. They didn't feel free to collaborate. This sense of obligation was a hindrance for free conversation, a conversation without taboos.

This was less a problem for the woman separate from the group. We could easily talk to her in a neutral room (a hotel lobby). Because of her work situation, she felt more comfortable. Also, communicating key aspects of the research such as anonymity and safeguarding from harm made her more at ease.

Following our early experiences, we thus started a round of conversations with the women to build trust and confidence. At first, we explained the project, the methodology and the questionnaire. Their first questions were about privacy. They wanted real safeguards guaranteeing their privacy. As mentioned, the women are fine colleagues but not friends. They didn't want to share their stories, especially the more sensitive parts, with the other women. They considered their life stories and their own stories of the workplace as private; they didn't want to share everything. The stories about their work and the workplace were very delicate: they asked for more than privacy and anonymity, they didn't feel comfortable if their boss knew their stories.

The conclusion of these conversations was that their broad stories would be only used privately and never used in a group session or in a conversation with the management of the company. We agreed that the condensed story - the rewritten story - could be used in group sessions. The condensed story omits the most sensitive parts of their lives.

We discussed with them also the questionnaire to refine the questions, to rewrite the questions and even to omit some questions. Questions about their families were particularly sensitive. We, the project leaders, answered the questionnaire ourselves to demonstrate to the women what we wanted to investigate. We showed that even with all the safeguards they are not obliged to answer all the questions or that they are not obliged to delve deep into a question.

The goal of all the conversations; making the women feel comfortable, was successful and we could continue in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

Capacity building: investing in appreciation

The interviews can be seen as an investment in the appreciation of the women. The interviews were conversational in nature. The questionnaire was followed, but more important was the interviewee's life story. How the interviewee developed their story was much more important than the succession of the questions.

The interviewee took the lead of the conversation. In this conversation the project leaders were the listeners who had the task to create a story of which the women could be proud of. The story is theirs, it is about their achievements, their concerns, and their successes. During this conversation we witnessed the growing self-appreciation of their own life story. We gave them attention, we were interested in their story, and our appreciation of their lives stimulated their self-appreciation. The conversations were also an investment in storytelling. By using the conversational method, (reframing our questions, asking again the same ques-

tions, delving deeper into some answers) we asked them about the key elements of their story, learning to distinguish between the main and side issues of their stories, and searching for a (thin) red line in their story. This red line was built around the focus of the project, their work-life balance (WLB).

The project leaders stimulated the interviewees to build a story of their life. These conversations were also an investment in speaking in a small group about their life, their concerns and their achievements, their worries about work (at that stage, a lot of cleaners and kitchen staff were on temporary unemployment due to Covid-19). Voicing their worries and achievements helped them to open a dialogue with their superiors.

During the conversations the project leaders provided some explanations about their WLB rights. Most of the women were more or less aware of the existing measures of WLB. They were well aware of the several kinds of services for childcare or family care and of the measures to reduce temporarily the working hours. They didn't make use of most of these measures. But they showed their proudness, their awareness of these measures, about their experiences of some of the measures (mostly used by persons in their network) but also their willingness to learn. One statement was heard several times during the conversations: "it is not because I have not a high degree, I don't know these rights" This growing self-awareness was a significant result of the project.

The conversations were used in the first report about the factual situation of the WLB of vulnerable women. The interviews were also transcribed and rewritten into short stories. These short stories were accepted by the interviewees after amendments were made. This acceptance was a necessary step in the process for the women and the project leaders.

The inquiry: aspiring to a WLB

The inquiry phase builds upon the enhanced self-awareness of these women. This phase in essence requires a group methodology. As mentioned before, in the first months we identified the importance of creating an atmosphere of confidence and trust. Because of the limitations of the focus group work (we didn't receive permission from the management to have all women on the same moment) we went for small groups: These groups were the Dutch speaking, the French speaking, and the women with a migrant background.

The Covid-19 pandemic interfered with our goal to work in small groups. In the first months of the pandemic, even small groups were not allowed. So we had to start again individually, free-wheeling with the women about their aspirations. Freewheeling is based on reversing the problems women has suffered. Freewheeling is not so easy done. Appandurai helps us to clarify the hindrances.

The inquiry is much more than a search for other measures for a real WLB. It is about aspirations of these women for their life. We used here the ideas of Arjun Appandurai¹. For Appandurai aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are thus never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life. Aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs about life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society, the value of peace or warfare.

1. Arjun Appandurai. The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition. In Culture and Public Action. Rao, Vijayendra and Michael Walton (ed). Stanford University Press. 2004. The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition

At the same time, aspirations to the good life tend to quickly dissolve into more densely local ideas about marriage, work, leisure, convenience, respectability, friendship, health, and virtue. More narrow still, these intermediate norms often stay beneath the surface and emerge only as specific wants and choices: for this piece of land or that, for that marriage connection or another one, for this job in the bureaucracy as opposed to that job overseas, for this pair of shoes over that pair of trousers. But here is the twist with the capacity to aspire. It is not evenly distributed in any society. It is a sort of meta-capacity, and the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire.

What does this mean? It means that the better off you are (in terms of power, dignity, and material resources), the more likely you are to be conscious of the links between the more and less immediate objects of aspiration. Because the better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes, because they are in a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial, because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options. They are better able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs. This resource, unequally tilted in favour of the wealthier people in any society, is also subject to the truism that “the rich get richer”, since the archive of concrete experiments with the good life gives nuance and texture to more general norms and axioms; conversely, experience with articulating these norms and axioms makes the more privileged members of any society more supple in navigating the complex steps between these norms and specific wants and wishes. And vice versa.

Appandurai shows that vulnerability limits the possible range of aspirations just because the limited experiences people have. In the first report we accentuated the modest wishes and wants of the interviewees. This modesty can hinder a true search for WLB for vulnerable women.

Our methodology takes into account these limitations of modesty. We had already asked during the interviews to prioritize their concerns about WLB. Which issues are for them more important than others and why? We brought these different priorities together on large sheets of paper and presented it to them in a new round of conversation. We stimulated their creativity by reversing the problems. Reversing the problems, looking at concerns from a different angle demands a kind of freedom from worries. Interviewees have to step beyond their own situation.

We confronted the participants with different but still realistic (for them) situations of WLB: same remuneration versus higher remuneration, full time versus part time, early hours versus 9am to 5pm hours, making use of social services of own network (family, friends, neighbours, ...), conditions for quality of work. These several images, situations challenged them to step beyond but at the same time to reckon with their own situation.

The conditions of a freedom to speak we created from the first sessions on helped the women to step beyond their own situation. For most of the women it was not so easy, sometimes it was only small steps beyond their own situation.

Outcome

The synthesis of the several stories is the product of their work, it belongs to them, it's their merit. In a final conversation we asked the women how they saw this project. Their evaluation of the project is also an essential step in the growing of self-awareness of the women.

France: women with a migration history

In the context of the project REGAL, Grdr² formed a group of 12 women whose common denominators are, besides of either being currently or having been in the past confronted with issues of work-life balance, the fact they are migrant women (born abroad), living in the region of Ile-de-France and being involved in associative or entrepreneurship activities and projects. This commitment induces an additional stake in the challenge of work-life balance. Along with conciliating working and family time, being involved associatively emerges as an extra issue for these women.

The methodology put in place by the Grdr with the group of migrant women is built around five stages which will be described below:

1. Egoscropy or “experiential profile”
2. The biographical life story
3. Identification of themes and shared challenges
4. The breakdown of shared issues through meetings with resource people
5. The promotion of individual and collective trajectories and aspirations

It should also be noted that the methodological process put in place is built around a cross-analysis between the individual trajectories and aspirations of each woman, and the declination of these trajectories and aspirations in a collective perspective. Furthermore, it is essential to build a climate of confidence with the group, prior to the development of this methodological approach. To do so, Grdr has approached this process with women by building on three principles:

- Forming, in the first instance, a group of women who have already been accompanied by Grdr, and who feel already confident with the structure since it has provided them concrete responses to their needs through other projects. The aim was to form a group with people that have already met in places of socialisation (workshops, trainings, clubs, etc.) suggested by Grdr.
- Forming a group of migrant women invested in associative projects and with a civic engagement. This approach gave us the opportunity to avoid being limited in promoting people’s individual trajectories and aspirations but also to highlight these women’s investment and to benefit from the REGAL project in order to give greater visibility to their actions. This double approach has encouraged women to be mobilised to the extent that they managed to identify an immediate benefit into being involved in order to make their initiatives known.
- Lastly, the first two stages of the methodology that will be detailed below, “egoscropy” and “biographical life story”, implemented during the three first focus groups, are exercises based on anonymity and aiming to reinforce the interconnection among the participants and create a climate of confidence. It is about an approach methodology that has been built to reinforce the feeling of belonging to a group starting from these individual experiences.

Finally, it is necessary to note the relative impact of the Covid-19 health crisis on the focus group’s format. Even though activities have taken place in the initial format till the third focus group, the following meetings took place online (sessions 4 to 7, from April to July). However, we managed to organise some face to face focus groups for sessions 8 and 9 (from September to October) and end this cycle with an online format (sessions 10 to 12 on November).

2. <https://www.grdr.org/>

Both planned sessions in Strasbourg with a visit of the European Parliament couldn't take place, reducing the symbolic dimension on the process. However, the group's dynamic has not run out of steam as long as we had made the choice of forming a solid and committed group and aiming towards a common goal: improving the working life balance of vulnerable women.

Trust-building: Egoscopy - work on self-image and the definition of the "project"

This exercise consists, for people who lend themselves to it, to become aware of what they are passing on, what they are showing of themselves (their painting). It is a creative and projective technique. It was put in place during Focus groups 1 and 2.

This activity has 5 main objectives: 1) Facilitate the presentation of oneself through a fun non-verbal entry; 2) Identify the image (or images) that you want to give of yourself; 3) Identify your values, get to know your personal universe better; 4) Develop your creative potential and conceptual capacity; 5) Connect personal values and professional opportunities or professional options (career and vocational path). The facilitator then invites everyone to make their own collage using three simple questions: *Where do I come from? Who I am? What are my values? What are my aspirations, my plans for the future?*

It is a question of finding the images (photos, drawings, symbols cut out from magazines or that one produces oneself) that are the most representative of oneself (relative to the three questions asked). The composition of the table is done by gluing the selected elements. The paintings must remain anonymous at first. From this work four dimensions will emerge: 1) The past, the sources having particularly marked individual history (family, informal); 2) What is currently experienced, the values we claim to be, the practices we have (ways of doing things, ways of speaking, ways of acting, ways of learning) that allow us to define ourselves briefly; 3) leisure, activities (professional, associative, etc.); 4) Expectations, aspirations, life plan.

These four major dimensions can exist in multiple relationships to each other, giving a simplified idea of the concrete structure of the individual (or collective) identity considered.

When all the participants have completed their individual work, the paintings are displayed without indicating the name of their authors. The person who wishes it, tries to "read" (decipher) a table and confirm the author, invalidates or completes the explanations given (it is his/her right, also, not to reveal themselves). A collective dynamic, discussions and exchanges can then begin on this experience which is first of all - let us remember - individual and anonymous.

The person concerned says what they wanted to express and what motivated their choice of images. The other participants are invited to react, both on the values represented by the coat of arms considered and possibly on its aesthetic aspects. The facilitator shows the diversity of possible interpretations, but also the constants. The group can also think about why the message went well or did not get through.

This collective work, in addition to helping each person to better understand and manage their own representations, can also help answer a question that will be essential for the next steps of our methodology: Is there a possible table for the group (a culture), a common identity.

Capacity building: Biographical life story (or experiential profile)

We could briefly say that an experiential profile is being presented as a visualisation of a personal itinerary. It expresses the relationship of involvement between one capitalised experience and a project. The emergence of this project takes place thanks to an operation during which both the practitioner and the subject join a partner relationship. This kind of relationship requires a life story interview in which data is collected by using an interview guide.

These terms of discussion and exchange of views promote an evaluation process from both partners. The subject is therefore able to become aware of the meaning of his or her experiences and resources that can be used in a life plan. The practitioner supports the orientation and dynamics of the personal strategy by controlling the operation and the analysis of the experiential profile.

We seek to know in what extent the project can be a part of a reality, as much as people have recalled their life itinerary throughout all this part of the interview without being out of reality. They always stay down to earth since they formulate a project after having reconstructed their life narratives. Most of them say "I don't have a project" but once the interview is over, they discover that they are actually a project leader and that they have accumulated a certain kind of knowledge. They have come out empowered, this is the effect of the emergence of the project: people realize that their goals and aspirations are achievable and this awareness makes them want to invest themselves by evaluating their resources.

To do this, the members of the group are split into six pairs. Each participant tells her story and the practitioner uses the data analysis guide in order to summarize the story. The participant later transcribes the story of her pair to the rest of the group and the other way round. This exercise has been used during focus group 2 and 3.

Identification of key themes

Following this exercise, key words were discussed such as: *De-qualification / professional assignation - Single mother - Skin colour - Pregnant women - Frustration - Work - Employment - Education - Widowed woman - Muslim woman - Discrimination - Immigration - Children - Commitment - Uprooting - Feminism - Prejudice - Politics - Valuation - Social problems - Awareness - Violence - Violence.*

After the presentation in the form of a riddle (in the sense that one member of the group present the story of another women, and the group try to identify who is she talking about), the women were able to tell their real stories and the difficulties they encountered. This allowed us to underline some key themes that we confronted with the key words from the analysis of egoscopy exercises and the experiential profile.

The themes that emerged are the following: *discrimination, violence, immigration, education, commitment, work, integration.* The latter will be at the origin of their situation of vulnerability in the articulation of private/professional life.

Inquiry: Variation of thematic issues

All the key words and themes that emerged from these exercises were grouped around four main issues facing women, which we then discussed in the following focus groups:

Identity and origin (4 and 5)

- Professional integration and access to the job market (6 and 7)
- Professional life and the eyes of employers (8)
- Gender and equality between women and men (9 and 10)

On each thematic axis, the participants identified stakeholder profiles who could bring their expertise on these issues of vulnerability. Each woman volunteered to raise awareness and invite personalities sensitive to these issues to meet them during dedicated focus groups. Each topic is treated as follows:

- The identification of stakeholders targeted in consultation between the Grdr and the group of women
- The invitation of personalities
- The organization of a preparatory session with the women before the meeting with the identified resource persons
- The focus group with the speakers where the women introduce the meetings based on lived experiences, their own stories.

Outcome: Valuation of trajectories and aspirations

The making of the graphic novel

During the entire process, a designer and a screenwriter accompanied the entire group of women in order to transcribe or “recreate” through a graphic novel the 12 stories of the women making up the group, to highlight the common issues encountered by these women in the articulation of their life time, and to highlight their personal and collective aspirations.

Women’s participation in the closing conference in Brussels

In order to give a significant place to the group of women, and to give them a voice, to make them actors of the process, they will participate alongside the Grdr in the Final Conference. They will come to present the work carried out, their analysis of the issues of the articulation of life time for people facing situations of vulnerability and will be the first spokespersons for their conditions and aspirations as migrant women and committed associative actors.

Ireland: women with children who have experienced homelessness

The project in Ireland sought participants with an experience of homelessness and/or housing insecurity and with a care responsibility. In preliminary discussions around recruitment, it had been deemed more appropriate to only recruit women who were no longer in emergency accommodation or precarious housing so that they were removed from the challenging experience of homelessness. However, during the recruitment process we decided to open up recruitment to interested women who were in emergency accommodation provided that their placement was stable and they had the support of a keyworker.

Key workers from Focus Ireland services helped to recruit participants. Most participants were linked to a designated key worker who helped them with their housing situation and with other aspects of their life. The support of key workers was an important ethical consideration in terms of protecting participants considered a vulnerable group.

The methodology undertaken for the project in Ireland was the so-called PAHRCA methodology³. This methodology was developed during the RE-InVEST project which worked with vulnerable groups.

Trust Building: laying the foundations of the research project

Building trust is the foundation of the methodology and without it the research is not possible. It was the component of the methodology that required the most thought, time and effort and therefore requires extensive elaboration.

3. Available at: <https://www.re-invest.eu/documents/books>

For this research, trust building began before approaching participants. In order to successfully recruit, this project required the trust and commitment of the gatekeepers i.e. the key workers. In this instance the role of the key worker is to support and advocate for the service user so they exit homelessness and/or sustain their tenancy and progress in life. They need to be convinced of the research methodology, the aims, its value and that participants will be protected from harm. This was ensured by clear and frequent communication from the research team.

Following the successful recruitment of participants, planning began for the twelve research sessions where the professional research team would work with participants to build capacity and inquire about their experiences of work-life balance.

First impressions are important in life and we wanted to make a good one with the participants. Therefore, the venue we chose to facilitate the research had to be of a good quality, convenient, accessible and a welcoming space; a place where participants would like to come and spend time in and take a break from their realities. Furthermore, because the participants were women with young children, we needed childcare facilities: a designated room and professional child care workers to look after the children. Thankfully we secured an appropriate building in the city centre where we could rent two adjacent rooms; one for the research sessions and another for childcare. We also secured three child care workers⁴. The professional child care workers coupled with an inviting room with toys and books gave piece of mind to participants safe in the knowledge that their children were in safe hands – and importantly offered them the opportunity to fully engage in the research sessions.

Trust building was at the heart of the first five research sessions. In the first session the professional researchers outlined clearly and accessibly in a presentation the research context, aims, expectations and safety protocols (why are we here, what are we going to do together, how we will keep you safe). From the outset we were cognisant of communicating in an accessible “plain English” way that avoids jargon or academic language. This is more difficult than it seems when professionals are conditioned to speak in a certain way with colleagues. We made efforts to adapt our communication technique and made time to explain any words or concepts that were not well known to participants.

In this first session we also spoke about available supports for participants if they were feeling vulnerable at any point over the course of the project. These included instructions to speak to their keyworker, the provision of a list of specialist agencies, or the opportunity to come and speak to any of the research team after the sessions. For this reason, even though the research sessions were two hours in duration, we scheduled more time in the event that participants wanted to talk at the end of the session. And on many occasions some participants did stay and talk about their personal concerns, problems and experiences. Affording this time was a key aspect of the early sessions that displayed to the group that we care and have processes in place to minimise risk. To further bolster this process we dedicated five minutes at the end of each session, in the form of a debrief, to acknowledge the topics we discussed and to remind participants of support options.

We also made clear to participants that co-production is at the heart of the project, that they are co-researcher; that we want to make their voices heard. To showcase this approach, we co-produced a group contract together, outlining what is important to the participants in terms of behaviour, attitudes and privacy. The session ended with a so-called ‘ice-breaker’

4. This research was made possible because of the dedication and skills of the child care workers and we are very grateful for their professionalism and patience

games of a light, fun nature (tell the group one interesting thing about you) that helped us to get to know each other and feel comfortable.

In the next session, we introduced the core piece of our methodology: 'Faith'⁵. Faith is a character with the same experiences and lived reality of participants; she is someone the women can speak to and through, and will ultimately represent the women in the final creative outcome of the project⁶.

We knew that the group of participants was diverse, consisting of various nationalities and, perhaps, cultures. The rationale was that participants may not want to discuss openly their experiences to strangers and that 'Faith' would provide the possibility to speak in general rather than personal terms. Faith did not have a physical form. However, her presence was recognised in the form of a fashioned post box situated in the room in which participants were encouraged to post notes or letters to her at any point, if for example they wanted to offer her advice from lived experience⁷.

In the early sessions, 'Faith' enabled further trust building. Initially participants were asked light questions, for example 'What is Faith's favourite song?' or 'What does Faith like to do to relax?', to deeper questions, for example 'What is Faith most proud of in her life?' or 'What are Faith's problems?'. Participants had the option to respond aloud or to write a response on a piece of paper and stick it to a whiteboard. Getting to know 'Faith' and developing a picture of her life allowed us to connect as a group and importantly to build a sense of solidarity within the group around the barriers in Faith's life and her aspirations. Faith was like them and they wanted the best for her.

Capacity Building: learning to be co-researchers

Once trust and solidarity were established the research moved on to developing the capacity of the group to talk about and understand key concepts.

Several research sessions were dedicated to the discussion and exploration of key concepts in the area of gender inequality: such as love labour, the mental load, the second shift, and women's Christmas - supplemented by data, for example, on time use and pay disparity. The sessions took the form of learning classes, followed by questions and group discussions. During these discussions participants were encouraged to write notes to stick on the whiteboard. This was a way of collecting data, as well as the observational notes taken by two professional researchers in the room.

Time was also given to explore particular policies pertinent to the women; such as childcare, social insurance and entitlements, along with important consideration to the insider/outsider dynamic of social protection which, in Ireland, is historically based on the male breadwinner model i.e. men are the primary income earner. In addition, human rights and political party manifestoes were explored and examined respectively to provide the women with a knowledge of their rights to inform their assessment of current policy thinking and provision. The examination of these issues helped to raise awareness of the barriers in the lives of the women and contributed to robust group discussions in relation to questions such as 'Who is

5. 'Faith' was inspired by Fiona Whelan, a socially engaged artist and educator, who worked as a consultant on the research project. Fiona used a similar methodology in previous work she undertook with marginalised groups in Dublin. <http://www.fionawhelan.com/>

6. 'Testing Faith' webpage, including an interactive diary - 'a week in the life of Faith'. <https://testingfaith.ie/>

7. This was a method of data collection. Several letters were collected.

caring for or protecting you?’, ‘Are you feeling judged?’, ‘Is the system and institutions unfair to you?’, ‘Are your rights being met?’, ‘What are the policies that would make your life better?’ and ‘What do you want to say to those in power?’.

An important aspect of capacity building was feedback. Information was collated after each session and relayed to the group at the beginning of the next session in the form of presentation slides. The slides showed the findings, or learnings from the week before. This was a way to show the group their work as co-researchers – “this is what you have done” – while also offering signs of progress with the project. Several of the women mentioned that they really appreciated the learning element of the research project. Engagement in the group seemed to work better when participants are learning as well as speaking about their own experiences. In this format the discussion facilitates itself.

Inquiry: making steps towards policy analysis

The exploration of work-life balance barriers and aspirations consisted of numerous participative methods. As mentioned in previous sections, the women were encouraged to participate in discussions relating to the research questions either vocally or they had the option to write a note and place it on two whiteboards situated at the top of the room. The notes were both a useful method of data collection and a practical way to engage the participants for whom English was not their first language and were more comfortable communicating in writing (or sometimes drawings) than speaking aloud. Furthermore, the active nature of writing and placing notes on the board created a positive energy in the room and offered the facilitator data to use to further engage the group. For example, the facilitator might identify a particularly interesting note that reads ‘caring is lonely’, share it with the group and use it generate discussion.

In an early session the concept of care was explored using a timeline. Paper sheets were used to create a large 24-hour timeline across a wall in the room. Participants were separated into 3 groups and asked to discuss what care looked like in their lives and to write their insights on coloured paper that corresponded to themes: 1) *type of care*, 2) *cost of care*, 3) *and challenges of care*. These notes were then placed along the timeline. Following the exercise, each of the three groups took turns to discuss their timeline to the wider group. This resulted in rich engagement and discussion.

To enhance the timeline method, participants were encouraged to participate in a photo diary exercise. The purpose was to capture moments in their daily lives under the following themes: *care work, rest and personal care, eating and drinking, travel, paid work or study, housework, shopping and appointments, socialising, sports and leisure*. Participants were asked not to take photos of people⁸, but rather activities or objects e.g. a pile of laundry to show housework, or a book to show leisure time. These photos were sent via Whatsapp to a designated and secure mobile phone. The photos were then printed and used in a subsequent timeline exercise where participants, again split into three groups, were asked to analyse the photos and place along a 24-hour timeline. The use of photography provided powerful imagery that conveyed the lived realities of participants and generated further rich discussion and findings about work-life balance.

The final method of inquiry involved a rating, or voting, exercise used in two instances: 1) policy preferences and 2) human rights preferences. In the case of policies, there was a general election in Ireland at the time of the research and we used this opportunity to examine the manifestos of each political party, specifically in respect of pertinent issues for participants

8. To avoid ethical issues of consent and privacy.

e.g. childcare and flexible employment. In this exercise the group was split into three smaller groups. Each group was provided with handouts containing a selection of policies. The groups were encouraged to debate amongst themselves and rank the policies from most important to least visually on a wall. Once each group had completed the task, they took turns to speak to the wider group about their policy choices. The same method was used to examine and explore human rights. It was observed that these exercises generated much dialogue and debate within the group.

It is important to mention flexibility in terms of methods of inquiry. The group of participants in this research project was diverse, with different levels of language skills and ways of expression and listening and it is useful to encourage different methods of communicating whether that be in voice, written word or illustration. Furthermore, the dynamics of the groups changed every week: some weeks there were new participants, some weeks it was a full and noisy room with many participants, some weeks it was a quiet room with less people. And every week, guaranteed, there were very young children (babies) who stayed with their mothers rather than with the child care workers⁹. Some weeks the babies cried, some weeks they didn't. Thus we had to adapt to the situation for each session. We prepared as best we could by having a suite, or a selection of ways of inquiry: sometimes inquiry worked well as a full group, other times attention levels were low and it was best to split the group into smaller groups or in some instances into pairs to increase engagement levels.

Challenges: Impact of Covid-19

It was at this point in the research that the global pandemic impacted significantly, meaning all remaining research sessions were cancelled for public health reasons. This was unfortunate as we had scheduled a further three sessions to further explore work-life balance aspirations in a creative and participative way and one final session to celebrate the end of the project and to thank the participants. However, after some consultation it became possible to conduct individual in-depth semi structured qualitative interviews by phone with four participants. In these interviews we focused specifically on their stories of work-life balance aspirations.

Outcome: policy recommendations and stories

The outcome of the methodology employed is the consideration and identification of policy recommendations by the co-researchers that will improve *their aspirations* for a better WLB. This is accompanied by rich stories, some personal and one representative of the whole group in the form of 'Faith'. Her story is communicated through an online, interactive diary which describes and illustrates a week in the life of 'Faith'¹⁰. This diary represents the voices and experiences of the women in this project, and asks those who view it to walk in her shoes, consider her barriers and to advocate for better conditions so that Faith and women like her can aspire.

A further outcome - perhaps a so-called 'soft outcome' - is the feedback we received from many research participants who spoke about the value of having the space as part of the REGAL project to voice their fears and hopes, to talk about the reality of their lives, and that they did not have another space, or place in their lives where they could do this with others who shared their experiences. The research sessions provided a space and an opportunity to decompress, talk, learn and bond. Many of the women expressed how a similar space would be very welcome in their lives.

9. This was the choice of the mothers and we respected that.

10. <https://testingfaith.ie/>

Portugal: women in poverty with a migration history

The first months, after the training for the implementation of the REGAL Project in Ireland, were dedicated to the elaboration of the state of affairs on the work life balance in Portugal, to the identification of stakeholders and the methodological design of the project's implementation.

Recruitment and Facilitation

The realization that working with vulnerable groups requires time to build trusting relationships led us to the search, in the universe of EAPN Portugal members, for an entity that could ensure logistical issues and support the implementation of the project. The initial choice was the Moinho da Juventude Cultural Association and the first step was an informal visit and participation in a Sabura activity that allowed us to see the team on the ground and the community space that initially proved to be promising.

Sabura is a project of local development and community intervention that energizes the local economy, enhances the cultural and artistic heritage of the community and made it possible to verify on location the conditions for hosting the REGAL project and facilitating the recruitment of participants. During an afternoon we visited the community, small informal businesses and had dinner at an establishment where local musicians enliven the space.

Later, we met with members of the staff and leaders from the institution to present the REGAL project and agreed on the opportunity to implement the project in that community. At the time, the main challenge identified was the constitution of a group of women with availability to remain involved in a study during the time initially thought the project would take.

Soon after, we met with a group of eight women invited by the Moinho da Juventude Cultural Association. In this meeting we again identified as one of the main challenges the availability to regularly gather a group of people who do not have much time and we identified a new challenge which would be the difficulty to access information and discuss issues that are considered private and/or intimate.

The strategy designed followed the instructions registered in the grant agreement regarding the realization of focus groups. Each participant in the meeting was asked to invite a friend to participate in the focus groups. Since we were unable to find a common schedule during the week, we decide to meet once a month on a Saturday.

The sessions took place in the multi-purpose room of the Moinho da Juventude Cultural Association, whose team ensured meals, cleaned the space and welcomed the children and provided childcare while the mothers participated in the focus groups.

Trust Building

The trust building process started with the presentation of the REGAL project and the discussion of expectations. A participatory group depends on relationships of trust and empathy and we seek in the individual presentation to use a dynamic that promotes the identification of common characteristics among the elements of the group. The dynamics selected was that of the world map in which each woman puts a pin on a map and described a real or projected trip that allowed not only the sharing and consolidation of the group but to present the concept of "aspiring" that is at the heart of the REGAL project.

The participants also completed a characterization form (which captured demographic details) and signed a commitment to give some solemnity to the moment. The signing of this docu-

ment fulfilled two functions by being, on the one hand, a first data collection instrument and at the same time a way of empowering the participants and helping them to feel part of the project.

Capacity Building

In regards to the capacity building of the group, we promoted the definition of concepts of WLB through a dynamic in which each woman presented two objects that they had previously chosen to illustrate the concepts of family and work. For example, one woman showed her house key to talk about the family and the achievement of having the ability to pay for the house she shares with her daughter and her mobile phone as a representation of work, contact and permanent connection between companies and people looking for an opportunity.

In the conversation circle that allowed the consolidation of the group to continue, we trained the skills of argumentation and articulation of the previously defined concepts, trying to make all women feel safe to express their opinion.

After this session, we realized that it would not be possible to deepen the history of each of the women without first maintaining the group activity on the one hand, due to the difficult management of agendas, but also because of the reserve to talk about themselves or to express an opinion about the condition of women and work life balance and personal life with a person with whom they had reduced contact so far.

Inquiry

Moving forward, in a different session, we started to build a narrative around the participants' experiences and perceptions about personal life, family life, unpaid work and paid work. Once again, we designed instruments that allowed us to collect information and structure interventions. To record the information, we then asked the participants to fill in some forms where the WLB concepts and indicators proposed by us allowed us to continue to outline the profile of the possible work life balance for women in vulnerable situations.

In order to collect the largest amount of data on the use of time and thus enable us to draw a credible portrait of the daily life of a woman in a vulnerable situation and start preparing the sharing of aspirations, we used a visual strategy and asked the participants to draw in two circles the distribution of real time and the distribution of ideal/aspirational time.

Outcome/Challenges

The explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the work on the ground and after the President of the Republic decreed a state of emergency in Portugal, mandatory confinement was determined, several restrictions on circulation on public roads and the closure of schools were imposed.

The health and economic emergency hit our group in a particular way as, in addition to the individual impacts on the participants' daily lives, the Moinho da Juventude Cultural Association itself came to the forefront of responding to the pandemic by promoting food support for people in the community who had significant, and in some cases total, loss of income.

The impossibility of continuing the activity with the participants led us to proceed with contact with stakeholders to present and debate the preliminary results of the project. The Zoom meeting allowed us to realize the richness of the data already collected and obtain inputs for the development of recommendations.

The prolonged time gap, emotional exhaustion and the maintenance of several restrictions due to the pandemic advice to reconfigure the intervention strategies, and we adapted our method by two ways of action. Firstly, with the support of the Cultural Association Moinho da Juventude, by establishing contact with some women who are still able to participate through a distance interview using technological means we could deepen some topics and obtain some more data on the aspirations of women with regard to the articulation between work life balance. Secondly, with the additional data collected, we examined the literature to fill any information gaps.

Romania: women with children living in rural regions

Immediately after the meeting in Brussels, we sent to member organizations network from TON the relevant information about the project and our future involvement at international level (project partners meetings, exchange of good practices, collaboration for project outputs), but also locally by setting up an active working group within the focus groups. The active working group was composed by fourteen women that attend the focus Groups. They do not just attend but they become part of the project. They were involved in all project discussion, they act as a group, they take part in activities together in the womens organization 9(ADAM Moldovita organization) that was the host for the focus groups

After the meeting in Ireland, which laid the project foundations with experts for the development of the working methodology, we selected the community in which the focus groups were created, a community that ensured the premise for the solid functioning of our project activities. Our foundation “The Open Network for Community Development” decided to implement our project activities of REGAL project in Moldovita - commune in Suceava County - to meet the requirements for a target group of women from rural areas - part of the “Rural poor”.

Recruitment and Facilitation:

Four Technical steps in activities development at community level followed:

Information campaign on the REGAL project

We created a local awareness campaign about the project objectives and activities and following this we invited interested women to take part in our focus groups. The campaign was targeted in educational institutions considering the criteria of “active woman” in a household with family/children.

Voluntary registration of women who will be present in focus groups

The call for enrolling into our project was made at community level. The group was formed voluntarily with women who were able to attend all the focus groups (in the entire project timeline), and who had an interest with the “Work-Life Balance” concept. All 12 women involved in the project are “active women” from a rural area (aged between 16-65 years old) in a household with family/children.

Establishing the project working method

The working method consisted of appointing the coordinator, establishing focus groups steps in development, and implementation and evaluation of the activity. The working group was formed consisting of the local coordinator and three project experts (project coordinator; a sociologist and a psychologist) and desk support (for the focus groups thematic concept and evaluation).

For each focus group, we created a plan of work that included theory, exercises, discussions and paper work/hands-out. After each focus group we made an analysis of the group dynamic and work. Part of the analysis was to examine what was working well and what improvements

were required. For example, sometimes the discussion after an exercise was taking more time than anticipated and the entire focus groups plan was not realised. In those instances, we continued the work in the following focus group.

Ensuring the sustainability of project activities

The coordinator at local level is a teacher and a social worker and this contributed to a growing level of trust between the women and the focus group coordinator. The focus group coordinator is also a woman and we found this aspect of benefit to our project because we want our project impact to be continued at local level for all the women involved, and also for the possibility of policy change.

The focus group work started initially in Moldovita school and then, in time, it was continued into FDAAM Moldovita organization (mutual organization) place. ADAM Moldovita is a member organization in TON, initiated in 2005 through a Romanian-Belgian collaboration. ADAM Moldovita Association carries out its activities through civil associative groups: Local Organization of Women, Men, Youth but also through the development of socio-medical services (medical offices)¹¹.

Starting from February 2020 we start to build the individual stories step by step. When the first wave of COVID-19 hit Romania we continued our work at individual level, in pairs and, when the safety measures asked for, only on-line. In June and July in Romania, due to the national situation caused by the COVID 19 virus, public meetings, events, conferences, trainings, etc. were banned. Under these conditions, the coordinator of the women's group organized individual meetings with each woman to continue working on individual stories. This overlapped with the methodology offered in the project in which this detailing of each individual story is necessary (and possibly) in order to be communicated to and understood by policy makers.

Trust Building and Capacity Building

We built trust between the women by making clear all the project activities and outputs (1st and 2nd Focus Group). When the women started to feel confident about their work in the focus group, we started to go deeply into the project theme - the balance between work and life. Many practical exercises (individual exercises, in small groups or with the whole group / exercises taken from the Educational Drama Method and adapted to the WLB concept) were implemented to help each woman form a better understanding about the concept of WLB in a local specific context with national inserts (national legislation/ vs. local actions).

For example, the situation of a woman who takes care of a person in the family (child) with disabilities was discussed with the group. We discussed the existing measures in Romania (at national level) regarding this specific help for the family, for the person with disabilities, for the personal assistant (woman) of the person with disabilities. The following questions were posed: *Under what conditions can state aid be accessed? What help possibilities exist at local level from community, town hall, community associations?*

Interviews and Storytelling theory

In order to realize individual (for each research participant) and critical moments (the moment where the balance between life and work was at a dangerous point) of life stories and to identify important points of view regarding the balance between the life and work of each participant, we realized in the focus groups, during these two months, the theory of making a story and an interview.

11. More information about the organization /<https://www.facebook.com/Adam-Moldovita-327426227378951/>

The following theoretical points were agreed with an emphasis on identifying individual realities:

- why a story/interview and why now?
- identification of barriers to listening
- elimination of listening barriers
- remember your inheritance
- say what happened (turning point / changing the dynamic in the story)
- find the end of the story
- what do I want to say to the public, and to policymakers with my story?

Points adapted to this project are inspired by “Powered by Storytelling” - Murray Nossel. Dr. Murray Nossel¹² is the founder and director of “Narrative”, a New York and London-based company that is specialized in “teaching storytelling”. Murray Nossel helps his clients (including many NGOs) through the “Storytelling” method to formulate their messages and convey them to the general public (and policymakers). In his book “Powered by Storytelling” he presents how to extract, to build, to present stories that will make your communication, the message – better heard. In our REGAL project team, we discussed and implemented many of the exercises presented by Dr. Murray Nossel in the book mentioned above.

Inquiry

Realizing (writing) the individual life stories

This phase was based on interviews, or self-descriptions in accordance with the related theory that was instrumental for this step. First a participant identifies the story (e.g. a significant moment in the story of their work-life balance), then it is made clear for herself and the group, and is written down. Following this, the interviewer clarifies the story through more questions, exercises from theatre, group dynamic and discussion, and adds more depth into the story. Finally comes the moment of “confrontation”: The group interpret and communicate the participant’s story back to them and a discussion follows about its accuracy.

Analyzing the women life stories about WLB within the group

Life stories were analysed by asking questions such as: *Does each story have a beginning, a middle, an end? Is it a real story? What would this story say at European level?* At this point we realize the potential for short theatre performance among the participants in the group from their life stories -because when you see your life and your crisis point on WLB as an outsider you have a much better understanding and you can take new decisions without emotional involvement.

Theatre performance

The techniques used in the focus groups were specific to those in Educational Drama, Drama Therapy, Theater in Education, techniques from Social Theater; Forum Theatre, Legislative Theatre (Augusto Boal).

We used exercises as “More” (used exercised from Forum Theatre Method in which each participant has to represent in consecutive plastic images organized with the other participants bodies - a lived story), “My Life in 3 big pictures” (all women participated in short scenes in which it was described a specific situation of their life in which the WLB was damaged), “The Roles”, “The Changing Roles”, “Interview”, “Mirror”, “Painting the Fence”.

We had exercises for emotions, for emotional replay, for “speaking-up” about dreams and desires, and for the empowerment of women. We used exercises for analysing a literature

12. <https://murraynossel.com/>

piece, a story and we analyse the importance of all story parts, with introduction, content and ending; we analyse the importance of the changing element into a story because the stories that we write about real life have to have a “form”. We also used brainstorming and brain-writing techniques.

Collection of “Aspirational” story in a collective approach

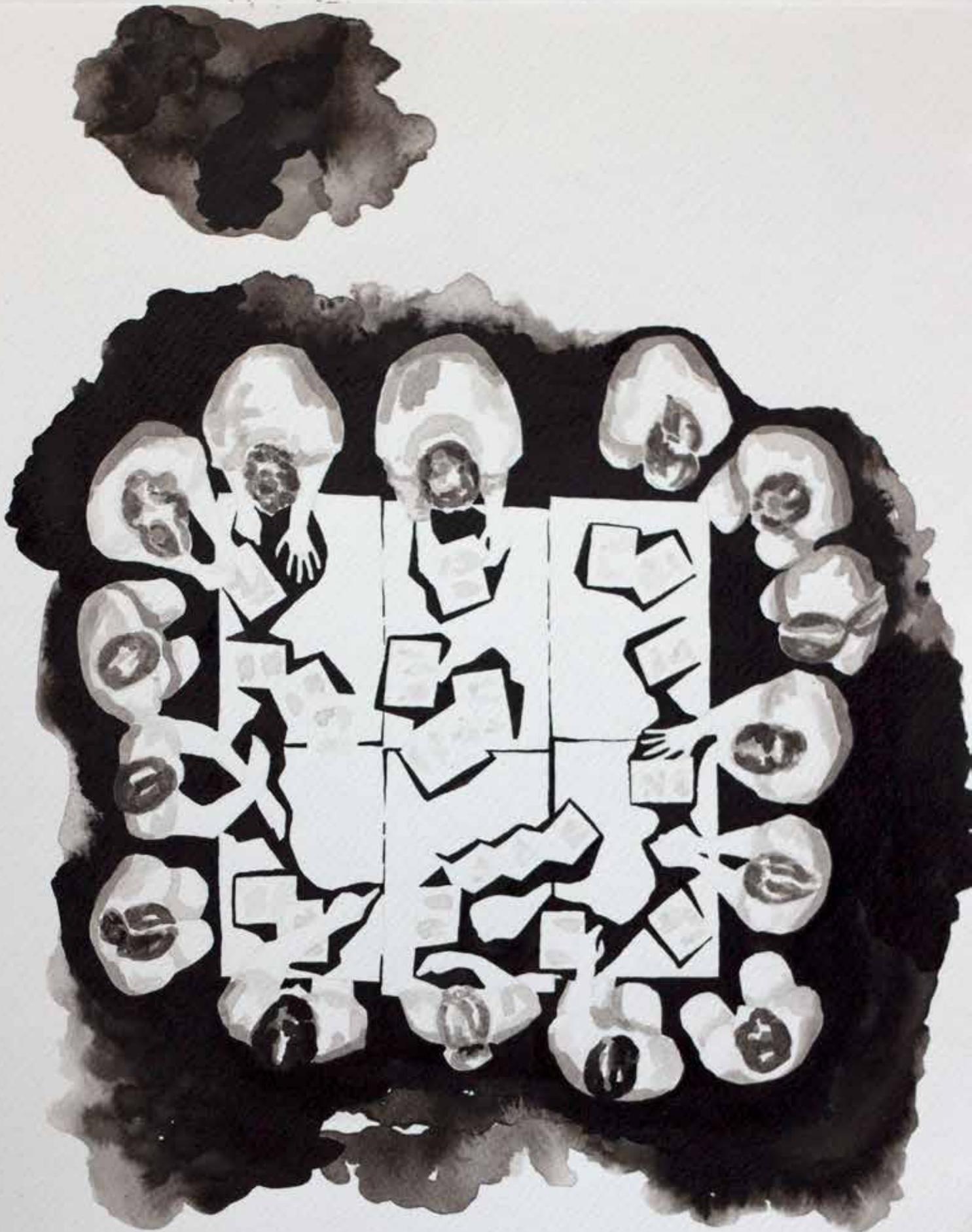
We analyzed each situation from the past, to the present and the future; what could be done to change something, either locally, nationally or at a European level?

We made 12 individual stories about the moment of crisis in which the balance between life and work was at a critical moment. We analyzed the difficult situation in which the woman in the story was at that time, what assistance legislation in Romania offered, what has changed in legislation recently (improvements), and what comparable types of legislation exist at this time in other European countries.

Output

Fourteen stories were gathered from the research. These stories were shared with the group for feedback before sharing with the public through a published book distributed at the national level¹³. The book also contained input from local stakeholder groups.

13. Available at: <https://theopennetwork.ro/regal-2/>



4. PART THREE

Learnings and sample methods

The following section of the toolkit outlines important considerations in the undertaking of the PAHRCA methodology with vulnerable groups. These considerations (or learnings) were identified from the experiences of the case studies featured in the toolkit. In addition, a selection of innovative sample methods is described.

What we learned

Flexibility

It is understood that a broad range of participatory action research (PAR) will be undertaken by co-researchers implementing PAHRCA. Given varying levels of resources/capacities of co-researchers/projects PAHRCA can be applied in a flexible way, particularly in the areas of ambition, engagement, diversity and action. Projects will benefit from a flexible approach and being prepared to adapt to new situations and evolving group dynamics. This is particularly important in terms of the methodologies employed in focus groups or other forms of data gathering. It is good practice to develop and prepare different ways of co-research if circumstances arise where original plans prove challenging or unsuccessful.

Facilitation

Selecting an appropriate venue for the research is paramount. The venue must be convenient, welcoming and good quality. The venue will likely be a place where co-researchers will spend a lot of time in and it is important to ensure the space is comfortable and inviting, a place that co-researchers look forward to return to for each session. Practical considerations should include accessibility (both in terms of usability for people with disabilities and proximity to public transport), privacy, comfort, availability of food and refreshments, and the provision of on-site childcare if necessary. It is important to dedicate time to select the right venue. This may include several physical visits or viewings.

Safeguarding

As with all good research, the safety of those participating is a core principle and ethical consideration. While it is understood that readers are aware of this, it is worth noting that the development of a thoughtful safeguarding process for participants/co-researchers may be useful. This can be done together as a group at an early stage and it might consist of simple measures such as providing contact details for support organisations (e.g. mental health, income support, etc.) or allocating sufficient time to debrief or “check in” regularly with co-researchers to discuss how they are feeling in recognition that some of the topics discussed might be challenging. A discussion about boundaries and what professional researchers can and cannot provide may also be useful.

Time and Resources

Partnership is the heart of PAHRCA. It is a methodology that allows for the redistribution of power through negotiation between the researcher and the researched. Therefore, it is positively discriminating in the allocation of time and resources, sensitive to those with weaker capabilities or capacities. The implications of this should not be overlooked. Beyond the necessities of effective investment in the research capacity and capability of co-researchers, a significant amount of time may be required to manage positive relationships (including attendance) with co-researchers over the course of the project. It is good practice to nominate a key contact person for co-researchers to allow for communication around practical issues and supports. This may take the form of a designated project mobile phone which is monitored by a member of the research team.

Accessibility and Engagement

It is suggested that research sessions or focus groups use non-academic language where possible, thus enabling co-researchers to feel comfortable and engage fully. All documentation

including handouts or presentation slides for example should be reviewed in preparation for research sessions to ensure they avoid jargon and terminology which may be common to 'professional' researchers but alienating to co-researchers. A further method to increase access and engagement is to report back to the group at the start of each research session what was learned (or the research findings) from the previous session. This provides a sense achievement and of partnership. Again, this should be communicated by avoiding academic language and jargon. An important consideration is to listen carefully to the language used by co-researchers and to adapt.

Sample Methods

Belgium: Freewheeling

The methodology of 'freewheeling' is a bottom-up approach, that consists of developing associations by the use of images, words, objects, etc. On the basis of images and words that we link to a particular topic, we look or search for associations. These images and words were extracted from the initial stories of the women. These associations evoke other associations and create a dialogue of associations.

The 'freewheeling method' uses images, words, concepts related to work-life balance. In this case specifically related to the job and the home situation of the women. Examples of words and images we used were the following: a watch, a train, a doll, a stroller, a broom, the moon, a bed, a dining table, a lunchbox, a garden.

The women were asked what these images evoke. Each woman has her own associations and the confrontation with the associations of the other(s) create a common ground for a dialogue on aspirations are being developed, expectations on a 'good life'. From this freewheeling, we then distil specific, concrete expectations.

France: Egoscopy

This activity has 5 main objectives:

- 1) Facilitate the presentation of oneself through a fun non-verbal entry;
- 2) Identify the image (or images) that you want to give of yourself;
- 3) Identify your values, get to know your personal universe better;
- 4) Develop your creative potential and conceptual capacity;
- 5) Connect personal values and professional opportunities or professional options (career & vocational path).

The facilitator then invites participants to make their own collage using some simple questions: *Where do I come from? Who I am? What are my values? What are my aspirations, my plans for the future?*

Participants are invited to select the images (photos, drawings, symbols cut out from magazines or images produced by oneself) that are the most representative of oneself and to arrange them in a collage. Collages are anonymous at first. When all the participants have completed their individual work, the collages are displayed without indicating the name of the authors. The person who wishes, tries to "read" a collage and its author confirms, invalidates or completes the explanations given (if they choose to do so). A collective discussion can then begin which is first of all - let us remember - individual and anonymous.

The author in question says what they wanted to express and what motivated their choice of images. The other participants are invited to react, both on the values represented and possibly on its aesthetic aspects. The facilitator shows the diversity of possible interpretations, but also the constants. Four dimensions are key to the analysis and discussion: the past, the present, leisure and activities, and aspirations.

Ireland: Composite character development

Exploring sensitive topics that require personal detail and reflection with research participants can potentially pose a challenge, particularly in a group dynamic. It is natural for some people to feel uncomfortable speaking about particular aspects of their lives amongst others who are not close friends or acquaintances.

The creation of a composite character may help with this problem. The idea centres on a character, brought to life by the group, that represents the research participants, is someone like them, with the same experiences and conditions in life. This character is someone that participants can speak to and through, in general rather than personal terms. The character can be named by the research participants and they can also decide what form or appearance the character takes.

This method can be a useful way of forming a group bond at an early stage and building trust and solidarity within the group as they bring the character to life. Questions to the group can be framed around the character. For example, a question could be asked in the following way: 'What barriers does [our character] face in their life?'. Speaking to and for the character and exploring the character's needs and experiences may be a more comfortable approach for participants in a group dynamic.

The character could be used as an early tool to help with trust building or could feature at every step as the anchor of the project and perhaps could act as the collective voice at the end of the project in the reporting and communication of findings.

Ireland: Timeline Mapping

Exploring questions or themes visually can help to provide more meaningful engagement with research participants. Constructing timelines is a method of illustrating rich narrative data. Timelines are usually constructed from the life events and experience of participants with notes or memos of particular events or actions, and in some form of chronological order.

This method typically uses a long piece of paper. For example, several sheets of flipchart paper or A3 paper can be used, stuck together along a wall or a floor. The timeline can vary, and can cover a range of periods, for example a 24-hour day or one calendar year. Participants are invited to work together to create a visual representation of the topic at hand using the materials available. While mapping the timeline, the group are encouraged to discuss how best to represent the topic in question and share their observations and personal stories. The method is active and engaging and can lead to rich findings as discussions unfold and develop within the group of participants both during and after the exercise.

Timeline mapping could be enhanced with the introduction of photography. Participants are invited to keep photo diaries based on the related subject. Photographs are collected, printed and used as materials for mapping the timeline. This is another way of facilitating meaningful engagement and can also foster empowerment as participants define and represent places and relationships that are important to them.

Portugal: "Show and tell"

"Show and tell" is the practice of showing an object to an audience and describing it to them. It is a common classroom activity that can be used in qualitative research groups as a way of giving voice to the individual experience through a visual image.

"Show and tell" is a tool that empowers the participants, as they are the ones who choose the object and describe its relationship with the phenomenon under study. It also allows

researchers to access the participants' perspective on the subject being discussed, particularly that of the most vulnerable groups of the population, as it is accessible to all regardless of their academic training.

In REGAL we used it to create a common ground for the definition of concepts related to work-life balance. Each participant presented two objects to the group. The exercise made it possible to reinforce the group's trust building, women's confidence to share their opinions and to train the skills for the storytelling necessary for expressing their aspirations in later stages of the research.

Romania: Theatre

"Social Theatre", "Forum Theatre", "Theatre of the Oppressed" were methods developed and promoted for a social dialogue by Augusto Boal (in collaboration with Pablo Freire).¹

The games listed in Boal's texts, such as Games for Actors and Non-Actors, are diverse. We used games to get people using their bodies for self-expression, or to restructure participants' ways of being; trust exercises, "body-sculpting" or mirror games. For instance, an image of happiness might be modelled, to show reality without any social oppression. An exercise known as "breaking repression" involves trying to recall a situation where one felt particularly repressed by family, society, time and acted against. Sometimes some participants "sculpt" others into particular images or situations.

One activity for example, involves participants acting as moving parts in a machine. Participants form a single machine, and can be instructed to increase or reduce the rhythm. Others play with rituals and masks. Participants-actors might play familiar roles (from a play, or from life) while taking on a different 'mask', or social role. For instance, they might play a worker with the personality of a boss, or vice-versa.

Some activities involve "translating" between different forms of expression – for instance, expressing words as movements. Others cut off a particular sense, such as sight, so as to enhance other senses. Or they carry out an entire dialogue through visual images or movement. Participants were encouraged first to feel the emotion of the image, then turning it into words (for our stories).

1. Boal, A., 2002. Games for actors and non-actors. Psychology Press.

