FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 26, No. 2, Art. 16
May 2025

# Peer Research in a Multi-National Project With Migrant Youth: Re-Thinking Vulnerability and Participatory Approaches

*Amalia Gilodi, Louise Ryan & Zeynep Aydar*

**Key words**: participatory approaches; peer research; migration; reflexivity; vulnerability

**Abstract**: Adopting a critically reflexive approach, we contribute to discussions on how participatory approaches, and peer research specifically, can be implemented, problematising the boundaries, opportunities and implication of the participation of young people from marginalised groups in research projects. We achieve this goal through three consecutive steps. First, we present the peer research approach in theory. Here, drawing on the wider literature, we critically engage with concepts of vulnerability, positionality and questions of inclusive participation and empowerment. Second, presenting concrete examples and lessons learned from our experiences with a multi-national project, we consider the practical obstacles, critical considerations, and advantageous outcomes associated with the inclusion of young migrants as peer researchers in this large European project. Third, we examine the accounts of a group of peer researchers to critically reflect on what characterises their participatory experiences and their impact, adopting the notion of vulnerability reconceptualised as an analytical lens. In the conclusion, we summarise key insights presented in our paper and offer some final reflections.

**Table of Contents**




Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research (ISSN 1438-5627)

## 1. Introduction

Participatory approaches to research constitute an attempt to make knowledge production more democratic, by challenging power hierarchies within and beyond academic settings (MATA-CODESAL, KLOETZER & MAIZTEGUI-OÑATE, 2020; SMITH, BRATINI, CHAMBERS, JENSEN & ROMERO, 2010). As such, they reflect not only a methodological choice but an epistemological and ethical stance, and they are considered particularly appropriate when conducting research among marginalised groups (MARLOWE, LOU, OSMAN & ALAM, 2015; McCARTAN, SCHUBOTZ & MURPHY, 2012). Peer research is a participatory approach, where members of the study population contribute to the research process as part of the research team (EATON et al., 2018, GUTA, FLICKER & ROCHE, 2013). The active involvement of individuals with first-hand experience of the research topic has been described as a means of empowerment for the peer researchers as well as a resource benefitting research outcomes (IBÁÑEZ-CARRASCO, WATSON & TAVARES, 2019; MARLOWE et al., 2015; RYAN, KOFMAN & AARON, 2011). [1]

However, it is important not to assume uncritically either the peer researchers' status as *insiders* within study populations (RYAN et al., 2011) or their empowerment through the participatory experience (MONTERO-SIEBURTH, 2020). For example, each peer researcher will bring distinct lived experiences, interests and skills, which need to be acknowledged and balanced with research responsibilities (BLACHNICKA-CIACEK, WINOGRODZKA & TRĄBKA, 2024; McCARTAN et al., 2012). Similarly, peer research can take a variety of forms depending on the field of study, project design and funding, subject matter and the communities involved (GUTA et al., 2013; ROCHE, GUTA & FLICKER, 2010). Accordingly, the role peer researchers assume within a research project may vary, and their participation may contribute to the research process and knowledge construction in different ways (YANG & DIBB, 2020). [2]

Peer research and overall participatory methodologies, are grounded in principles of reciprocity and inclusion, yet implementing such ideals in practice is not always straightforward (COOK, 2012; KELLETT, 2011; SMITH et al., 2010). Arguably, one of the first hurdles is avoiding paternalistic and patronising rhetoric toward research populations deemed *vulnerable*, especially common in the context of migration (CLARK, 2007; HEIDBRINK, 2021). These discourses portray institutions, and researchers as *non-vulnerable* members of society who *charitably help* vulnerable residents or *give them a voice* (GILODI, ALBERT & NIENABER, 2022; MONTERO-SIEBURTH, 2020; SÖZER, 2020). Adopting such rhetoric, even implicitly, risks stigmatising research participants and peer researchers as powerless. As we argue throughout this paper, to avoid this trap it is important to re-evaluate vulnerability as a concept and as an analytical category. [3]

Beyond conceptual and ethical considerations, implementing a peer research approach with people in vulnerable conditions can involve a number of logistical, administrative, financial and even legal challenges (such as immigration status,

discussed later in this paper), which should be carefully considered in the research design, implementation and evaluation phase of any participatory project. All these practical aspects may shape the type of participation available to peer researchers, with implications for the overall inclusivity, reciprocity and empowerment of the populations at the centre of the research project. [4]

In this paper we aim to contribute to discussions on the implementation of participatory approaches, and peer research specifically, problematising the boundaries, opportunities and implication of participation. We do so by presenting frank methodological reflections on the participation of peer researchers in a multinational project, researching the integration processes of young migrants (18-29 years of age) living in vulnerable conditions in Europe (MIMY). Within the MIMY project, young people with migrant background were recruited to work on different aspects of our project including recruiting participants, conducting interviews and focus groups, as well as participating in generating outputs and in dissemination events. As such, in the project we followed what ROCHE and colleagues (2010) named an "employment model" of peer research, whereby peer researchers are hired as active members of the research staff, going beyond an advisory role (advisory model) but not assuming the role or leaders or partners in all the stages of the research, including research design and grant application (partnership model). [5]

We construct this critical and reflexive methodological account through three consecutive steps. First, we present the peer research approach in theory (Section 2). Here, drawing on the wider literature, we critically engage with concepts of vulnerability and positionality, and with questions of inclusive participation and empowerment. In a second step, we draw from MIMY's concrete examples of implementing the peer research approach across nine countries with varied socio-legal and linguistic contexts and our experiences, as researchers, within the project (Section 3). We first outline how and why peer research was adopted in the project's research design and then discuss practical obstacles, critical considerations, and advantageous outcomes associated with this approach. In the next section, we critically reflect on the impact that participatory experiences can have on peer researchers themselves, adopting new conceptual elaborations of vulnerability as an analytical lens (Section 4). As we neither wish to "speak for" peer researchers nor uncritically assume that participation will result in empowerment (DUIJS, BAUR & ABMA, 2021; MONTERO-SIEBURTH, 2020), this section will draw mainly on the reflections of five peer researchers who collaborated in four MIMY teams, gathered through an online focus group at the end of the project by Amalia GILODI and Zeynep AYDAR (January 2023).[1] The concluding section brings together main insights that emerged in the paper and offers some final reflections on participation (Section 5). [6]

1 During the session, peer researchers were encouraged to reflect on and discuss together their experiences in the project. Their participation was entirely voluntary and specific consent was granted by each participant, regardless of their roles in their respective teams at the time of discussion.

Reflexivity is useful to help not only peer researchers but all members of the research team to consider their dynamic interactions with each other and with participants and how their positionalities may impact the research process (RYAN, 2015; RYAN et al., 2011). Therefore, we also reflect on our own positionalities. We played different roles in the project and were affiliated with three different countries' teams where we were ourselves migrant residents. Amalia GILODI was a PhD candidate with an EU migration background who, despite her relatively junior position in the research team, as a member of the coordinating team was partially responsible for overseeing the implementation of the peer research approach across the project. Louise RYAN is a senior academic of migrant background with extensive research experience and played a key role in designing the peer research approach in the initial funding application stage and later in the setup of the project. Zeynep AYDAR was also a PhD candidate and early career researcher with a non-EU migrant background who, as discussed later, shared some characteristics with the peer researchers. [7]

## 2. Peer Research—Ethical Considerations and Problematising Vulnerability

While peer research can be empowering, this is not automatically the case. It is crucial to avoid *tokenism* and a delicate balance must be struck between providing opportunities for peer researchers and ensuring that the research responsibilities are not exploitative (EATON, TSANG, CRAIG & GINOCCHIO, 2019). For example, there is a risk that peer researchers might be utilised solely as inexpensive data collectors or as a convenient means of accessing and recruiting specific study participants (McCARTAN et al., 2012). In other words, the research teams bear responsibility to safeguard peer researchers from exploitation. This entails refraining from assuming the individual benefits derived from their engagement, acknowledging and valuing their efforts and contributions to the research and enabling them to further develop their knowledge and competencies within the project. [8]

As IBÁÑEZ-CARRASCO et al. noted, "[r]esearch teams should critically examine whether they are training peer researchers for the task or for the future" (2019, p.3). Consequently, it is necessary to provide peer researchers with the fundamental methodological and ethical knowledge, through training, on how to carry out research activities that do not harm research participants (RYAN et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is also crucial to ensure that access to suitable emotional support, where needed, is provided to them. As, by definition, peer researchers may be closer to the research population than the wider research team, it is possible that they may experience vicarious trauma particularly when undertaking research on sensitive topics (MARLOWE et al., 2015; McCARTAN et al., 2012). Thus, research teams have an ethical duty of care not only for research participants but also for peer researchers. However, it is important not to imply that peer researchers are by definition vulnerable and necessarily at risk of emotional issues (MARLOWE et al., 2015). Research may involve emotional work for all members of the team, and this should be addressed and supported in appropriate ways for all researchers (RYAN, 2008). [9]

The need to find a balance between the duty of care and recognition of needs, on one hand, and the recognition of expertise and agency, on the other, is also at the core of debates around the notion of vulnerability, and its (ab)uses in the context of migration. Scholars have highlighted the need to problematise normative and essentialised definitions of vulnerability. For example, in the context of international protection frameworks for refugees, this notion has been increasingly deployed to direct shrinking resources to *the vulnerable refugees*, often promoting their stigmatisation and control, as well as the exclusion of those deemed *not vulnerable enough* (MESARIČ & VACCHELLI, 2021; TURNER, 2021). In light of these critiques, some have argued for a dismissal of this notion (particularly in the humanitarian context) (SÖZER, 2021), while others support a reconceptualization of vulnerability as an analytical category. Indeed, feminist scholars have long argued that the negative moral connotation attributed to this concept is based on a flawed masculinist ideal, whereby it is possible and indeed necessary to achieve invulnerability to have social and political agency (BUTLER, 2016; FINEMAN, 2008). [10]

Grounded in this reflection, rather than synonyms for powerlessness and lack of agency, vulnerability can be reconceptualised as part of the human condition as well as a generative force, bringing positive change and increased understanding in certain contexts. Indeed, it has been theorised that vulnerability has the potential to generate social change, for example by uncovering latent relations of oppression (FINEMAN, 2010) or by informing political resistance (BUTLER, 2016), as well as to promote new knowledge relating to migration and integration (GILODI et al., 2022; GILODI, ALBERT, NIENABER 2024; GILODI, RICHARD, ALBERT, NIENABER, 2023). [11]

In this paper, we have adopted vulnerability as an analytical category, defined as the product of multiple conditions (or layers), originating from different aspects of the context in which individuals are embedded and dynamically interacting with each other. In other words, any individuals or groups will potentially face several intersecting conditions of vulnerability over their life course, but the unequal distribution of resources and rights created by modern socio-political frameworks will disproportionally affect certain residents of a country, including certain migrant groups (GILODI et al., 2022). Thus, we argue that the concept of vulnerability can aid us in highlighting systemic and contingent conditions constraining the opportunities of peer researchers as migrant residents while acknowledging their unique experiences and agentic power (ibid., see also GILODI et al., 2023) and, thus, allowing us to further explore the boundaries of their participation within research projects. [12]

Furthermore, it is imperative to go beyond any simplistic assumption of vulnerability and of peer researchers as *community insiders* and to recognise their diverse, complex and, at times, ambiguous positionalities (RYAN et al., 2011). Identities (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, citizenship status, etc.) intersect in ways that both shape and are shaped by distinct lived experiences (MARLOWE et al., 2015) and merely sharing ethnicity, language, or age with the research participants does not automatically confer insider status to peer researchers. On

the contrary, positionalities are multi-layered, and aspects of identity, such as religion or class background, as noted later in the paper, may come in and out of focus within research encounters (RYAN, 2015). For example, it has been found that during fieldwork, some peer researchers may feel that their identities or insider status is challenged or questioned by research participants in ways that may be uncomfortable (IBÁÑEZ-CARRASCO et al., 2019). This presents a fundamental question for the delicate equilibrium between the roles of *peer* and *researcher*. As peer researchers actively conduct research alongside professional researchers, it is crucial to acknowledge and appreciate their skills and contributions as researchers, and not solely on the basis of their *peer* status. At the same time, peer researchers must be valued as knowledge holders within the team, bringing to the fieldwork insights and skills that extend beyond the academic knowledge of the researchers. [13]

## 3. Implementing Peer Research—Principles and Practicalities

In the MIMY project (February 2020-January 2023), we focused on the integration processes of non-EU migrant youth, aged 18-29, living in vulnerable conditions in nine European countries. Within the project, a holistic definition of integration was adopted, resulting in the inclusion of research activities with a variety of social actors, in addition to migrant youth, living in different geographical locations across the nine partner countries (e.g. stakeholders, young people without direct migration experiences, older migrants, etc.). Additionally, the research was grounded in a critical understanding of vulnerability within the migration context, as explained in the previous section, leading every country's team to embrace a broad definition of its target group. This encompassed diverse young individuals who migrated to the partner countries for various reasons, through different channels and who encountered various conditions of vulnerability, including racial discrimination, marginalisation, precarious economic situations, and lack of support systems. [14]

Furthermore, at its core, in the MIMY project we adopted a migrant-centred and inclusive approach, grounded in a commitment to empower migrant youth facing vulnerable circumstances. Instead of viewing young people with experiences of migration merely as passive *research subjects*, we set out to regard them as experts and agents in their own lives and resolved to actively engage them through participatory methods. Consequently, the principle of peer research was incorporated into the study design from the initial grant application phase. However, given the size and multinational nature of the project, our peer research approach could not be too narrowly defined. Instead, reflecting the project's commitment to fostering a more democratic and inclusive approach to knowledge production through participation, three key principles were developed as underpinning the peer research approach in the project:

- *Reciprocity & non-exploitation*: Recognition and compensation (monetary or otherwise) of the peer researchers' contribution to the project;
- *Recognising young migrants as experts in their lives*: Promoting a culture of learning from and listening to young people;
- *Peer researchers as partners in democratic knowledge production*: Avoiding power asymmetries to create a meaningful and respectful collaboration. [15]

These principles were meant to guide the peer research approach for each partner institution while allowing for a certain degree of flexibility in its implementation, to accommodate the diverse research contexts. [16]

A total of 42 peer researchers were recruited in MIMY: They were between 17 to 30 years old[2], came from different countries across five continents, held different legal statuses (e.g. refugees, international students, naturalised citizens), and spoke a variety of languages. Such variety partially reflected the project's broad target group but was also impacted by the multitude of diverse challenges each team encountered in its own context of research (e.g. based on immigration regimes, institutional settings, demographic and linguistic profiles, etc). Another set of challenges was created by the Covid-19 pandemic which spanned almost the entire duration of the project and significantly impacted its research activities, also affecting the work of peer researchers. In other words, when devising training materials and recruiting strategies at the consortium level, it became imperative to account for these country-specific factors, which in turn impacted the inclusion of peer researchers in each team and the extent of their participation. [17]

### 3.1 Training

As a key component of the peer research process, detailed training material was developed at the consortium level. While, ideally, it would have been good practice to bring all the peer researchers together and train them as a group so they got to know each other, this was not possible in practice. The project included teams from countries with different languages and diverse social realities and the peer researchers themselves spoke an even wider variety of languages. Therefore, at consortium level, we adopted a *train the trainers* approach whereby each research team was trained in how to deliver the local peer research training and tasked to adapt a common set of training materials. [18]

These training materials included instructions, suggestions, and online resources for the trainers and encompassed instructive content for peer researchers on conducting qualitative research activities (e.g. how to facilitate focus groups or conduct interviews) as well as extensive material on ethical considerations (e.g. negotiating informed consent, data protection issues). After their own training, researchers from each team became the trainers and modified, translated and

2 The target group of the project were young people with experiences of migration between 18 to 29 years of age. However, recognising such parameters as somewhat arbitrary, they were applied with some flexibility and few of the peer researchers involved were not yet 18 or had just turned 30.

adapted the training pack according to the specific geo-political context and the distinct profiles of their peer researchers. This approach not only allowed the translation and adaptation of the training pack to suit each unique context but also the balancing of different levels of prior training and experience by researchers across MIMY teams. [19]

The training was developed by Louise RYAN. While adopting peer research in many different research projects, she had always worked directly with the peer researchers themselves and thus had opportunities to get to know them and build rapport. In our large multi-national project, operating across different languages and working under Covid-19 restrictions, Louise *trained the trainers* and did not have the opportunity to meet peer researchers until much later, when several attended dissemination events. On reflection, this put her at *arms-length* from the actual implementation of the peer research process but under the particular circumstances it was difficult to find alternative, practical solutions. [20]

### 3.2 Setting up the participation of peer researchers

Across different partners, the recruitment process raised questions about the remuneration and recognition of the peer researchers' participation. Consistent with the principle of non-exploitation, compensating peer researchers for their valuable contributions to the project was an essential aspect of the project-wide approach. However, due to incomplete financial projections developed during the application phase or pandemic-related strains, some partners did not have funding set aside for financial compensation. To address this limitation, different strategies were devised: Some partners reduced the number of recruited peer researchers or the duration of their involvement, others sought alternative funding sources and some teams reallocated the travel budget that could not be used due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, two out of ten partners were unable to provide any financial remuneration and instead structured the inclusion of peer researchers as trainees or interns, resulting in certification and accreditation, supporting their educational and professional growth. Thus, even when no financial resources were available, research team found alternative ways to recognise the contribution brought by the participation of peer researchers in the project. [21]

Moreover, aligned with the project's principle of learning from the people at the centre of the research, partners were encouraged to recruit peer researchers who were experiencing some vulnerable conditions. As highlighted above, this was broadly understood to include precarious economic, legal and social positions, facing contingent situations of hardship and/or subjective experiences of exclusion, discrimination, etc. In other words, efforts were made to include young people with migration background who were experiencing some form of marginalisation. However, the eligibility of different young migrants to join the research team was strongly impacted by institutional and national policies. Notably, legal status and associated entitlements, such as having a valid working permit for the country of residence, proved to be critical criteria for peer researchers' recruitment and often served as a prerequisite for their employment

and financial compensation. Furthermore, some institutions placed additional constraints related to the type of job contract and position that could be offered to peer researchers to formalise their participation in the project. These two elements influenced the profiles of those involved as peer researchers across the partners and to a certain extent precluded some teams from including the most marginalised members of society. For example, several partners were limited to formally hiring university students as peer researchers, while in countries with fewer national and institutional limitations, partners were able to extend their recruitment efforts beyond academic institutions, with the assistance of NGOs and local stakeholder networks involved in the project. [22]

As a result, the group of peer researchers recruited and involved in the MIMY project exhibited significant diversity across countries. Their formal education levels varied, ranging from bachelor students to master students, Doctoral candidates, and individuals without higher education degrees. Thus, despite the intention to facilitate the participation of members of marginalised groups in our project, a reflexive and transparent account of the practical challenges involved in the implementation process forces us to acknowledge that certain marginalised groups could not participate as peer researchers in MIMY. Nonetheless, those recruited shared many characteristics such as ethnicity, religion and language with our research participants and, despite being highly educated, many of them still regularly faced conditions of vulnerability such as, for example, experiencing racist discrimination or the precarity of a short-term legal status. [23]

Furthermore, peer researchers differed in terms of their engagement within migrant communities and their familiarity with the local context. Some peer researchers were activists, volunteers, or practitioners (such as social workers) in their localities, while others were newcomers to the context and possessed limited knowledge of local realities. As shown below, and in line with previous research (RYAN et al., 2011), these aspects affected the positionality of each young person involved as *peer* and the negotiation of their insider/outsider status in relation to the migrant populations under study. [24]

The experience of Zeynep AYDAR further illustrates the blurry line between the *insider/outsider* position. Because her profile and background bore some similarities with the group under study, it was discussed within her team if, alongside being a researcher, she could also assume the role of peer researcher. Ultimately, the idea was discarded, on the one hand, because the potential impact of such unclear insider/outsider positionality was not predictable, and, on the other hand, because access to different networks and language proficiency were needed to advance the research activities in that location. Nevertheless, Zeynep's migration background continued to be a resource for the research efforts. It allowed her to establish strong and trustful relationships with the peer researchers based on their shared experience of *being new* in the same country and together they adapted research instruments (e.g. interview guidelines created by other project partners in English) to ensure that questions reflected a non-stigmatising and inclusive tone. Reflecting on these decisions and experiences, Zeynep can only underline how enriching and beneficial it was to

include two further young people with experiences of migration as peer researchers in the team, as it broadened the diversity and plurality of understandings in her team. [25]

In sum, each peer researcher brought unique lived experiences, understandings, perspectives and conditions of vulnerability. Nevertheless, adhering to the guiding principles of the project, all of them were recognised as knowledgeable individuals who made a valuable and distinct contribution to the research activities and the overall project, drawing from their unique or shared background and experiences. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of profiles and experiences among peer researchers, and thus the plurality of viewpoints, promoted reflexivity within the entire research team, helping to problematise essentialist and homogenising understandings of migrant groups and ultimately improving the overall research process across the teams. [26]

### 3.3 Engaging and cooperating with peer researchers

Across MIMY partners, variations emerged regarding the roles and tasks of peer researchers. This was influenced in part by the aforementioned challenges and the corresponding solutions devised by each team. For example, practical constraints related to finances and logistics, including how the Covid-19 restrictions across the different countries impacted data gathering, prevented the partners from involving peer researchers for the entire length of the three-year project. [27]

Additionally, the role and tasks carried out by peer researchers within the research teams were influenced by their prior knowledge, individual goals and personal interests, as well as the research team's capacity, in terms of training, supervision, and support. The types of tasks in which peer researchers were involved, and the level of training and supervision required, was negotiated for each of them individually based on their unique profile. For example, those undertaking a bachelor or master's degree in a related discipline had often accumulated some knowledge about methods and theories in migration studies, thus requiring less basic training, and they were frequently interested in advancing their research skills, for example by conducting interviews autonomously. Others were more interested in developing communication skills and were actively involved in recruitment or dissemination activities. It is significant to mention that the needs and goals of these young people were not always in direct correlation to their level of education or formal qualifications. This highlights the importance of avoiding assumptions based on fixed characteristics and openly discussing and negotiating goals and expectations with individual peer researchers, to ensure they can derive the most benefits from participation in the project. [28]

Moreover, this duty of care toward the peer researchers needed to be balanced with the duty of care toward participants in the research activities. As a personal reflection, Amalia GILODI found negotiating this aspect of the collaboration with peer researchers one of the most challenging aspects of the process. As noted

earlier, despite being a junior researcher in the project, she was the supervisor of the peer researchers' group. It was her responsibility to ensure that they had sufficient understanding of the ethical risks involved in qualitative research activities, so as not to harm the participants with whom they were going to interact. At the same time, she was committed to recognise peer researchers as holders of a knowledge beyond her methodological experience. She felt a responsibility to afford them the freedom needed to bring their unique contribution to the project and to grow in their personal and professional development. As an early career researcher, still negotiating and learning the challenges involved in conducting ethical research herself, balancing these needs was difficult to navigate. Ultimately, it was made possible by the development of trusting relationships with all peer researchers individually through honest and open conversations about their own interests and ambitions and Amalia's concerns regarding ethical risks and responsibilities. [29]

### 3.4 The positive impact brought by peer researchers

Regardless of the different strategies adopted across research teams to address the challenges discussed above, there is no doubt that the inclusion of peer researchers had an overall positive impact on the outcomes of the project. As mentioned briefly above, Zeynep AYDAR directly observed the advantageous outcomes brought by the two peer researchers included in her team. They both had migrated from Syria and had refugee status but came from different regions of Syria and had different life experiences, language skills, cultural proximities and religious identities. Their differences and similarities informed many aspects of the fieldwork and produced rich data. It became quite clear that the richness of the material gathered by these two young people was the product of the relationships of trust they managed to build with their interview partners. They were invited to conduct several interviews in participants' homes, a familiar and safe space conducive to in-depth conversations. Furthermore, they managed to facilitate rich and engaging focus group discussions, especially in the absence of Zeynep and the rest of research team. The trust between these two peer researchers and the participants was built upon shared linguistic habitus, cultural and religious proximities, and similar migration trajectories, which Zeynep, despite being a young non-EU migrant herself and a more experienced researcher, simply would not have been able to build. This experience shows that the role of peer researchers goes beyond simply being community insiders or door-openers for a smoother recruitment process. Their participation in the project can contribute to fostering better relationships with research participants and hence generating richer, more meaningful data. [30]

The reflections shared by our MIMY colleagues from the Swedish and English team in a previous publication (SHAHROKH et al., 2023) highlight another key way in which peer research can benefit a research project. By relating what they heard from participants to their own personal experiences or those of friends and family, peer researchers in these two teams were in a unique position to contextualise narratives and to greatly contribute to the interpretation of the data gathered. For example, the authors note that by "recognising non-typical

discourse" or "identifying silences" (pp.23-24), peer researchers often challenged the assumptions and pre-conceived notions of the other members of the research team. However, it was only after trust and reciprocity were built between peer researchers and more established researchers, that the former group felt confident to make their voices and opinion heard by the wider research teams. [31]

Similarly, reflecting back on the contributions made by peer researchers to the project, Amalia GILODI cannot help but think of how this collaboration shaped her as a researcher and as a person. The continued conversations and exchanges with the peer researchers' group involved in her team, and in particular the close relationship of mentorship and friendship developed with one of them, challenged her to become increasingly reflexive of her own positionality and biases, and to approach her research work more critically. Although it may be impossible to articulate in detail how the project outcomes were impacted by these exchanges with peer researchers, Amalia can say with certainty that working with them has greatly benefitted her work as a researcher and academic, in MIMY and beyond. [32]

## 4. Participatory Experiences From the Perspective of Peer Researchers

Despite challenges, this multi-national project clearly benefitted from the participation of peer researchers. But how were the peer researchers themselves impacted by their participation? In the following section we attempt to answer this question, using vulnerability as an analytical lens to frame the experiences collected and the different elements that seem to have impacted them. [33]

### 4.1 "I wanted to grow": Diverse motivations for getting involved in the project

We begin our discussion by foregrounding the peer researchers' own thoughts on their positionality and condition(s) of vulnerability at the time of recruitment. We observed that the peer researchers' positions in society and the contingent conditions of *situational vulnerability* (GILODI et al., 2022; GILODI et al., 2023) upon embarking on the participatory process strongly affected their expectations of participation and consequently their experiences of the project. For example, Basam[3], who had recently arrived in Italy from Syria, saw his participation in MIMY as an opportunity to get to know his new lived-context, to make connections and to learn the language:

> "It was a nice project for me because when I arrived to [city] last year in [xx], I arrive and at the start, it's ... It's not easy to enter the Italian culture. [...] The culture for these countries is not so far, but also it's not easy to enter a new country, a new language, new culture. So the MIMY project helped me to, to be with the new people, with the new culture, with the new ideas" (Basam). [34]

3 In line with the wishes expressed by the participating peer researchers, the names used are pseudonyms.

Thus, the motivation behind Basam's decision to join the project and its expected impact were shaped by the difficulties he was encountering as a young migrant in a new country. For others, expectations were informed by their life course positionalities, including personal, educational and professional development. This was the case for Claire, who had lived in her country of residence since childhood and was going through a phase of personal and academic transition, considering her position within her lived context:

> "My expectations were several actually. From one side, I wanted to include myself or participate in society, in a way that felt meaningful to me. [...] I just felt that I also wanted to have some way to contribute, some way to have a say. And the MIMY project in that regard was perfect. But also on a personal level, I wanted to grow [...] So in that regard, I had those two expectations as to, like, orient myself professionally, but also get to learn more about how the world works and why these injustices are being built and form against some people" (Claire). [35]

As their positions in and relationship with their environment evolve so do the ways in which individuals interpret their social realities, affecting their conditions and experiences of vulnerability (GILODI et al., 2023, GILODI et al., 2024) and their orientation and plans for their future (BOCCAGNI, 2017). Thus, acknowledging contextual and temporal positionalities and conditions of vulnerability of each peer researcher is crucial in negotiating inclusive participation and avoiding tokenism and exploitation. As noted earlier, participation in a research project should not be assumed to be automatically beneficial (IBÁÑEZ-CARRASCO et al., 2019; McCARTAN et al., 2012). Rather than assuming their aspirations and needs on the basis of a fixed characteristics such as age or ethnicity, supporting peer researchers and promoting positive impacts of their participation means acknowledging their positionality and subjectivity (GROOT et al., 2019). [36]

### 4.2 "Sometimes I felt a bit uncomfortable": Complex positionalities

Past lived experiences and knowledge affected the ways in which every peer researcher negotiated their position as both *researchers*, actively trying to understand issues and experiences of other migrants in their community, and *peers* of such communities, sharing, to a certain extent, some lived experiences and conditions of vulnerability with participants. It has been argued that a certain amount of ambivalence is an intrinsic part of the peer research method (EDWARDS & ALEXANDER, 2011) and that the reflexivity it sparks on different positionings is one of its most valuable benefits to the research process (RYAN et al., 2011). Nonetheless, how this ambivalent positioning affects the peer researchers has received less attention. [37]

In the MIMY project, the way in which peer researchers negotiated their position within the team and the context of research varied greatly. Interestingly, the testimonies gathered suggest that those peer researchers with previous experience in research found the ambivalence of being a researcher as well as a young person with experiences of migration more challenging than those with

limited prior knowledge. This was the case for Aisha, who had a master's degree in social sciences, and stated:

> "I just think sometimes I felt a bit uncomfortable that I was there as a subject" (Aisha). [38]

Aisha followed this reflection by explaining how, while participating in an international event connected to the project, she felt othered by some academics and stakeholders as a racialised migrant (or *peer*) and *positioned* outside the academic circle of the *researchers*.

> "For me it was really weird being at a conference for example [...] people were still thinking of migration as like, uh ... like a migrant person as someone that's ... I don't know [...] In this space, where we're talking about these people and about empowerment and integration and all these things [...] the real-life conversations I'm having with some people, they do make me feel othered. So it was a really weird space to navigate" (Aisha). [39]

This very significant example shows that, regardless of the individual positioning negotiated by each peer researcher in the ambiguous tension between being a *peer* and being a *researcher*, other people can also ascribe a positionality on them, based on particular stereotypes and biases. [40]

### 4.3 "I'm not the only one": Reflections on researching migration

Another key aspect of peer researcher's experiences was related to the project's focus on marginalised migrant residents. Peer researchers worked with varied groups of migrants living in their local area, often exposed to systems of discrimination, marginalisation as well as different challenges and barriers, which can be understood as conditions of structural vulnerability. [41]

The extent to which such conditions were known to each peer researcher varied considerably across the group. For some, these themes and tasks were completely new and made the initial adjustment to the research setting challenging. This was the case for Faith, a 19 years old bachelor degree student in physical sciences, new to her country of residence:

> "And the initial stages, where there was a lot of information to kind of learn, like the types of research [...] the differences between like different migrants and how they kind of participate in society and it was just overwhelming" (Faith). [42]

In other cases, being involved in the research also meant becoming aware for the first time of the experiences of their own families—as in the case of Elif who was born in her country of residence to migrant parents:

> "Because my parents came in the 70s, 90s and they didn't tell me anything about their migration. [...] And in the interviews they told us about things I couldn't imagine.

> [...] I was self-reflecting in that moment, because [my parents] don't [talk] about their problems or things like their migration, and I was surprised by that fact" (Elif). [43]

By contrast, Aisha, who had experience working in migrant community centres, stated:

> "So I think for me, the project... It wasn't that I was learning that. I think it was just affirming—or confirming actually—the lived reality that people have to go through" (Aisha). [44]

According to FREIRE's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (2014 [1968]), education as a practice of freedom means transforming "background awareness" into problems to be considered in their "deeper implication", thus making them into "objects of their action and cognition" (p.83). It is through such a process of *conscientização* [conscientization] (p.36) that members of marginalised groups ("the oppressed") develop a critical understanding of the relationships between power and privilege, which determine their subordinate position in society (DEVOTTA et al., 2016; SANCHEZ & ROMERO, 2010). Following these insights, awareness or knowledge of structural conditions of vulnerability affecting a marginalised population can be conceived as a key step in participatory research practices with migrant communities, as it is necessary to "break the silence" of oppression and enable full participation (MONTERO-SIEBURTH, 2020). Similarly, following BUTLER (2016), acknowledging the conditions of vulnerability affecting one's group is a necessary step for mobilisation, leading to resistance and political agency. [45]

In line with these speculations, previous experiences not only impacted what peer researchers already knew or had to learn about systems and conditions of vulnerability, but also how they personally related to this new information. For Faith, the increased awareness of certain issues brought a sense of validation:

> "Because when you're facing these kind of experiences by yourself, you often think that this is an insular incident. But then through research, you're able to understand that: 'yes, I'm not the only one'. And it adds validation to, kind of like, your experience and it kind of empowers you in a way ... Like there's something wrong ..." (Faith). [46]

Moreover, reflections on one's positionality within these systems also resulted in reflections on one's relative privilege within systems of oppression and exclusion.

> "I started reflecting on my own position and I acknowledged that 'Oh yes, I do have privileges in this country, because I do have the nationality'. [...] All of that triggered... it triggered my mind to be thoughtful and intensely deep about what it is that I want to be and who it is that I think I am" (Claire). [47]

However, while Faith felt validated and empowered by such critical awareness of systems of structural vulnerability, Aisha's reflections on the impact of her participation were quite different:

> "... it's not a validation, it's not something that makes me feel empowered. It's a confirmation of a thought I already had, that I've already felt, and I think being in this project talking to people in that environment where we encourage people to share that, just being a part of this project in that way, kind of gave me that confirmation really, but it's a negative one" (Aisha). [48]

Similarly, for Claire this *conscientização* (FREIRE, 2014 [1968]) and the reflections on her positionality that followed, gave rise to personal experiences of vulnerability:

> "The most overwhelming issues for me were that I found myself relating a bit too much with those issues. [...] Because since I was more exposed to ... Let's say, 'the brutal reality', I felt sensitive and exposed [...] Watching and witnessing the issues some migrants were going through made me reflective of my position in society and eventually made me feel exposed, vulnerable ... and not equipped to deal with what's coming, with what was coming for me potentially in the future. That was one of the hardest things that I felt during the MIMY project" (Claire). [49]

Claire's words point to a critical aspect of conducting participatory research with marginalised people: Empowerment is not always a guaranteed outcome of participation, especially in disempowering contexts (DUIJS et al., 2021; MONTERO-SIEBURTH, 2020). Indeed, in terms of power and participation, conducting research with marginalised groups can highlight or confirm their structural vulnerability and underline the limits of their agency to promote social change. It is also interesting to note how Claire herself used the word *vulnerable* in describing her experience. Although vulnerability as a concept was an integral part of the project, its wide-spread use in everyday conversations and its different translations in the MIMY languages resulted in some discussions during the focus groups on what should be construed as vulnerability and only some peer researchers chose to use this term to describe their own feelings and experiences. [50]

Taken in isolation these quotes would suggest that the increased or confirmed knowledge of systems of structural vulnerability, which resulted from the peer researchers' participation in the project, had a negative impact on their lives. This would mean that, while their participation may have increased their critical awareness, this did not result in feelings of empowerment. Yet, all the peer researchers who joined the focus group described their participation as positive and, to different degrees, transformative. Indeed, underlying the negative impact of confronting "the brutal reality" throughout their participation, both Claire and Aisha pointed out the positive effect of hearing how people with migration background reacted to and resisted conditions of vulnerability. Aisha described as the most rewarding and interesting aspect of her experience hearing stories of solidarity in the community and how that can create a positive impact at the individual and community level, if not structural changes.

> "[...] with the focus group interviews with more settled communities and the ways that they navigated that, and the ways that they gave each other support and stuff through

> that, that is really beneficial for me in my own personal, sort of like understanding of how you can ... you know what I mean? What you can do" (Aisha). [51]

According to Claire, learning how people in vulnerable conditions confronted the challenges encountered was what helped her to overcome the feelings of vulnerability that emerged during the participatory process and ultimately positively impacted her vision for the future:

> "[...] being immersed within the people who got interviewed and share that moment with them... not only made us aware of our privileges, but [...] it also made me aware that no matter what you do in life, there's a level of free will and agency to it [...] To some extent—I'm saying to some extent—you have the possibility to choose that: 'OK, this happened, but I choose otherwise, another direction, I choose to think otherwise, I think to putting different actions'. And in that regard, I believe that the MIMY project was very much empowering" (Claire). [52]

Thus, in line with the literature problematising the expectations of empowerment intrinsic in participatory methodologies (DUIJS et al., 2021; MONTERO-SIEBURTH, 2020), our analysis revealed that awareness of structural vulnerability and patterns of marginalisation does not necessarily empower people to act and mobilise. Indeed, as noted in the discussion above, such awareness can be experienced as overwhelming and somewhat disempowering. This seems in line with previous research conducted among young people with refugee status (GILODI et al., 2024), which suggested that awareness of structural barriers may lead them to perceive their position and opportunities in the country of residence as limited, while interpreting challenges encountered as transient obstacles seemed accompanied by more positive outlooks. Nonetheless, as the peer researchers also narrate above, being involved in the research and hearing participants describe forms of resistance, to conditions of structural vulnerability, may be inspiring and create strategies for future action. [53]

### 4.4 "My perspectives have been broadened": Building understanding through participatory experiences

The participatory experiences of these peer researchers appear to differ both in terms of content, quality and impact of the experience. However, one common element that appears to have played a central role in shaping their varied experiences and their impact related to the interactions they had with different people and the empathy and understanding built through them. Indeed, qualitative research practice fosters meaningful interactions that not only create objective knowledge and spark reflections but may generate emotional understanding through shared spaces of expression (RYAN, 2008).

> "And I realised these things kind of differently, and at least also more. [...] I do understand them more intensively [...] Feel what the people are saying and feeling and living" (Elif). [54]

It could be suggested, then, that the impact of participatory methodologies with people facing conditions of vulnerability should not be evaluated in terms of transformative social change or empowerment, which, as Faith pointed out, is "a grand word". Rather, the legacy of their participation could lie in the way it contributed to their understanding of the world and of the people that live in it. Claire's words clearly convey this message:

> "My perspectives, they have been broadened by the MIMY project [...] I think it brought this human perspective that besides religions or skin colour, we are mostly all human beings and we're all also deserving of a place. So [I am] going forward with that in mind" (Claire). [55]

This seems in line with what is theorised within feminist scholarship on vulnerability. Having reconceptualised vulnerability as universal, based on the human body's potential of being harmed and our interdependency as social beings, scholars claim that it is this connective function of the notion which hides its potential for positive change (COLE, 2016; FINEMAN, 2008; GILSON, 2011). As ZOLI, JOHNSON and HAZENBERG (2023) pointed out, by challenging normalised processes of "ego-thinking about 'us and others', 'subjects and objects' as separate entities [...] new experiential way to be with others (or be as others), and therefore to be with vulnerabilities (or be vulnerable as others)" (p.329) may emerge. Indeed, according to McCLELLAND, vulnerable listening, or "the duality of vulnerability within the research dyad" (2017, p.339) is already an integral component of the research interview process. Following this line of thought, vulnerability can create the conditions for *mutual experience*, *empathy*, *interdependency* and *solidarity*, which may be translated into collective action and social mobilisation (BOUBLIL, 2018; GILSON, 2011). [56]

## 5. Conclusion

Based on our reflections of working on a large, multi-national project, in this paper we offer a critical examination of implementing peer research as a participatory approach. Our analysis problematises the boundaries, opportunities, and implications of such participation, arguing that while the intentions behind adopting participatory approaches are inclusive in nature, their implementation is fraught with challenges and complexities that necessitate continuous reflection and adaptation. [57]

Participatory approaches were developed with the goal of democratising knowledge production by disrupting traditional power hierarchies both within academia and in broader contexts. They embrace an epistemological and ethical stance particularly suited for research promoting empowerment among members of the research population included as peer researchers. Through their first-hand experiences, these individuals enrich research projects with unique insights, bridging the gap between lived experience and academic inquiry. However, as this paper underscores, it is important not to uncritically assume the insider status or empowerment of peer researchers merely from their involvement in such participatory frameworks. The nature of their contribution can vary significantly

depending on the project's design, resources, and subject matter, a fact that research teams must account for when adopting peer research strategies. [58]

As we have shown, the implementation of peer research is context-dependent, influenced by institutional, socio-legal, and linguistic factors. This necessitates flexibility, especially in multinational projects where uniform methodologies may not be feasible. Our experiences in the MIMY project exemplify how guiding principles can uphold methodological and ethical standards while adapting to different contexts, though this can lead to varied implementation strategies and patterns of participation. Furthermore, legal, administrative, and institutional constraints often impact the recruitment and involvement of peer researchers. In MIMY, these constraints promoted the inclusion of a more diverse pool of peer researchers, with varied educational backgrounds, which paradoxically enriched the project's outcomes by promoting reflexivity and the inclusion of a plurality of viewpoints and experiences. [59]

Despite the practical challenges we encountered, our experiences in the MIMY project reveal that the beneficial impact of peer researchers hinges on the establishment of trust—both between peer researchers and research teams, and peer researchers and study participants—and a commitment to reflexivity across the entire research team. On the other hand, the impact of these participatory experiences on the peer researchers themselves remains under-researched and demands further exploration. It is essential to acknowledge the unique positionality, expectations, and aspirations of each peer researcher. Their voices need to be heard and so it is necessary to create space in research projects for peer researchers' feedback and reflections. As the peer researchers clearly articulate in the sections above, their experiences in the project are largely shaped by how they negotiate their dual positions, as both *researchers* and *peers*, as well as by how others perceive them. Research teams must engage in open dialogue and negotiation regarding these, ensuring that assumptions do not dictate the peer researchers' contributions. [60]

Moreover, when dealing with sensitive topics such as discrimination, oppression, and stigmatisation—which participatory approaches are often designed to address—the effects of increased awareness of structural vulnerabilities and privileges can vary significantly. For some peer researchers, this awareness is empowering; for others, it can be disempowering, affecting their overall experience and engagement. Interestingly, the testimonies of the peer researchers discussed in this paper suggest that what promoted feelings of empowerment within their participatory experience was the awareness of forms of resistance to conditions of structural vulnerability. This suggests that the empowering potential may lie in creating shared spaces of interaction and expression where stories of resistance can inspire emotional understanding, solidarity and emancipation. [61]

Reflections on the implementation of peer research in the MIMY project highlight that the principles underlying participatory approaches are not straightforward to apply. Persistent power hierarchies, exemplified by disparities in compensation

and the exclusion of certain young people due to bureaucratic constraints, undermine the ideal of equitable participation. The constraints further challenge the democratic co-construction of knowledge as they impose limits on how effectively peer researchers can engage with and influence various stages of the research process. Moreover, the expectations and motivations of each individual peer researcher need to be balanced with expectations of funding bodies and academic tasks. [62]

Despite these challenges, the inclusion of peer researchers in projects such as MIMY has been ultimately beneficial, both enriching the research findings and advancing the personal and professional growth of the peer researchers involved and across the wider teams. However, it is essential to problematise and manage expectations of *full* participation. Even *partial* participation can yield significant benefits, provided there is an ongoing, reflexive balancing of the project's and peer researchers' needs. Ensuring a mutually beneficial process requires continuous reflection and adaptation, allowing for the accommodation of diverse experiences and expectations, and enhancing the overall quality and impact of participatory research endeavours. [63]

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to the peer researchers quoted above, for sharing their reflections and experiences with us and to thank all peer researchers involved, for being a significant part of the MIMY Project.

This research was funded through the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under Grant Agreement No. 870700, as part of the MIMY project: "EMpowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable conditions".

## References

Blachnicka-Ciacek, Dominika; Winogrodzka, Dominika & Trąbka, Agnieszka (2024). Enhancing benefits for peer researchers: Towards a flexible and needs-based approach to participatory research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2024.2417380 [Accessed: April 14, 2025].

Boccagni, Paolo (2017). Aspirations and the subjective future of migration: comparing views and desires of the "time ahead" through the narratives of immigrant domestic workers. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *5*(4), https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-016-0047-6 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Boublil, Elodie (2018). The ethics of vulnerability and the phenomenology of interdependency. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, *49*(3), 183-192, https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2018.1434952 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Butler, Judith (2016). Rethinking vulnerability and resistance. In Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti & Leticia Sabsay (Eds.), *Vulnerability in resistance* (p.12-27). New York, NY: Duke University Press.

Clark, Christina R. (2007). Understanding vulnerability: From categories to experiences of young Congolese people in Uganda. *Children and Society*, *21*(4), 284-296, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00100.x [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Cole, Alyson (2016). All of us are vulnerable, but some are more vulnerable than others: The political ambiguity of vulnerability studies, an ambivalent critique. *Critical Horizons*, *17*(2), 260-277.

Cook, Tina (2012). Where participatory approaches meet pragmatism in funded (health) research: The challenge of finding meaningful spaces. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum:*

*Qualitative Social Research*, *13*(1), Art. 18, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-13.1.1783 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Devotta, Kimberly; Woodhall-Melnik, Julia; Pedersen, Cheryl; Wendaferew, Aklilu; Dowbor, Tatiana P.; Guilcher, Sara J.T; Hamilton-Wright, Sarah; Ferentzy, Peter; Hwang, Stephen W. & Matheson, Flora I. (2016). Enriching qualitative research by engaging peer interviewers: A case study. *Qualitative Research*, *16*(6), 661-680, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115626244 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Duijs, Saskia E.; Baur, Vivianne E. & Abma, Tineke A. (2021). Why action needs compassion: Creating space for experiences of powerlessness and suffering in participatory action research. *Action Research*, *19*(3), 498-517, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319844577 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Eaton, Andrew D.; Tsang, A Ka Tat; Craig, Shelley L. & Ginocchio, Galo F. (2019). Peer researchers in post-professional healthcare: A glimpse at motivations and partial objectivity as opportunities for action researchers. *Action Research*, *17*(4), 591-609, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750318811913 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Eaton, Andrew D.; Ibáñez-Carrasco, Francisco; Craig, Shelley L.; Chan Carusone, Soo; Montess, Michael; Wells, Gordon A. & Ginocchio, Galo F. (2018). A blended learning curriculum for training peer researchers to conduct community-based participatory research. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, *15*(2), 139-150.

Edwards, Rosalind & Alexander, Claire (2011). Researching with peer/community researchers—Ambivalences and tensions. In Malcol Williams & Paul Vogt (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of innovation in social research methods* (pp.269-292). London: Sage.

Fineman, Martha A. (2008). The vulnerable subject: Anchoring equality in the human condition. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, *20*(1), https://ssrn.com/abstract=1131407 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Fineman, Martha A. (2010). The vulnerable subject and the responsive state. *Emory Law Journal*, *60*(2), 251-275, https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/elj/vol60/iss2/1 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Freire, Paulo (2014 [1968]). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Bloomsbury.

Gilodi, Amalia; Albert, Isabelle & Nienaber, Birte (2022). Vulnerability in the context of migration: A critical overview and a new conceptual model. *Human Arenas*, 7, 620-640, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-022-00288-5 [Accessed: April 14, 2025].

Gilodi, Amalia; Albert, Isabelle & Nienaber, Birte (2024). Toward a critical phenomenology of vulnerability: Experiences of young refugees building a life in Luxembourg. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*.

Gilodi, Amalia; Richard, Catherine; Albert, Isabelle & Nienaber, Birte (2023). The vulnerability of young refugees living in reception centres in Luxembourg: An overview of conditions and experiences across subjective temporal imaginaries. *Social Sciences*, *12*(2), 102, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020102 [Accessed: April 14, 2025].

Gilson, Erinn (2011). Vulnerability, ignorance, and oppression. *Hypatia, 26*(2), 308-332.

Groot, Barbara C.; Vink, Marja; Haveman, Annyk; Huberts, Mia; Schout, Gert & Abma, Tineke A. (2019). Ethics of care in participatory health research: Mutual responsibility in collaboration with co-researchers. *Educational Action Research*, *27*(2), 286-302, https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1450771 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Guta, Adrian; Flicker, Sarah & Roche, Brenda (2013). Governing through community allegiance: A qualitative examination of peer research in community-based participatory research. *Critical Public Health*, *23*(4), 432-451, https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2012.761675 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Heidbrink, Lauren (2021). Anatomy of a crisis: Governing youth mobility through vulnerability. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *47*(5), 988-1005.

Ibáñez-Carrasco, Francisco; Watson, James R. & Tavares, James (2019). Supporting peer researchers: Recommendations from our lived experience/expertise in community-based research in Canada. *Harm Reduction Journal*, *16*(1), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-019-0322-6 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

Kellett, Mary (2011). Empowering children and young people as researchers: Overcoming barriers and building capacity. *Child Indicators Research*, *4*(2), 205-219.

Marlowe, Jay M.; Lou, Lucy; Osman, Mohamud & Alam, Zibulnessa Z. (2015). Conducting post-disaster research with refugee background peer researchers and their communities. *Qualitative Social Work*, *14*(3), 383-398.

Mata-Codesal, Diana; Kloetzer, Laure & Maiztegui-Oñate, Concepción (2020). Editorial: Strengths, risks and limits of doing participatory research in migration studies. *Migration Letters*, *17*(2), 201-210.

McCartan, Claire; Schubotz, Dirk & Murphy, Jonathan (2012). The self-conscious researcher-post-modern perspectives of participatory research with young people. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *13*(1), Art. 9, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-13.1.1798 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

McClelland, Sara I. (2017). Vulnerable listening: Possibilities and challenges of doing qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, *4*(3), 338-352.

Mesarič, Andreja & Vacchelli, Elena (2021). Invoking vulnerability: Practitioner attitudes to supporting refugee and migrant women in London-based third sector organisations. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *47*(13), 3097-3113.

Montero-Sieburth, Martha A. (2020). Who gives "voice" or "empowers migrants" in participatory action research? Challenges and solutions. *Migration Letters*, *17*(2), 211-218.

Roche, Brenda; Guta, Adrian & Flicker, Sarah (2010). *Peer research in action 1: Models of practice*. Toronto: Wellesley Institute, https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Models_of_Practice_WEB.pdf [Accessed: February 13, 2025].

Ryan, Louise (2008). Navigating the emotional terrain of families "here" and "there": Women, migration and the management of emotions. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *29*(3), 299-313.

Ryan, Louise (2015). "Inside" and "outside" of what or where? Researching migration through multi-positionalities. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *16*(2), Art. 17, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-16.2.2333 [Accessed: April 14, 2025].

Ryan, Louise; Kofman, Eleonore & Aaron, Pauline (2011). Insiders and outsiders: Working with peer researchers in researching Muslim communities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *14*(1), 49-60.

Sanchez, Gabriella & Romero, Mary (2010). Critical race theory in the US sociology of immigration. *Sociology Compass*, *4*(9), 779-788.

Shahrokh, Thea; Lind, Jacob; Kilkey, Majella; Hansen, Christina; Awes, Nada; Blumenkron, Cristina; Chahine, Ali & Kabadeh, Asma (2023). Intergenerational explorations of "integration" through youth-led peer research. In Birte Nienaber, José Oliveira & Isabelle Albert (Eds.), *Doing action research with young migrants in vulnerable conditions* (pp.19-26). Luxembourg: MIS Working papers, https://mis.uni.lu/resources/working-papers/ [Accessed: April 14, 2025].

Smith, Laura; Bratini, Lucinda; Chambers, Debbie A.; Jensen, Russel V. & Romero, Le Laina (2010). Between idealism and reality: Meeting the challenges of participatory action research. *Action Research*, *8*(4), 407-425.

Sözer, Hande (2020). Humanitarianism with a neo-liberal face: Vulnerability intervention as vulnerability redistribution. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *46*(11), 2163-2180.

Sözer, Hande (2021). Categories that blind us, categories that bind them: The deployment of the notion of vulnerability for Syrian refugees in Turkey. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *34*(3), 2775-2803.

Turner, Lewis (2021). The politics of labeling refugee men as "vulnerable". *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *28*(1), 1-23.

Yang, Caroline & Dibb, Zoe (2020). Peer research in the UK. *Institute for Community Studies, Young Foundation report*, https://eprints.icstudies.org.uk/id/eprint/246/ [Accessed: 13 March 2025].

Zoli, Anna; Johnson, Katherine & Hazenberg, Evan (2023). Unsettling vulnerability: Queer and feminist interventions. *Feminism & Psychology*, *33*(3), 325-334, https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535231194430 [Accessed: January 27, 2025].

## Authors

*Amalia GILODI* is an assistant professor at Radboud University in Nijmegen (the Netherlands) and part of the university's network on Migration Inclusion (RUNOMI). Her research interests revolve around the psychosocial well-being of migrant residents, with a particular interest in processes of exclusion and inclusion, conditions of vulnerability and privilege and how these affect the well-being, positions and experiences of different groups in society. She has obtained her PhD in psychology from the University of Luxembourg within the framework of the EU-funded project MIMY, with a thesis critically examining the concept of vulnerability in the context of migration and international protection and its potential as an analytical category.

Contact:

Amalia Gilodi

Radboud University
Geography, Spatial Planning and Environment Department
Heyendaalseweg 141, 6525 AJ Nijmegen, the Netherlands

E-mail: amalia.gilodi@ru.nl

*Louise RYAN* is a senior professor of sociology and director of the Global Diversities and Inequalities Research Centre at London Metropolitan University. She focuses on migration with a particular specialism in social networks, and is a pioneer in the field of qualitative social network analysis. In her various research projects, she seeks to co-produce knowledge with participants through working with peer researchers. In her current project on the Afghan resettlement scheme across England, she is working with colleagues and 20 Afghan peer researchers.

Contact:

Louise Ryan

London Metropolitan University
Global Diversities and Inequalities Research Centre
166-220 Holloway Rd, London N7 8DB, United Kingdom

E-mail: l.ryan@londonmet.ac.uk

*Zeynep AYDAR* is a researcher at the University of Hildesheim in Germany, and member of the Migration Policy Research Group (MPRG). In her current research, she focuses on examining the needs and development potential of the integration policies and support structures for immigrants in the rural areas of Germany. She parallelly pursues her PhD at the University of Duisburg-Essen with a focus on education trajectories of young refugees, analysed through reconstructive biographical research approach. She studied sociology (B.A.) at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey and holds a double M.A. Degree from the Global Studies Programme of University of Freiburg, Germany and FLACSO Argentina.

Contact:

Zeynep Aydar

University of Hildesheim
Institut für Sozialwissenschaften
Migration Policy Research Group,
Universitätsplatz 1, 31141 Hildesheim, Germany

E-mail: aydar@uni-hildesheim.de

## Citation

Gilodi, Amalia; Ryan, Louise & Aydar, Zeynep (2025). Peer research in a multi-national project with migrant youth: Re-thinking vulnerability and participatory approaches [63 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *26*(2), Art. 16, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-26.2.4276.