

EPIM-DMI event on closing the representation gap for people with lived migration experience in public and policy advocacy on migration issues

- *Policy, advocacy and campaigning work on refugee and migration issues is not predominantly led by people with lived migration experience. Why?*
- *Where are the spaces where policy, advocacy and campaigning work take place? How open, how closed, are those spaces to people with lived migration experience?*
- *What are the opportunities and challenges to promote leadership by people with lived migration experience in policy and advocacy work on refugee and migration issues?*
- *What role can private funders play in promoting and supporting migrant-led policy and advocacy work?*

On 21 April 2021, the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM) and the [Diversity, Migration and Integration Thematic Network of the European Foundation Centre](#) jointly organised a learning session on closing the representation gap for people with lived migration experience in public and policy advocacy on migration issues. During this event more than 50 private funders and leaders with lived migration experience thoroughly unpacked and interrogated the above questions. The event was moderated by Dylan Fotoohi (Director of [Refugees for Justice](#)).

As a baseline for the discussions, Mohammed Badran (Founder [MD Capacity Development](#)) and Tuyet Stooker (Researcher MB Capacity Development) the authors of the EPIM-commissioned report "[Migrant-led advocacy across Europe: challenges and opportunities](#)" presented the key highlights of their research. Anila Noor (Managing Director of [New Women Connectors](#) and Member of the European Commission expert group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, asylum and integration), Sana Mustafa (Associate Director of Partnerships and Engagement at [Asylum Access](#)), and Melis Arı (Senior planning officer on diversity and inclusion at [Mental Health Finland](#) and member of the [Transatlantic Migrant Democracy Dialogue](#)) then joined the authors on a panel discussion to offer further reflections and thoughts.

The panel unpacked the lack of representation of people with lived experience in policy and advocacy work on migration and refugee issues: historical causes, systemic barriers, public and political narratives, absence of a gender lens and power dynamics as the underlying causes of this imbalance. Some of the headlines of the insights shared by the speakers include:

- Funding and policy processes are not designed by and for people with lived migration experience. The migration sector is one of the few sectors which is not being led by people with lived migration experience. This situation is rooted in a historical context of colonialism, racial inequalities, and power dynamics. Organisations and institutions need to reflect internally about privilege and exclusion and review their practices accordingly.
- Policy making spaces are generally closed to people who have lived migration experience. The right to political participation (such as right to vote, or to stand up for elections) is essential, but often not granted to people who are refugees and migrants. The door to the main hall is often closed from the very outset.

- The civil society sector is virtually the only remaining space for people with lived migration experience to try to shape and influence policies that affect them. The current shape of the migration civil society sector is clear; it is not led by leaders with lived migration experience.
- Tokenistic practices are prevalent in the civil society, policy and philanthropy sectors. It has become the norm for organisations to create unpaid advisory groups, consultations, or some other sort of lived experience group on the side-lines, outside of their main governance, decision making, staffing, and operational structures. This may tick the boxes, but in reality, it is nowhere near meaningful participation.
- Public discourse around people with lived migration experience is dominated by deficit-based, victimising narratives that promote a perception of people as problems to be fixed, as opposed to agents for change. This narrative is internalised by the public, politicians, civil society, funders, and even over time, by people with lived migration experience themselves. This disempowering narrative is the acid that corrodes the agency of individuals. It takes a brief moment of thought to realise that such a discourse would not facilitate people to emerge as leaders, nor does it enable the public to perceive them as capable of leading.
- And finally, but very importantly, almost all of those who are currently leaders with lived experience in the civil society sector end up in these positions accidentally. There is an eminent need for purposeful, targeted, and systemic action to upskill, develop, and support emerging and potential leaders with lived experience to take on leadership roles in this space.

Together with Ali Torabi ([Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust](#)), and Nadia Sacoor ([Aga Khan Foundation](#)) as speakers, the learning session continued with a discussion on practical and pragmatic actions to address this gap, the role that funders can proactively play, the opportunities that exist, examples of good practice that can be replicated and built on, and the hopes and aspirations for the future.

The discussions have been summarised and turned into a set of recommendations with the hope that it stimulates further thoughts and joint action among funders.

Recommendations for funders:

- **Be sensitive** to and mindful of victimising, deficit-base narratives. Try to counter them and promote a person-centred strength-based approach in your grant-making to enable the agency of people with lived experience. Expect and encourage your grantee organisations to do the same.
- **Be proactive** in reaching out to (where possible directly and not through larger CSOs) and supporting those groups and organisations that are formed and led by people with lived experience. Work with intermediaries and collaborate with existing migrant-led organisations in your portfolio to expand your network of groups and organisations that are led by people with lived experience.
- **Ringfence** funding for groups and organisations that are led by people with lived migration experience.
- **Be purposeful and targeted** in creating leadership development opportunities and mechanisms to build capacity, skills, network of emerging and potential leaders with lived migration experience in the civil society sector and to address the systemic barriers that leaders with lived experience face in the sector.
- **Lead by example.** Champion meaningful involvement of people with lived migration experience by actively recruiting people with lived experience to your own organisations' board, leadership team, staffing and operations.

- **Actively Encourage** your grantee organisations to recruit people with lived experience to all levels of their governance, leadership, staffing, and operations.
- **Be mindful of** specific barriers that organisations or leaders with lived experience may face in accessing resources and actively try to mitigate them in your grant-making processes. These could be technical barriers such as communications and language barriers, institutional requirements or systemic barriers such as power dynamics within the sector and discrimination on the basis of multiple identities (intersectionality).
- **Invest** in organisational development, core support, capacity building and start-up support for individuals with lived migration experience and groups that are formed and led by people with lived experience.
- **Collaborate** and **communicate** with other funders. Invest in and create shared spaces and strategic funder collaborations to bring about system change and to address the root causes of the gap in representation of leaders with lived experience in policy and advocacy work.
- **Promote and practice** *meaningful* participation. Meaningful participation requires a constant delegation of power and authority to people. It requires opening up the space, delegating decision making authority, redistributing resources, and enabling ownership and leadership by people with lived experience.
- **Reflect** internally about privilege and exclusion and **review** practices accordingly. Meaningful participation will not happen as a matter of common practice unless funders reflect internally on the ways their systems currently function and consider mechanisms to prevent and address harmful narratives and tacit manifestations of stereotyping and discrimination.

EPIM and DMI will continue to convene and facilitate a space for further discussions and collaboration among funders to close the gap in representation and leadership of people with lived experience in policy and advocacy work.