



Peer Research: The Power of Shared Experience

Understanding the importance of peer led research as a driver for change

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FOREWORD

Being a peer researcher is a rewarding experience. It has allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the social and economic issues young women face in society. Taking part in peer research motivated me to amplify the voices of young women so that they can be heard, and their lived experiences valued in creating change and a better future for young women. To go through this experience and share it with other young women is really valuable and something I will forever be grateful and appreciative of.

The peer research approach has an empowering effect in which young women, whether they are a peer researcher or research participant, are able to have open and honest discussions about their shared experiences. Through peer research, we gain a new perspective of the issues young women face that we might have missed if traditional methods of research were used. Peer research is important for influencing policy and decision making as it provides rich and authentic data which policy makers can use when campaigning for change. The real stories of real women can be a powerful tool in finding the solutions needed to create and implement effective policies that provide help and support for women. Peer research can bring forward action that can help achieve economic justice.



This report will be useful for policy makers and research practitioners as it allows them to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of peer research and its powerful benefits in producing better quality data. To acknowledge peer research as a powerful and credible tool provides opportunity to invest in peer research and use it as a reliable source of research and evidence needed to create positive change. Through the power of our shared experience, I hope it inspires others to use peer research as a driver for change.

Roshni
Peer Researcher

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE



“I think sharing experiences makes a huge difference. They say knowledge is power, and the more people talk - but also listen, the more things will change.”

Research participant

We heard from around 30 of our peer researchers and former research participants about their experiences of being involved in peer research, the benefits they have gained and why peer research is a powerful tool for understanding the lives of young women and driving the changes needed to build a more equal society.

They told us that:

- Peer research is a mutually empowering process that amplifies the voices of those furthest from power, unifies communities, and catalyses change through the power of shared experience.
- This mutual solidarity creates a safe and supportive space to gather rich, authentic, nuanced data about young women's lives that goes beyond what would typically be shared in a traditional research interview.
- Overcoming the imbalance of power between researcher and research participant results in research that is truly grounded in lived experience and helps to fill the evidence gaps needed to build a genuinely intersectional evidence base.
- Working alongside peer researchers to produce and publish accessible peer research means that more people are able to engage with reliable data about the experiences of people from minoritised communities and feel connected to the issues that affect them and the solutions they need.
- Being involved in designing and conducting research equips peer researchers with both specific and transferable skills, increases their confidence, improves their mental health and broadens their networks.
- Both peer researchers and research participants are motivated by a desire to create positive and meaningful change and are eager to be more involved in shaping the policies and decisions that affect their lives.

Young Women's Trust are calling on policy and decision makers to invest in peer research and acknowledge it as a powerful and credible tool for understanding the experiences of young women, especially those from minoritised communities who are rarely represented in traditional forms of research.

We are also calling on research practitioners to draw on the expertise of organisations like Young Women's Trust to understand how peer research can result in better quality data, as well as having significant benefits for peer researchers and research participants.

We're asking the research community and people in power to advocate for the change needed to put peer research at the heart of decision making, so that the voices of those with lived experience can be truly heard, valued and given the chance to help shape our society.



INTRODUCTION

Peer research empowers people with lived experience to lead and conduct research.

At Young Women's Trust, young women are at the heart of all our work. We know that young women have the experience, ability and drive to create the changes we need to make an equal society for women and that their voices are powerful. We do peer research to amplify the voices of young women and to fill urgent evidence gaps in the data about their lives and experiences.



Young Women's Trust Research Centre

Our Research Centre for Young Women's Economic Justice was launched in 2021. Our aim is to build a unique evidence base on young women's lives to call for the change that young women need to achieve economic justice. We train young women as peer researchers who shape and conduct research with other young women to understand their experiences and the challenges they face. Our peer researchers are at the heart of all our research and are always paid fairly for their time. As experts on their own experience, we believe that empowering them to conduct the research on issues that concern them is crucial to creating meaningful research which catalyses change.

Whilst peer research is gaining momentum, particularly in the third sector, it remains an underutilised source of evidence amongst policy and decision makers. Previous research¹ has identified a need to legitimise the methodology in the eyes of policymakers, and other stakeholders working with communities. There is also limited published evidence about the specific benefits of being involved in peer research for peer researchers and research participants, particularly young women.



¹ Peer Research in the UK (2020) Institute for Community Studies – Powered by the Young Foundation
<https://i3w7d2w8.stackpathcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TheYoungFoundation-PeerResearchInTheUK-final-singles.pdf>



What did we want to find out?

The overall research questions guiding this research are as follows. They were developed in consultation with our peer researchers and internal stakeholders:

What are the benefits of peer research?

- For peer researchers
- For research participants
- For decision/policy makers

How can peer research be used to effectively influence decision making on the issues affecting young women?



WHAT DID WE DO?

- We carried out a rapid review of the academic and grey literature relating to the peer research landscape in the UK, and its benefits to peer researchers, participants and policymakers.
- We held two creative workshops, with seven young women who had previously been interviewed by or had taken part in a focus group with Young Women's Trust's peer researchers. The workshops were co-designed and facilitated by peer researchers.
- We held a further creative workshop with three former Young Women's Trust peer researchers, also co-designed and facilitated by current peer researchers.
- We invited our 28 existing and former peer researchers and anyone who had previously been involved as a research participant in our research to share their views anonymously in two qualitative online surveys.



WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

1. What motivates young women to take part?

We asked: What was your motivation for taking part in peer research?

Young women told us that they wanted to contribute to research to help create positive change for young women. This was the most common answer from both peer researchers and research participants when asked about their primary motivation for getting involved in peer research at Young Women's Trust. Peer researchers told us that they were motivated by a desire to support Young Women's Trust's aim to achieve economic justice for young women and they felt passionately about the need to build a stronger evidence base on young women's lives and elevate their voices to achieve change. Peer researchers were also keen to use their own lived experience to support and empower others.



"I wanted to become a peer researcher because as I learned more about Young Women's Trust I realised that my experiences were much more common than I initially thought. I wanted to make sure that other young women like myself who felt alone could be heard in order to build a stronger case to support other young women."

Peer researcher



"I wanted to be part of the resolution by taking part in whatever can help shift change."

Research participant

Peer researchers also told us that:

- They wanted to build their confidence and gain new skills, either to pursue a career in research or to gain transferable skills for their personal and professional lives.
- They wanted to feel part of a community and connect with other like-minded young women. This was particularly important for young women who had experience of mental health problems or who had felt particularly isolated during the pandemic.



“I was looking for opportunities to improve my skills as I was struggling in my previous job, feeling demotivated and undervalued.”

Peer researcher



“I felt that with my mental health I really needed to feel part of a community and do something positive to help me to feel more connected with other young women.”

Peer researcher

Research participants also told us that:

- They wanted the opportunity to share their experiences, reflect on their own journeys and be part of something ‘bigger’.
- The financial incentive for taking part made them feel that their time and contribution was valued and made them more likely to sign up.



“Although I would have done it happily without the vouchers, it makes me feel like my time is worth something and my experiences are valuable somehow.”

Research participant

Some of the peer researchers who participated in our survey told us they had some concerns before applying to become a peer researcher. These were predominantly centred around feeling as though they would not be good enough or that other people would be more educated or have more varied or relevant life experiences. However, all of the peer researchers who took our survey told us that their experience of being a peer researcher has met the expectations they had when they signed up and that the training and support they received equipped them with the skills and confidence to fulfil the role.

2. What skills and experience do peer researchers gain?

We asked: What skills have you gained during your time as a peer researcher?

Peer researchers told us about the wide range of skills they have gained during their time as peer researchers. As well as specific research skills, such as survey design, interview and focus group facilitation, they also felt that they had benefited from the opportunity to learn and practise more general workplace skills and improve their teamwork, confidence, and communication.



“I’ve had the chance to learn to do lots of things I hadn’t done before, like transcribing, working on the interview questions, and I’ve even had the chance to do a presentation on our research which is something that was a great experience that I learned so much from. It’s been such an opportunity to learn a lot of incredible things.”

Peer researcher



“I feel I have learnt to articulate myself, push myself out of my comfort zone and experience blog writing.”

Peer researcher



“I’ve gained confidence and more of an understanding about the ‘world of work’. It’s less scary than I thought it was and I am more equipped to handle it than I previously thought.”

Peer researcher

Peer researchers also told us that speaking to other young women and being part of a community of peer researchers has increased their awareness and understanding of the issues affecting young women, which has in turn made them feel more passionate about raising their voices to drive change. As well as valuing the connection and shared experience of talking to young women with similar backgrounds and experiences, peer researchers also appear to enjoy and benefit from the opportunity to learn more about young women from diverse communities and approaching research through an intersectional lens.



“I’ve gained a deeper understanding of feminism, equality and empathy when listening and connecting to other young women.”

Peer researcher



“I’ve gained more understanding about the issues facing us all as young women. I don’t know if that counts as a skill, but I think it should because it’s so important for us all to be aware of the things impacting us so much and it’s really changed my perspective for the better.”

Peer researcher



“I’ve learnt about different life experiences and neurodivergences. I’ve learnt how to work from a feminist and empathetic lens.”

Peer researcher

3. How does peer research promote growth and development?

We asked: Have you experienced any other benefits, either personally or professionally, as a result of being a peer researcher?

The two greatest benefits most frequently articulated by peer researchers in both the survey and workshop were increases in confidence and feelings of connection. They told us about the growth and development they have experienced, both on a personal and professional level, during their time as a peer researcher. Many shared how they have gained more faith in their own abilities since being a peer researcher and have been less hesitant to pursue job opportunities that they had previously felt underqualified for. Some told us that they believe that the training and support they have received as a peer researcher has helped them to secure promotions, improved their job prospects and open doors to other peer research opportunities.



“I got a job two levels higher within a year because I had the confidence to apply and the skills to prove my worth in the interview.”

Peer researcher



“I was able to get another similar role with another organisation doing other bits of peer research. I wouldn’t have heard about it had it not been for being a peer researcher with YWT, and I think the experience that I already had from my role with YWT was what made me stand out and get offered the other role. That’s been great for me as I wouldn’t have applied otherwise.”

Peer researcher





“I have been able to put on my CV that I am a peer researcher, and I can genuinely state that I have skills in creating projects, which I couldn’t before becoming a peer researcher.”

Peer researcher

Young women told us that they especially valued being part of a community of peer researchers and that the connection with other women has been both empowering and helped to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially during the pandemic. One peer researcher told us how being part of an understanding and supportive community and being able to do something she enjoys and is passionate about has helped her to overcome depression and feel more hopeful for the future.



“As a young woman who has had trouble being understood in society due to invisible chronic pain, it has made me feel safe, comforted, and given me hope on my darkest days.”

Peer researcher



“For the first time in my life, I felt part of a great team. It has taken until my late 20s to achieve this. The social aspect has sometimes helped to break my loneliness.”

Peer researcher



“Hearing about other young women’s experiences has been something that’s made me feel really unified with other young women. I have felt really isolated over the last few years and being a peer researcher has really helped me to feel a part of something and to realise that every young woman has their own struggles. That’s been a really valuable thing for me and has made a big impact on how I view the world and people around me.”

Peer researcher



“I feel connected to a strong and supportive community. Before taking on this role, I was feeling isolated after being unemployed for over a year. Being a peer researcher, having regular training opportunities and meetings with other young women around the UK has made me feel so happy and rejuvenated. In this difficult period, I’ve felt uplifted, valued and connected. I honestly am so so grateful for this opportunity and chance to learn and grow.”

Peer researcher



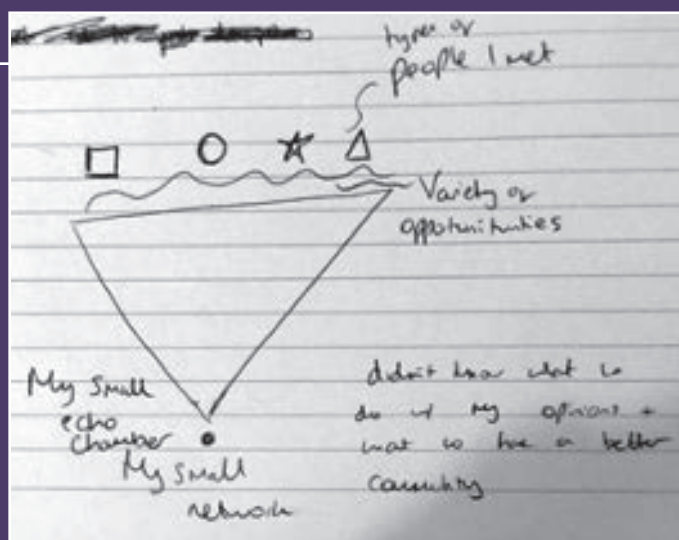
In our creative workshop, we asked former peer researchers to find an object or draw a picture that represents their journey or highlights one of the benefits they experienced as a result of being a peer researcher. Their images and stories clearly demonstrate the personal growth they have experienced and the different ways that young women can benefit from the skills and experience that being involved in peer research offers them.



Louise's journey

I've drawn an upside-down triangle to say that through the process, my world has got bigger. The small end of the triangle represents me before, and the way that I felt that I was only in a really small network of people. I felt like I had opinions about things and I cared about things, but I didn't really know what to do with it. I would just have conversations with my friends, but I felt we were just existing in an echo chamber. And then I've drawn little symbols to represent different kinds of people that I've met. Like, other peer researchers and the team at Young Women's Trust – just people that I wouldn't have met in my retail job. And then I did a little squiggly line just to signify the variety of things we did and how things are changing and how everything was exciting, and we got to speak about things and share things that were important to us.

Louise, former peer researcher

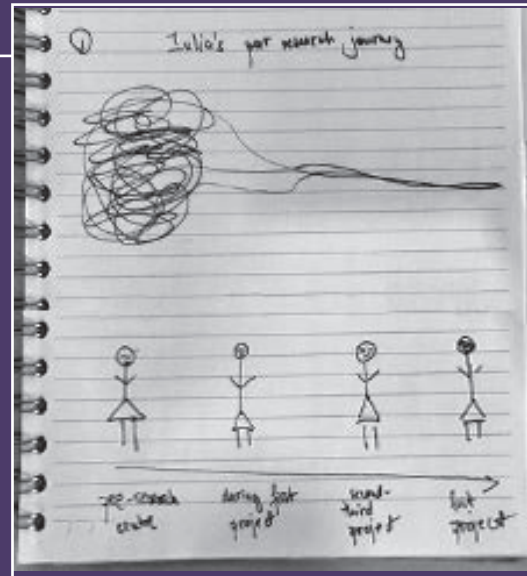




Iulia's journey

The first picture is me in the beginning, before the Research Centre. So, it's my face with an 'x' for a mouth and above it is my scrambled brain. And then this is me doing the first project, my face like a straight face and my brain is, like, slowly peeking avenues. And then this is during the second and third one, and I'm smiling. And then obviously as it goes on, and it all makes sense, here I have hearts for eyes.

Iulia, former peer researcher



4. How does being involved in peer research make young women feel?

We asked peer researchers and research participants to write three words that describe how being involved in peer research at Young Women's Trust made them feel. We then turned their responses into a word cloud. The larger the word, the more frequently it was used by young women to describe how they felt:

Fig 1: Peer researcher word cloud



Fig 2: Research participant word cloud



Overwhelmingly, both peer researchers and research participants felt that taking part in peer research was a ‘mutually empowering’ experience that helped break down power imbalances that often exist in traditional research and provided young women with an opportunity to have their authentic voices heard.

Although some research participants told us that they felt anxious before, and sometimes during, their interviews, all said they would be very or quite likely to take part in similar research in the future. In addition, almost all the participants we heard from said that they felt safe and supported during the process and found it easier to open up to another young woman with similar experiences than to a professional researcher.



“Just the fact that I was talking to a peer, I was able to be honest. It felt like a safe place. I feel like if it wasn’t a peer, I might have been more reserved. And all the truth might not have been said. But it is really beneficial, the fact that that it’s peer research.”

Research participant



5. Peer research in policy and decision making

We asked all the young women who took part in our research: How can peer research make a difference to achieving economic justice for young women?

They told us that:

- Peer research is more authentic and can help people in power to gain a more realistic and nuanced picture of young women's lives.
- It elevates the voices of young women that are not typically heard in traditional research, especially those from minoritised communities, and helps to fill urgent gaps in the data about their experiences.
- It is more accessible and easier to understand than traditional academic research, meaning that a greater number of people, including young women, can engage with it and use it to catalyse change.
- It helps to bring communities together.
- It creates opportunities for young women by paying them fairly for their time and developing their skills and confidence.
- It breaks down traditional power structures and empowers more young women to speak up and campaign, directly or indirectly, for justice and equality.



"The real stories of real women are powerful tools. It can bring a whole new perspective on an issue rather than statistics or interviews conducted/reported by someone who may not be able to interpret what that person means because they're from a different background."

Peer researcher



"It allows us to find their voice, hear their voice, then bring forward action that can achieve economic justice."

Peer researcher



“I think it can bring people together and unify them. It’s such an important thing in our society to try and understand each other more and listen to each other and that’s at the heart of what peer research is.”

Peer researcher

We also asked young women why they think it is important for policy and decision makers to consult peer research to inform their work. They emphasised how peer research can help to bring people’s experiences to life and provide a more in-depth and intersectional understanding of the challenges they experience and the solutions they need. This is particularly important when considering decisions and policies affecting communities where official data is limited.

Hearing directly from young women, particularly those from minoritised communities, can not only help to fill gaps in the data and provide an alternative perspective, it can also help to bridge the gap between the lives of politicians and their constituents and encourage policy making which is rooted in a more grounded understanding of the issues affecting communities.



“It’s important to listen, I think. And hear. And not just hear, but really hear. I think that’s really important. Because so many people have conversations where they listen, they hear, but they don’t actually hear-hear. Yes. And then I think the other thing that’s very important is learning from other people’s experiences and background and using that to... inform other things.”

Research participant



“Peer research can help inform their work because it helps them to develop a better understanding of the perspectives of young women and the issues they face. This can help them with creating and implementing effective policies that provide help, support, and opportunities for young women.”

Peer researcher

At Young Women’s Trust, we provide opportunities for young women to share findings from our peer research directly with decision makers, including MPs, alongside their own personal experiences of the challenges facing young women. Having a strong evidence base, rooted in intersectional lived experience, to back up young women’s individual stories, helps boost the credibility of our policy and campaigning priorities and allows us to more effectively influence change.



“Peer research gives politicians a powerful insight into the lives of young women, going beyond the statistics. It also equips young women with the skills and confidence to tell politicians about the challenges they face and the solutions that they want to see. I recently met with Amy, a member of the Advisory Panel at Young Women’s Trust. I was able to hear directly about her experiences of the Social Security system – invaluable to me in my work as the Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Work and Pensions.”

Wendy Chamberlain MP

WHAT NEXT FOR PEER RESEARCH?

Our research adds to a growing evidence base demonstrating the value and credibility of peer research and the benefits it brings, both at an individual and societal level.

At Young Women's Trust we believe in the power of shared experience, and we're asking the research community and people in power to join us in advocating for the change needed to put peer research at the heart of decision making, so that the voices of lived experience can be truly heard, valued and are given the chance to help shape our society.

Our Recommendations

For policy and decision makers:

- Recognise that peer research is a valuable tool for understanding the lived experience of communities and the solutions they propose and can provide rich insights into the lives of those who are often missing from 'traditional' approaches to research.
- Engage with organisations like Young Women's Trust to hear directly from people from minoritised communities, enabling them to contribute to shaping policy and practice.
- Champion and prioritise peer research within your networks and advocate for its use as a means of filling important evidence gaps and bringing about a more nuanced understanding of people's real experiences to bring about change.



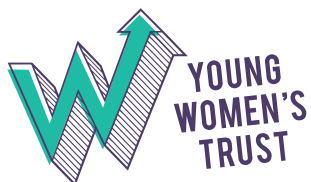
For research practitioners:

- Consider how a peer research approach could benefit your data collection. Draw on the expertise of organisation such as Young Women's Trust to support you to build your skills and knowledge and help you create an empowering and supportive space for peer researchers and research participants.
- Value the skills and experience that peer researchers bring to a research environment and draw upon this talented pipeline of individuals to diversify your workforce and bring a new perspective to your research.
- Seek out opportunities to share power and amplify the voices of people from minoritised communities.
- Advocate for peer research and promote it as a credible alternative or adjunct to traditional research methods, especially as a means of informing policy and decision making.
- Evaluate the impact of peer research and publish your findings to help build a strong evidence base and secure future funding.

For funders:

- Understand and recognise the added value and legitimacy of peer research and proactively fund projects that use a peer research approach to generate new knowledge and empower people from minoritised communities to have their voices heard.





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