

# Working as Peer Researchers on Delivering with Dignity: Our Experiences

*This has been co-authored by Isra Al Sharabi, Acha Joseph and Niloha Rangel: three peer researchers who worked on the British Red Cross's Delivering with Dignity research, a Health and Wellbeing Alliance project. Acha and Niloha contributed to this research as members of the [VOICES Network](#) - a collective of refugees and people seeking asylum. As experts by experience, they speak out about issues that affect them. This shares their reflections on the experience, and why meaningful opportunities to include people with lived experience are so important.*



The [Delivering with Dignity](#) project aimed to develop a framework to identify the barriers people seeking asylum face when trying to access healthcare in the UK, and to explore practical ways to overcome those barriers.

As people with lived experience of seeking asylum in the UK, we were invited to work as peer researchers on the project.

The project involved participatory workshops with people who had lived experience of the asylum system, alongside focus group discussions with healthcare professionals and other relevant stakeholders.

We were involved throughout the entire research process, contributing to the design, delivery, discussions and interpretation of the work.

### **Q: What did you gain from the experience?**

Acha Joseph: This project taught me so much, both professionally and personally. I became more confident speaking in meetings with academics and professionals. At first, I was nervous, but I realised my experience mattered. I learned how to ask the right questions, listen carefully, and take clear notes during interviews.

I also grew as a team player. We came from different backgrounds: academics, charity staff, and peer researchers, but we worked together towards one goal. I learned how to manage my time, prioritise tasks, and meet deadlines.

Perhaps the most important thing I gained was confidence. Being a peer researcher made me believe that my voice and my experience can really make a difference.

Niloha: What I achieved was to learn how to run workshops and listen to attendees who were seeking sanctuary. It was important for me to write up their opinions and concerns. I noticed they liked feeling listened to. I was very surprised how the participants opened up to me because when I was seeking asylum, I had been through the same doubts they were facing at that moment.

I was able to show respect for any sort of trauma and explain that it was a safe space. Being a peer researcher gave me other skills too: better English comprehension, and I learned how to conduct roundtables with participants with lived experience. This has helped me to build up my CV and also to become visible to other organisations which have invited me to participate in research.

Isra: For me, this project came at a time when my professional identity felt uncertain and my career path lacked clarity. Being part of the research gave me confidence and provided a space where I felt able to contribute meaningfully. It played a significant role in helping me rebuild my sense of self after difficult and exclusionary experiences connected to my career and identity as a refugee in the UK.

The project also opened important professional opportunities. I was able to submit abstracts based on this work to several conferences, present the findings, and was honoured to receive an award for best oral presentation at the UK Public Health Science conference. Following a presentation at a UK Health Security Agency event, I was invited to participate as a panel speaker, where I reflected on the personal and professional impact the project had on me.

### **What value is there in experts by experience playing this sort of role on research projects?**

Isra: Lived experience provides insights that cannot be replicated through traditional research approaches alone. Those who have navigated the asylum system understand its challenges in ways that external observers cannot fully capture. This

perspective strengthens research by ensuring that questions, interpretations, and outcomes remain grounded in real-world experiences.

Peer researchers also play a vital role in building trust with communities. Shared experiences can create safer spaces for open discussion, enabling richer and more authentic contributions. This ultimately leads to findings that are more relevant, more practical, and more likely to support meaningful change.

Niloha: Our involvement as peer researchers meant research participants felt valued as experts of their own experience, which boosted confidence and participation. Due to having a similar background, I could anticipate concerns, adapt discussions, and respond sensitively.

These roles promote inclusion and equity, while providing career pathways and empowerment for those who have navigated the system themselves.

Acha Joseph:

One moment that really stayed with me was speaking with someone who had struggled to register with a GP. They felt ignored and frustrated. Because I've had similar experiences, I could empathise and make them feel heard. It was rewarding to see someone open up and trust me enough to share their story. That's when I felt the real value of peer research, bringing lived experience into the process.

Funding for this type of co-production is important – it shows that lived experience is valued. It creates opportunities for growth, employment and leadership. Without it, these roles might not exist, and important knowledge would be lost.

### **What learnings do you think can be taken from this project?**

Isra: A key strength of this project was the genuine involvement of peer researchers at every stage. Rather than being consulted at a single point, we were trusted to shape the work from the outset. This fostered a strong sense of ownership, trust, and commitment, which in turn enhanced the quality of engagement and contributions.

Acha Joseph: Co-production has to be genuine. Peer researchers shouldn't just be included as a token. In our project, I felt that my ideas really mattered, and that made the work much more meaningful.

Niloha: An important factor was leadership: our partners' approach created a supportive and genuinely inclusive environment, enabling peer researchers to contribute in ways that reflected their strengths, perspectives, and interests. This type of leadership is crucial in participatory research. Research led by experts by experience builds trust, relevance, and engagement but requires planning, sensitivity and support to be effective. Respecting the whole person, rather than reducing individuals to a single aspect of identity or experience, is fundamental to the success of this work.

Acha Joseph: Support is really important. Some interviews were emotional, and it helped a lot to have check-ins where we could talk about how we were feeling. I think other organisations should remember that peer researchers may be reminded of their own past experiences, and support makes a big difference.

Training at the start would also help. While learning on the job is valuable, more structured preparation would make peer researchers feel even more confident.

For me, this project was more than research, it was a journey. I learned, grew, and felt empowered. It reminded me that lived experience is expertise. When organisations truly listen and work with communities, research can create real change, respect, and dignity for those it aims to support.