

# **Co-Creating Stories: Methodological Guide**

**porCausa**  
Investigación, periodismo y migraciones

## **Co-Creating Stories: methodological guide**

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# **1. What is Co-Creating Stories, and why did it emerge?**

The Co-Creating Stories project is a participatory journalism initiative that seeks to place migrant communities, and specifically migrant women, at the center of the journalistic process. The idea, first proposed two years before the start of the project, emerged from a shared concern among three researchers at the porCausa Foundation: who gets to tell migrant women's stories?

Interest in migration grows year after year, yet migrant communities continue to be underrepresented in the media, and coverage remains shaped by crisis narratives. This situation stems from a structural problem: media outlets lack mechanisms that foster the participation of historically marginalized communities, and migrants are largely relegated to the role of researched subjects or occasional sources. This reality is even more pronounced in the case of migrant women, a group frequently excluded from media narratives or represented through approaches that prioritize victimization and render invisible their agency, knowledge, and needs.

A lack of diversity has direct consequences on the information we consume. Not only does it contribute to a gap between the information produced about migration and the actual informational needs of migrant communities themselves, but it also deprives society as a whole of rigorous, plural, and contextualized information that could foster social cohesion.

It is within this context that Co-Creating Stories was developed. Conceived as a pilot experience, the project is structured around four phases of work in which participants themselves lead the investigations and define both the approaches and the outcomes. Beyond producing journalistic content, the initiative seeks to strengthen community ties and foster dialogue among participants, journalists, and researchers, contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and representative media ecosystem.

What began as a pilot project has become the initial phase of a proposal that remains alive and in constant transformation, thanks to the commitment and participation of all the women who have been part of the process. In this guide, we share our process—developed with the support of the Journalism Fund between May 2025 and January 2026—as well as the lessons learned from this experience. Our aim is for other actors, media organizations, and professionals to replicate what was learned and build upon it.

## 2. What are participatory methodologies?

More than a technique, participatory methodologies are an approach grounded in three principles:

1. All knowledge is the result of a historical process; it responds to and implicitly carries the worldview in and for which it was created. In other words, **knowledge is not neutral**.
2. From this situated character of knowledge emerges the need to decenter hegemonic voices, as part of a commitment to epistemic justice. For this reason, participatory methodologies are based on the **centrality of participants in the research process**, in an effort to foreground those who have historically been excluded from knowledge production.
3. From the two previous principles emerges the understanding that **all knowledge is collective**. In this sense, participatory methodologies aim to produce living, situated, multidimensional, and complex knowledge that resists the processes of subjectification of those commonly referred to as “others”.

Some important definitions when working from this approach include: participation, participatory techniques, and a reflexive stance.

### Participation

The concept of participation can be controversial, as it covers a wide range of forms that vary in degree and intensity, from symbolic participation and consultation to full and active participation.

Our goal in Co-Creating Stories was to foster full participation. This implies involving participants at every stage of the process: from formulating questions and selecting methods to creating the final outputs.

### Participatory Techniques

By techniques we mean the strategies we use to foster conversation and reflection at different moments of the participatory process, whether to identify topics to explore, define research questions, or evaluate and reflect on the outputs produced.

Some specific techniques include: focus groups, sharing circles, radical mapping, and arts-based methodologies, such as photovoice or collective drawing.

### Reflexive stance

One of the core aspects of participatory methodologies is their commitment to transforming the power structures embedded in research processes. Accordingly, beyond the specific techniques used, a commitment to collaboratively producing knowledge with the community is essential. This requires the research team to adopt a critical and reflexive stance regarding their position within both the research process and broader social structures, as these place them in a position of power over participants.

Thus, it is essential for the research team to maintain a continuous reflexive stance and an ethical commitment to avoiding the reproduction of these hierarchies, as well as to the co-construction of knowledge.

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### Sharing Power

As we have already said, participatory methodologies are not a set of techniques, but rather a commitment. This commitment entails decentering our own voices in the research process so that participants are the ones who make decisions about what, how, for whom, and for what purpose research is conducted. In this way, we assume a process of constant negotiation in which, as co-researchers, we contribute to the research based on the principle of horizontality: we bring our knowledge and criteria, and we sustain conversations and dialogues with the other people involved to make decisions throughout the research, without imposing them from the authority traditionally associated with the figure of the researcher.

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## 3. The Co-Creating Stories Methodology

Drawing on the reflection–practice–reflection loop of participatory methodologies, the Co-Creating Stories project process consists of four phases, detailed in Table 1.

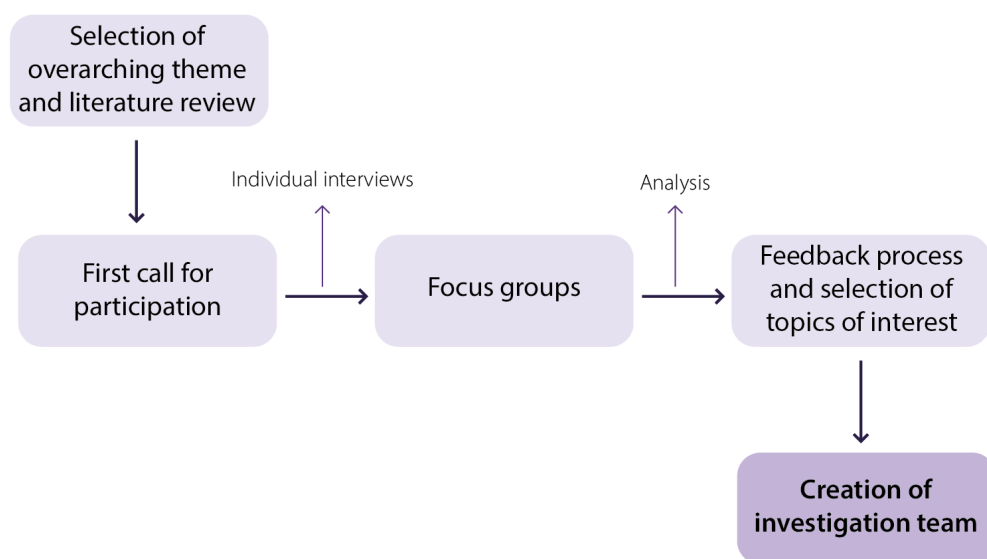
| Phase      | Objective  |
|------------|--|
| Initiation | Define the thematic areas to be investigated.  |
| Research   | Delimit the research questions, develop the research process, and develop the outputs to be published. |
| Validation | Present the results and final outputs of the investigation, submit                                     |

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|             |  |
|-------------|--|
|             | them to dialogue, and make the necessary modifications.      |
| Publication | Publish the results once final validation has been obtained. |

### Initiation

The initiation phase is decisive for the success of the project, as it is where community, trust, and reciprocity begin to develop among members, and where a shared goal is established. Its objective is to establish the thematic areas to be addressed in the investigation, and it unfolds around the steps illustrated in Figure 1.



This is one of the longest and most complex phases of the participatory process, with multiple steps and key moments in its development. In this phase, several questions arise: How do we select an overarching theme? How do we organize and conduct focus groups? How do we carry out the return process?

### *How to select an overarching theme?*

Every participatory process begins with a topic of interest to the community. It is important that this theme be formulated in a way that enables active participation by the community in defining the research process. In this sense, it should be:

- **Broad**, avoiding overly narrow topics that limit participants' ability to decide what and why research is conducted.
- **Flexible**, allowing adjustments and redefinitions throughout the process.

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- **Relevant**, as it has to answer to the community's concerns and needs.
- 

### Communication and transparency

At the beginning of the project, especially throughout the first call for participation, it is important to maintain open and transparent communication: Why does the project emerge? What are its goals? What is expected of participants? What do we expect to achieve?

In our case, we carried out an informational session, aimed at migrant women, and provided a contact email in order to schedule a call with those who could not attend.

The goal was to provide clear information and address any questions that might arise regarding its goals, values, phases, and modes of participation. This initial effort toward transparency and engagement with the community was essential to the success of this first stage.

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### *How to organize and conduct focus groups?*

In the development of focus groups, there are two essential elements: group composition and the questions proposed as guides for the discussion. In order to define these elements appropriately, it is important to conduct prior research that provides insight into the topic being explored.

Group composition should meet the following criteria:

- **Internal homogeneity:** we want to create safe spaces where people feel comfortable sharing their experiences. For this reason, it is important to create groups in which participants share similar experiences. We can achieve this by conducting prior individual interviews that guide us in assigning each participant to the most appropriate group.
- **Heterogeneity across groups:** the communities we work with are diverse, so each group should reflect that diversity. In this way, we ensure a plurality of perspectives that enriches both the knowledge-building process and the community we are trying to create.
- **Small size:** between 4 and 8 participants per group. Groups that are too large can hinder the dynamics, while smaller groups facilitate equitable participation and allow everyone to express themselves.

The questions should:

- **Enable reflection grounded in lived experience:** it is beneficial to begin focus groups with individual reflection exercises in which each participant can think about their own experience before sharing with others.
- **Be open-ended:** the questions we ask are not neutral either; they can steer responses toward what the research team considers relevant. For this reason, it is advisable to avoid overly closed questions that direct the



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conversation toward a specific point. Instead, it is recommended to formulate broad questions that foster dialogue and collective reflection.

- **Not assume shared meanings:** it should not be taken for granted that certain concepts are understood universally. People with different trajectories and contexts may interpret the same idea in different ways. In our case, for example, the concept of “mental health” needed to be problematized; therefore, one of the initial questions was “What do we mean by mental health?” in order to collectively build a shared definition that would serve as a basis for subsequent reflections.

**Moderating focus groups:** just like the questions we ask, the facilitation of these conversations is essential. In this sense, the moderator’s role is to foster balance in the discussion: encouraging participation from those who have spoken less, while respecting their boundaries so they feel comfortable, and moderating voices that, for various reasons, take up more space in the conversation. Likewise, it is important that moderation be carried out by someone who is part of the community itself, fostering trust and the creation of a safe space.

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### Our experience

In our case, the overarching theme aimed to explore the intersection of **migration, gender, and mental health**. Before the first call, we carried out a review of the academic literature that allowed us to identify several relevant thematic axes:

- Migrant populations show a higher prevalence of psycho-affective disorders (depression, anxiety).
- Migrant populations show a higher prevalence of psycho-affective disorders (depression, anxiety).
- In addition to gender, other variables influence this prevalence, such as race and LGBTQ+ identity.
- Life moments such as motherhood, as well as employment, can be risk factors.

Based on this review, we defined four variables around which to organize focus groups in order to facilitate internal homogeneity: **mental health experiences, LGBTQ+ identity, employment status, and family situation**.

After conducting an individual interview with each participant, we organized four focus groups of between 4 and 6 participants. The groups had the following characteristics:

1. Women working in jobs not aligned with their professional qualifications.
2. Domestic care workers.
3. Women working in jobs aligned with their professional qualifications who had **not** sought professional psychological care.
4. Women working in jobs aligned with their professional qualifications who had sought professional psychological care.

The discussion dynamic began after informed consent was obtained, with the

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instruction:

*“Think about your migration trajectory from the time you migrated to where you are today. Think about the experiences that have been most meaningful to you. Include people, places, obstacles, and opportunities that affected and shaped your experience.”*

Each participant had the opportunity to share their personal trajectory and experiences, which then served as the basis for developing the discussion around the following questions:

- How does gender affect the migration experience?
  - What do we mean by mental health?
  - How does migration affect mental health?
  - When do we begin to become aware of the effect that migration has on our mental health?
- 

### ***How to conduct the return process?***

The return process involves three important steps: systematizing the information, sharing the results with participants, and returning to dialogue.

1. **Systematizing the information:** this refers to analyzing everything that emerged in the focus groups. To analyze what emerged in the focus groups, Co-Creating Stories used thematic analysis, a technique that allows qualitative information to be organized and understood. This type of analysis consists of reviewing conversations and narratives to identify recurring ideas, common points, and relationships among different contents. Based on this process, information is grouped into themes or axes that help make sense of the experiences shared by participants. To support this work, we used Atlas.ti software, which facilitates data organization and analysis.
2. **Sharing the results:** once the results were obtained, we prepared a synthesis document that we shared with participants and carried out a plenary session. The return process was not carried out in the small groups previously formed, but rather in a joint meeting with all participants. At this stage of the process, we sought to leverage the group’s diversity to foster dialogue and enrich the decisions that would be made collectively.

Thus, the plenary session began with a reminder of the different phases of the project, followed by an explanation of the work carried out in the focus groups, particularly regarding the characteristics of the groups that were formed and the themes that emerged in each one.

3. **Returning to dialogue:** once the explanation was given, the question was posed: *Which topics are of interest and important to you to investigate in depth?* In this way, the aim was to reach a shared decision about the themes to address in the next phase.

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In our case, two themes were selected: migrant women's experiences of motherhood, and the challenges and forms of discrimination present in their labor experiences.

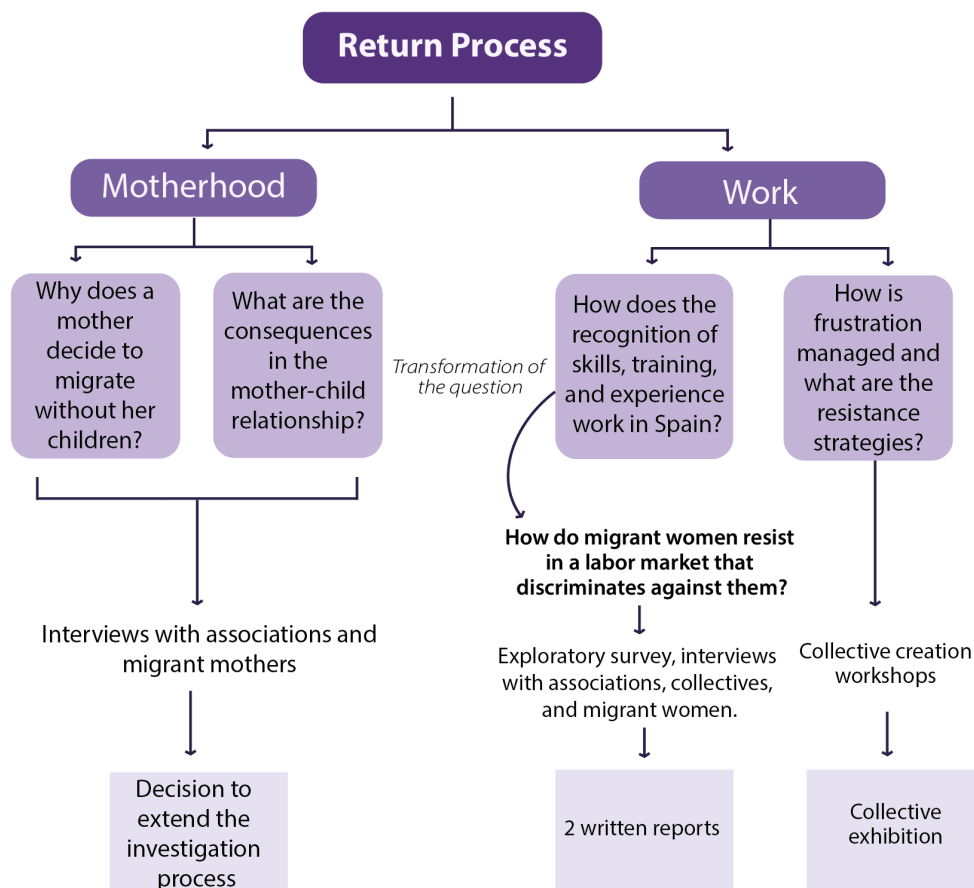
### Building the research team

It is important to allow each participant to choose to what extent and how they want to take part in the project. For this reason, after conducting the return process, participants are asked once again who would be interested in joining the research team. In this way, volunteers become co-researchers in the next phase.

## Research

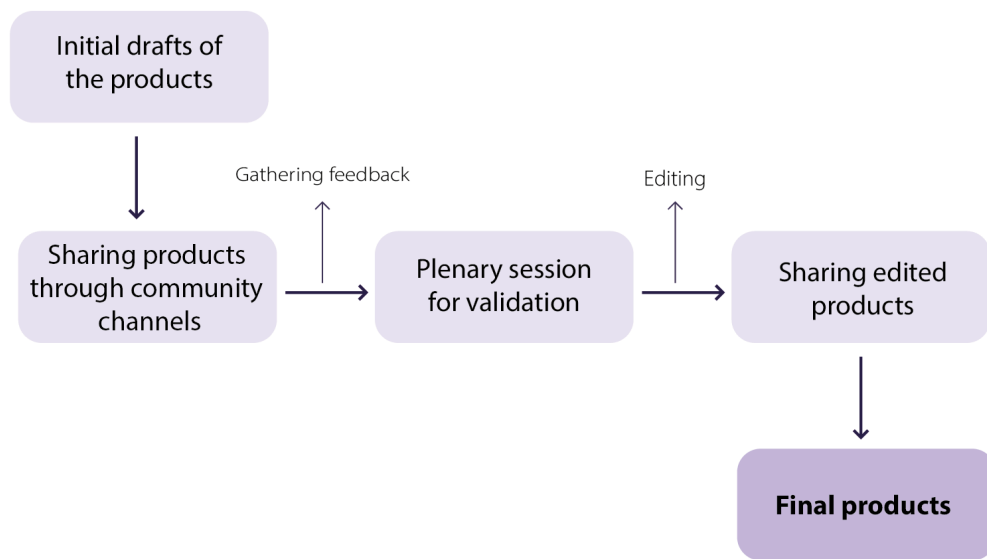
Throughout this phase, research is carried out based on the selected themes and the final outputs are defined. Each research process depends on the topics chosen, the questions posed, and the community itself.

One of the most important aspects of this phase of the project is to involve participants as researchers, negotiating roles and relinquishing control over the research process. In this way, it is essential to maintain a reflexive stance and a commitment to building knowledge jointly with the community. In our case, the research process unfolded as shown in Figure 2.



### Validation

The objective of this phase is to return to dialogue with the community so that the final result expresses how participants want the issue to be seen. This phase includes people who took part in the focus groups but chose not to continue as co-researchers, the co-researcher participants, and all the women who joined throughout the process, whether because they contributed testimonies or because they joined through collective creation workshops.



#### ***How to conduct the validation session?***

The first step in the validation phase was to share drafts through the community's WhatsApp channel, so that participants could leave comments on the drafts. This decision was made for two reasons: the difficulty of bringing all participants together in a single plenary session, and to allow them to familiarize themselves with the outputs in advance. In this way, participants' comments were collected and then brought into discussion in the plenary session.

Subsequently, a plenary validation session was held, during which each team presented the work carried out throughout the research process, shared draft outputs, and engaged in collective discussion and reflection. To guide this reflection, each working group proposed a set of questions related to the output they had developed. These questions were as follows:

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| Outcome  | Questions   |
|--|---|
| Article: <i>Tras años de lucha, colectivos migrantes continúan resistiendo por unas homologaciones justas</i>                        | <p>Do you consider that the article answers the research question: “How do migrant women resist within a labor market that discriminates against them?”</p> <p>Does the article read well and flow clearly?</p> <p>What kind of concern did the topic generate for you? And the article?</p> <p>What kinds of outputs (related to the topic) would you like to consume (guides, updates on the topic, investigations, etc.)</p> |
| Article: <i>Mujeres migrantes que alimentan resistencias: encender fuegos y sostener cuidados frente a la discriminación laboral</i> | <p>Do you consider that the article answers the research question: “How do migrant women resist within a labor market that discriminates against them?”</p> <p>After reading the article, what point caught your attention the most, or what would you like to know more about?</p> <p>Does the article read well?</p>  |
| Collective exhibition  | <p>Does the exhibition manage to answer the question: “How is frustration managed in the face of this lack of recognition, and what are the strategies of resistance?”</p> <p>How did you feel during the workshop process?</p> <p>At a creative/recreational level, how did it impact you?</p> <p>What could we have done differently?</p>   |

## Publication

The final step, after the validation session, is to modify the drafts based on participants’ comments and reflections. Once the editing process is complete, the drafts can be shared once again with participants through the community channel—in our case, a WhatsApp group. In this way, final validation is obtained for the publication of the results.

Because we did not have our own platform to publish the results, the alliance with media outlets interested in the outputs derived from this participatory process was essential. After the research concluded, the initial draft was shared with El Salto, which agreed to publish both stories. However, the project required allied media outlets to understand and respect the logic of the process: after their edits, participants needed to be able to make additional adjustments and provide final approval. Therefore, it was essential to work with allies willing to wait until the validation phase was complete and to publish the version approved by the community.

## 4. Conclusions

The Co-Creating Stories project emerged in response to a need and with a clear objective: for migrant women to tell our own stories. Through spaces of collective creation, the project sought to generate original and innovative narratives, strengthen community ties, and foster dialogue among participants, journalists, and researchers, thus contributing to the construction of a more inclusive, fair, and representative media ecosystem.

It has been a dynamic, complex, and enriching process. Among the lessons learned, we highlight several key points:

- **We need participatory spaces:** migrants, and particularly women, have historically been excluded from knowledge production processes, creating a gap between media narratives about migration and the real informational needs of migrant communities themselves. In the face of this reality, it is essential to have spaces that allow us to narrate ourselves collectively and from our own experiences.
- **More than a method, a commitment:** joint knowledge-building is only possible if a reflexive stance is sustained that avoids reproducing hierarchies and power relations that have historically excluded these communities. Without this commitment, participatory processes risk replicating the same dynamics they seek to transform.
- **Care, communication, and horizontality** are the pillars on which community is built.
- **Building from the community produces better outcomes:** the process and the diversity of the people who participate in it give rise to research with community-centered approaches that are relevant to the community, and with strategies and outputs that at times go beyond traditional journalism.

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- Community Radio: CAP Radio  
(<https://www.capradio.org/podcasts-shows>)
- Community media outlet City Bureau  
(<https://www.citybureau.org/our-mission>)

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