

# Vulnerability, Embedded Agency, and Downward Social Mobility of Young Asylum Seekers

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# Vulnerability, Embedded Agency, and Downward Social Mobility of Young Asylum Seekers<sup>1</sup>

Mara Gabrielli<sup>a</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

From an intersectional perspective, the situational and inherent vulnerability faced by two young asylum seekers in Catalonia, Spain, were analyzed through case studies that illustrate how these young people navigated within unpredictable and changing environments that hampered their embedded agency. Their settlement as social navigation highlights the temporal dimensions of the migration process. Waiting was also a key element that marked and regulated their settlement from a normative, relational, and existential dimension. The results highlight downward social mobility and precarious integration into the host society due to institutional, structural, and socio-cultural constraints.

## KEYWORDS

Young asylum seekers; intersectional discrimination; intersectional vulnerability; social navigation; embedded agency; downward social mobility

## RESUMÉ

D'un point de vue intersectionnel, nous avons analysé la vulnérabilité situationnelle et inhérente à deux jeunes demandeurs d'asile en Catalogne (Espagne) grâce à des études de cas qui illustrent comment ces jeunes ont navigué dans des environnements imprévisibles et changeants qui ont influencé leur agence intégrée. Leur implantation en tant que navigation sociale met en évidence les dimensions temporelles du processus migratoire. L'attente est aussi un élément clé qui a marqué et réglé leur règlement d'une dimension normative, relationnelle et existentielle. Les résultats mettent en évidence une mobilité sociale à la baisse et une intégration précaire dans la société d'accueil en raison de contraintes institutionnelles, structurelles et socioculturelles.

## MOTS CLÉS

Jeunes demandeurs d'asile; discrimination intersectionnelle et vulnérabilité intersectionnelle; navigation sociale; agence intégrée; mobilité sociale à la baisse

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Europe received 471,270 asylum applications, and Spain became the third receiving country with 88,762 applications, behind France with 93,470 and Germany with 121,955 (Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado [CEAR], 2021). Since 2015, the number of asylum seekers in Spain has grown significantly; however, positive resolutions

were for a meagre 5% of the total applications, well below the European average of 31% (CEAR, 2021). In 2020, the Inter-Ministerial Commission of Asylum (CIAR) resolved 116,567 applications, of which 72,519 were unfavourable, 45,262 were granted permission to stay or reside in Spain for humanitarian reasons, like in the case of

## CONTACT

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<sup>1</sup> This project has been carried out within the Ph.D. Program in Education of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain).

Venezuelans,<sup>2</sup> and 5,760 were favourable. Of these, only 4,359 applications were granted refugee status and 1,401 received subsidiary protection. The communities of Madrid (33,878 asylum applications), Catalonia (9,415), and Valencia (6,926) submitted the highest number of applications, representing almost 55% of the total asylum applications.

In Europe, most research findings (e.g., [Fundamental Rights Agency \[FRA\], 2017](#); [Koehler, 2017](#)) confirm that reception policies and programs tend to lack standardized and targeted interventions to adequately respond to the needs of young refugees and asylum seekers (in the 12–24-year age group according to the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education). These young people experience difficulties accessing the regular educational system and in language learning; additionally, they tend to lack social support and strong community networks (e.g., [Morrice et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, their families' socio-economic precariousness is compounded by other institutional obstacles, such as difficulties validating certificates and diplomas for access to professional courses or tertiary education and their employability ([Federico & Baglioni, 2021](#)).

Knowledge of the socio-educational pathways and employability of young refugees and asylum seekers in Catalonia, Spain, is largely based on limited data that mainly focus on the analysis of the national reception system and the programs offered to this population, as well as the adverse effects of traumatic and stressful events that psychologically affect refugee children (e.g., [Pasetti & Sánchez-Montijano, 2019](#)). The results of this doctoral research highlight a

lack of empirical data on both how young refugees and asylum seekers cope with the integration process in the new environment and how state policies and programs affect their socio-educational pathways and their insertion in the job market.

My doctoral research has provided new relevant data on the case studies of 12 young refugees and asylum seekers who came from diverse social geographic backgrounds and who were in different stages of the asylum process (refugee status, asylum application, or denial of asylum). In this paper, I present the biographies of two of these young asylum seekers, Paulo and Akram (pseudonyms), to explore the **situational** and **inherent vulnerability** they faced during their stay in the reception program in Catalonia.

Following a conceptual approach to intersectional vulnerability ([Mendola & Pera, 2021](#)), and drawing on the notion of **social navigation** ([Vigh, 2010](#)) to understand how young people navigate in an unpredictable and changing environment ([Nunn et al., 2017](#)), I present the methodology based on a multimodal ethnographic approach that incorporates the photo-elicitation technique as a complementary tool for interviewing the young participants. In the next section, I describe two case studies: these young peoples' biographies offer a valuable picture of the intersecting factors (institutional, structural, and contextual) that generate a precarious integration in the host society. In the last section, I present the findings and establish comparisons to analyze the processes of **intersectional discrimination**, which generate multiple forms of **intersectional vulnerability** affecting Akram's and Paulo's integration process and **embedded agency** ([Brah, 1993](#); [Khurshid, 2015](#)) in the host society.

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<sup>2</sup>Since March 2019, CIAR has been granting humanitarian protection of one year (renewable) for Venezuelans whose application was rejected between January 2014 and February 2019, and about 35,000 people have benefited from humanitarian protection.

## A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITY

In recent decades, the concept of **vulnerability** has entered more strongly into the academic debate on human rights—and forced migration—in institutional policies and programs and in nonprofit organizations' (NGOs) practice of using it as an analytical tool for evaluating inequality and social injustice. For refugees and asylum seekers, the status of vulnerability is caused by the country of origin, as stated in article 14 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and article 33 of the 1951 Geneva Convention (La Spina, 2021). The UN (2001, pp. 15–16) defines vulnerability as “a state of high exposure to certain risks, combined with a reduced ability to protect or defend oneself against those risks and cope with their negative consequences.”

In the social sciences, Brown et al. (2017) show that the extreme flexibility, ubiquity, and malleability of the concept of vulnerability results in a lack of analytical clarity that can hinder its evaluation in social practice. Kuran et al. (2020, p. 1) also highlight the trend towards homogenizing practices in the identification of “vulnerable groups,” which hinders a more individualized work that considers the “qualitative differences” and resilience factors in determining the causes that generate inequality.

From an ethnographic and anthropological approach, I reviewed academic contributions that implement the feminist and intersectional critical perspective (P. H. Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991) to define and measure vulnerability. This critical perspective allows a deeper analysis of the intersection of multiple factors and social variables that generate inequality, exclusion, and lack of access and control over resources (Brown et al., 2017; Kuran et al., 2020; Mendola & Pera, 2021). Thus, vulnerability is defined as

“the result of different and interdependent societal stratification processes” (Kuran et al., 2020, p. 1). As Tierney (2019, p. 127) has pointed out, people “are not born vulnerable, they are made vulnerable,” since vulnerability is a social construct that develops in specific contexts, differs between social groups, and encompasses temporal, spatial, situational, and personal domains. Thus, the individual's ability to reduce vulnerability depends on “access to and control over different types of resources” (education, health, and social networks, among others) that are unevenly distributed among social groups (Kuran et al., 2020, pp. 2–3).

From these premises, in my research, I refer to the concept of **intersectional vulnerability** (Mendola et al., 2020) to analyze the intersection of different degrees of vulnerability and the changing conditions to which young refugees and asylum seekers are exposed both in origin and host country. Mackenzie et al. (2014) offer a taxonomy of vulnerability, making a distinction between **situational vulnerability**, which is derived from external factors (socio-political and economic factors, environmental situations, the status of social groups), and **inherent vulnerability**, derived from individual intrinsic factors (the physiological, affective, and social nature of the person). Goodin (1985) introduced the taxonomy of **pathogenic vulnerability**, which is determined by both situations of paternalistic abuse, or oppression in interpersonal relationships, and structural injustices and political violence and oppression. Hence, migration policies and programs that regulate the legal status and access to socio-economic resources might exacerbate the vulnerability of the refugee population instead of ameliorating their inherent and situational vulnerability.

In my research, Vigh's (2010) concept of **social navigation** is crucial to understanding

how young refugees and asylum seekers navigate in unstable, hostile, and changing environments that condition their possibilities (Nunn et al., 2017), identifying the strategies to adopt as they face new forms of discrimination and oppression (Denov & Bryan, 2014). These new forms of vulnerability are caused by not only individual intrinsic factors (Mackenzie et al., 2014) but also situational factors that would be included in so-called **intersectional discrimination** (Mendola & Pera, 2021), such as “racialized stereotypes” about refugees (Denov & Bryan, 2014, p. 28), difficulties arising from their situation in the school context and access to vocational training, or limited access to counselling and support services (Denov & Bryan, 2014; Nunn et al., 2017). Furthermore, **waiting** is a key dimension that marked and regulated the settlement of young refugees from both a normative dimension (asylum and integration policies) and a relational and existential dimension. The analysis of the waiting process from these two dimensions permitted us to understand how these young men coped with the temporalities of the migration process and how they found spaces for new subjectivities and relations. Therefore, the notion of waiting provides critical new knowledge both as “a social phenomenon,” which marks the existential dimensions and the social position of individuals, and as “an analytical perspective on migration processes and practices” that “offers new insights into the complex and shifting nature of processes of bordering, belonging, state power, exclusion and inclusion, and social relations in irregular migration” (Jacobsen et al., 2021, p. 2).

In an environment characterized by social change and the flow of unexpected events, “multiscalar social forces” (Nunn et al., 2017, p. 53) determine the possibilities and aspirations of young people. Young

refugees and asylum seekers end up experiencing segmented and ethno-stratified social inclusion (Iglesias-Martínez & Estrada, 2018) due to processes of discrimination and/or racialization based on structural, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints that limit their embedded agency (Brah, 1993; Khurshid, 2015) in the host society.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is part of a PhD project on education, which I developed through case studies of young refugees and asylum seekers who, with or without their families, had access to the International Protection Reception System in Catalonia. This is a national reception program for asylum seekers and refugees who lack social and financial resources. It is divided into two phases with a duration of 18 months, which can be extended to 24 months in cases of extreme vulnerability (MISSM-SEM-DGIAH-SGPPI,<sup>3</sup> 2020). The program is managed in coordination with NGOs that receive public funds from annual funding rounds. Contact with young people has been possible thanks to the collaboration of two NGOs. The first is a one-year volunteering job, and in the second organization, the researcher is working, which makes it easier to build a trusting relationship with young participants. We carried out the ethnographic research for 18 months,<sup>4</sup> from October 2019 to May 2021, with 12 young participants (8 male, 4 female) in the age group of 12 to 24 years (4 of them under age 18) in the metropolitan area of

<sup>3</sup>The acronym indicates the ministries that develop and finance the reception program: Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration (MISSM); Secretary of State for Migration (SEM); General Directorate of Integration and Humanitarian Assistance (DGIAH); and General Sub-Directorate of the International Protection Program (SGPPI); see <https://www.inclusion.gob.es/ca/web/migraciones/sistema-de-acogida>.

<sup>4</sup>Due to the exceptional situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to adjust the schedule and timing of the field work.

Barcelona. These young people came from different socio-demographic backgrounds: Honduras, the Donetsk region in Ukraine, Peru, Guinea-Conakry, Morocco, Lebanon, Mali, and Pakistan. Eight came with one or more family members, and four were young adults who emigrated alone. These young people arrived in Spain between 2018 and 2020. The young people who came from Central and Latin America presented higher levels of education in comparison with those coming from North Africa and Sub-Saharan countries.

To collect information, I used a field diary, participatory observation inside and outside the premises of the two NGOs, and multimodal ethnographic methodology using participatory methods from visual ethnography and visual anthropology (Pink, 2007). For the interview, I implemented the photo-elicitation technique (Harper, 2002) as a complementary and participative tool for interviews with young participants. The **multimodality** in ethnography refers to the combined use of written texts, visual material, and digital communication for interactions between the researcher and participants (e.g., S. G. Collins et al., 2017). The young people in this study carried out preliminary work by selecting and elaborating photographs and graphic images related to specific topics about their country of origin, the migration process, and the reception experience. Empirical data have been triangulated with semi-structured interviews with 6 family members of 5 young participants and 20 professionals from public institutions and NGOs.<sup>5</sup> All interviews were recorded and transcribed in the language used for the interview (Spanish, Catalan, or English). Before the interviews, the participants were informed of the ethical issues

of research through an informed consent document about the aims and purposes of the research, their right to confidentiality, and the protection of personal information using pseudonyms, as well as the risks and benefits of participating. We implemented **reciprocity** (between the researcher and the participants) and **reflexivity** as ethical support strategies both for the visual ethnographic practice with young people and concerning the researcher's positionality (Berger, 2013). I followed the recommendations set out in the European Commission's Horizon 2020 program (2020) about the concepts of innovation and responsibility in research. In addition to ethical responsibility, among the aspects highlighted in the European program, I prioritized participatory methods with young people, and I implemented a gender-sensitive approach as a tool for ethnographic analysis to ensure gender equality in the research process and content (methodology, information analysis, use of gender-neutral language). Finally, inductive categories were established and analyzed to encode the different sources of information using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

### EXPERIENCES OF VULNERABILITY OF YOUNG ASYLUM SEEKERS IN CATALONIA

Although every narrative is unique, the cohort of 12 young participants shows institutional neglect of liability in their country of origin, precarious social inclusion in the host society, and common threads in terms of **situational** and **inherent vulnerability**. In this paper, I present in-depth qualitative data, analyzing the case studies of Paulo and Akram, two young asylum seekers whose biographies offer a rich and valuable picture of the **intersectional vulnerability** they faced and are illustrative of the cohort of 12 young participants. Because of the absence

<sup>5</sup>I wrote a specific paper in which I analyzed the social practice of professionals who provide reception services to young people in not-for-profit organizations.

of empirical studies on the subject in the specific field of study, I also considered it relevant to focus the research on the biographies of these young people and frame discussion of their **social navigation** in the new environment in all its nuances, thus highlighting the intersecting factors that generate vulnerability and the changing conditions concerning specific individuals and social groups.

Additionally, the photographic interviews with these young people created a context in which the discussion of images leads participants to express how they live and act in their environments, and the photographic meanings were renegotiated and reconstructed during the interviews as part of the process of creating ethnographic knowledge (Pink, 2007). This interactive method allowed the young people to narrate their perspectives through a self-reflection analysis of the images represented.

### Paulo: A Young Asylum Seeker from Peru

Paulo was a 17-year-old who fled Peru in December 2019, along with his mother Maribel and his stepfather Farid, a Palestinian from Jordan. Maribel and Farid ran an Arab street food truck in a neighbourhood of Lima. Shortly after starting the business, the family was the victim of racism, harassment, and assault due to Farid being a practising Muslim, as well as his Arabic background, having a Peruvian wife who converted to Islam. Even city hall officials joined the neighbourhood protests, which made headlines in the local media. Paulo remembered how disturbing the whole situation was:

There [in Lima] is very difficult as she [Maribel] was a Muslim [...] and a lot of people came out to confront them, to tell her to take off the veil ["destaparse"], that "you can't dress like this," "go to your country," [...]. They always followed my mom and harassed her. And people thought they

were foreigners and were forcibly removed from the place ["los botaban como piedras"].

Without any institutional protection, complaints to the media, the ombudsman, and the public prosecutor's office were useless, and Paulo and his family remained isolated at home for months. The acts of discrimination ended with the destruction of the Arab street food truck. The situation was so unsustainable that the family borrowed money from Maribel's sister and fled to Spain.

In October 2020, almost a year after their arrival in Spain, Paulo and his family had access to the International Protection Reception System. The family went to live in a reception centre shared with other asylum seekers coming from Honduras, Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru. It was at this moment that I met Paulo, a boy a little introverted and lonely, with a withdrawn look. During the interview, Paulo showed me a photograph of a first Christmas dinner and stated, "Since we are all Latinos, we have good communication [...]. We help each other. We are like a family." Since his arrival in Barcelona, he was seeking psychological support because of the traumas he experienced; but he had to wait until he was 18 years old—more than a year after his entry into the reception program—to be referred to a mental health centre for adults.

Their arrival in Spain also broke the fragile balance of Paulo's family, accelerating the family breakdown. A social worker informed us that Paulo had decided to share a flat with Cesar, whom he met in the reception centre and with whom he had developed a strong bond of friendship. In Peru, Paulo was finishing his last year of high school, and, in his opinion, everything was harder due to the high cost of studies, a very selective and classist system, and a conservative mentality:

Universities cost four times more than the basic salary. There is a lot of machismo [...]. There [in

Peru], if you're in school, ESO<sup>6</sup> here, if you're not in the top positions, you're considered someone who doesn't have an intelligent ability. This limits your future ["Ya amarga tu futuro, así de fácil"].

In Spain, Paulo became more independent, learned many things, and was able to leave his comfort zone. He showed us a picture from the internet, in which a fish carrying a backpack is walking beside a fish tank:

I was used to my family guiding me, I didn't know what to study, I didn't know anything. Here [...] I have become much more independent in all areas. And so I can get out of my comfort zone.

Paulo managed to enter a Ciclo Formativo de Grado Medio<sup>7</sup> (a vocational training course of one year) in advertising and marketing, which he eventually had to leave due to difficulties in the validation of his high school qualification. In addition, he was running out of time in the reception program and would have to get a work contract to be able to maintain his legal status in Spain and be economically independent. He obtained a temporary job as a waiter at a food company and in a hotel. At the time of the interview, he was unemployed.

Paulo's family was waiting for the resolution of their asylum application. In Spain, Paulo was able to move away from the emotional burden and family responsibility caused by the situations of racism and discrimination he faced in Peru. Catalonia was a place of opportunity, but it was also a place where he had to face many challenges—above all, the possibility of being in an uncertain legal status if the asylum application were denied. Despite everything, Paulo continued with the project of resuming his studies and "bringing to light ['sacar a flote']

[his] project that is related to advertising, an undertaking ['un emprendimiento']".

### Akram: A Young Pakistani University Student

In March 2019, Akram, a 24-year-old Pakistani youth, fled his country with his mother, Samia, after a year and a half in which Samia suffered sexual harassment and threats by a group of men who perpetrated acts of violence, kidnappings, and sexual offenses against women in urban and rural areas of Pakistan.

In Islamabad, Akram's family could afford "a very pleasant life" thanks to the good salary his mother earned as a civil servant. Samia was an independent woman, with a high position in a government insurance company. Akram's father, Talha, worked as a salesman for a painting company. Sexual harassment and threats began one day while Samia was waiting at the bus stop to go to work, and from then on, the harassment became increasingly violent. Samia reported the harassment, but without any result, because, as Akram stated during the interview, the police forces are a part of the patriarchal and corrupt institutional system. Complaints to the media also failed; these only aggravated the threats to the family. With loans from the bank and the help of friends, the family obtained visas for Samia and Akram. They fled to Europe, and when they arrived in Germany, they applied for asylum and were transferred to the refugee camp in Cologne. Akram recalled those few months as difficult due to the poor conditions and the refugee camp's many restrictions. In the Dublin Convention application, the German government denied asylum to Akram and his mother because they had a visa to enter another country, Finland. Yet, they decided to flee to Spain because, as Akram reported during the interview, "it is the only country

<sup>6</sup>ESO (compulsory secondary education) is the Spanish educational system that corresponds to the 12–16-year age group.

<sup>7</sup>The CFGM are courses to acquire the professional competence and knowledge of each sector. The degree allows access to job labour, other educational paths, or higher-level education. See <https://triaeducativa.gencat.cat/ca/fp/grau-mitja/>.



in the European Union that does not deport people who are denied asylum.”

For more than two years, Akram and his mother shared a small apartment in a coastal city in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, where there was a big Pakistani community with many Pakistani shops. Akram explained:

We can buy halal meat and other products from our country. The neighbours and the owner of the apartment where we live are Pakistani. This is good for us.

In January 2021, Akram and his mother were denied asylum. The notification of asylum refusal entailed the withdrawal from the reception program within 15 days and the loss of their residence and work permit, as well as any kind of economical help from the reception program. The denial was justified because Samia could have moved to live elsewhere in the country. This justification lacked an in-depth analysis of the situation of institutional neglect of women in Pakistan (Hadi, 2017), according to the lawyer who worked on Akram's and his mother's asylum applications.

Akram was a young university student who “had everything” in his country: a comfortable life without economic problems. In Islamabad, he was finishing his career in business administration and was “enjoying life,” he said. In his new life in Catalonia, Akram was a young man with a heavy burden of family responsibility, frustrated and discouraged by the succession of events that, both in his country of origin and host country, completely changed his daily life and his plans, as he expressed during the interview:

I miss the carelessness I had because I had no responsibilities. I had no worries. I only went to university, studied, met friends, and enjoyed life [...]. In Pakistan, I had no idea what my future was going to be. I grew up very, very fast. I came here, with responsibilities, tensions, and problems.

During the time that I met with Akram, he was profoundly demotivated, showing a loss of future expectations because he could not continue his university studies and he was forced to find a job to be economically independent after being denied refugee status. He showed me pictures of his life in Pakistan, expressing how these images made him feel sad, and how he felt lost in his new environment without his friends and family.

Akram sometimes felt that he was in limbo, waiting to obtain legal status through the so-called *arraigo social* [social roots], a temporary residence permit obtained in exceptional circumstances after proof of residence in Spanish territory for three years. He could also possibly obtain the *arraigo laboral* if he could prove a minimum of six months of employment and two years of residence in Spain. Akram felt stuck, without real expectations about his future, because of the vulnerability of his legal status and his socio-economic instability:

I don't see any future in Spain for me. We began at ground zero and we are still at ground zero! We had problems in Pakistan, and we have problems here. [...] I don't have any expectations in Spain now and I don't know about the future. I'm a young 24 years old and I can do anything for myself, only working, eating, sleeping, and going back to work every day.

For more than a year, Akram had been working as an electrician in a small company without a work contract. He worked many hours a day, which he said left him exhausted:

We can't make any complaints because we don't have papers. If I call the police because the employer doesn't pay me, they can arrest me. The employer takes advantage of my situation and reduces my salary as he pleases.

Akram felt he was at the mercy of external events, and the condition of stagnation wearied on him emotionally and gave him a feeling of “non-existence”:

A lot of times I feel stuck, my life is waiting, waiting, waiting. Things are now worse because before I had job permission, and I could do everything I wanted. But now I have nothing [...]. I can't do anything more, except wait. [...] And without legal status, we are nothing. We don't exist!

He had very few friends with whom he could socialize, in both the local and the Pakistani communities, because of the negative intra- and inter-group experiences where he lived in Spain. Akram also commented that on several occasions he perceived prejudice, hostility, and a certain rejection by the native population towards the Pakistani population. He said, "We are the bad citizens in anything" in Catalonia. He felt alone, without a social life where he lived, but he still had contact with his friends in Pakistan: "I maintain the contact with them, we talk about our studies and a lot of things."

In his relationship with the Pakistani community, Akram felt betrayed and disappointed because what he called the "Pakistani mafia" tried to take advantage of his own and his mother's situation, asking them for a lot of money in exchange for fictitious labour agreements that would have allowed both his mother and him to obtain a residence and work permit. He commented:

The Pakistani community does not help us, they use us to their benefits [...]. When we ask for something like a contract, they know we're in trouble and I'm a fellow countryman, but they say, "You have to pay anyway."

Moreover, he clashed with a social reality of which he did not feel part. In his opinion, Pakistanis living in Catalonia were immigrants with low levels of education who came from a social background of high poverty. Akram thus marked his social difference, and cultural capital marked the intra-group social class difference:

People who have studied, like us, come from other cities and here in the community are people without studies [...] and do anything to earn a living.

He also felt disappointed by the reception system because he felt it should have offered some alternative socio-economic support when people leave the program:

They [the Ministry of the Interior] would have to understand how we can survive after the rejection of the application. We are dependent on them and suddenly they decide that we are not in the program anymore.

Despite everything, the possibility of reversing his situation did not leave his mind. Akram continued with the project of resuming his studies to work in business administration. He stated, "Here I want to implement my career after my residence permit in Spain and do some kind of courses to start working in this area." Although the wait was often exhausting, he did not lose hope: "I have hope, hope that one day something will change."

## DISCUSSION

The biographies of Akram and Paulo illustrate how social variables that generate inequality and exclusion are contextually situated and change according to specific social and historical contexts. As [Yuval-Davis \(2011\)](#) highlights, biases such as gender, age, social class, ethnicity, and racialization shape people's lives, while other biases such as belonging to certain castes or legal status are specific to minority groups such as Indigenous people or refugees. The **politics of belonging** ([Yuval-Davis, 2011](#)), which are implemented through reception programs and asylum policies, determined the social positions of Akram and Paulo in the host country and led them to downward social mobility during the first three years of settlement in the host society. These young people's process of integration functions as a **social mirroring** ([Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 317](#)), which is "the process by which new immigrants internalize the attitudes—often

negative—the host country projects toward their group.” Therefore, the concept of social mirroring concerns the host society’s response in terms of structural and social conditions.

### Intersectional Discrimination

In their countries of origin, Paulo and Akram were victims of violent discrimination due to institutionalized neglect of liability. Racism and discrimination in Peru are understood in terms of interpersonal prejudices “imbued with customs” and therefore are considered problems that the individuals must solve on their own (Oboler & Callirgos, 2015, p. 69). In Catalonia, Paulo could free himself from the stigma of racism by “dissociating” himself from his family’s ethno-religious identity, which ceased to be a factor of vulnerability in his life. The moment when you “stop being” is therefore when you can go beyond and overcome the framework of vulnerability. In Akram’s case, his ethno-religious visibility became evident in the host country, where he perceived hostile treatment and an attitude of distrust from the local population for his physical characteristics and religious beliefs, a situation that is confirmed for Asian populations (Suso Araico et al., 2020). In his country of origin, Akram and his family were victims of a patriarchal system that exercises control over women through the institutionalization of restrictive codes of conduct, gender segregation, and ideology associated with family honour and feminine virtue (Hadi, 2017). Akram’s mother’s “independence” sparked rejection in a society where only 2% of women formally participate in the labour market (Amnesty International, 2002) and in which religion drives oppression against women: “When a woman’s conduct and behavior are regarded as a threat to the patriarchal system, it is her body that is to

be penalized and punished for wrong-doing” (Hadi, 2017, p. 303).

In different social environments, Akram and Paulo suffered **intersectional discrimination** through processes of **racialization** that attributed hierarchies between social groups based on physical and cultural differences (Barot & Bird, 2001). Race and racism are social constructs that create “otherness,” and as dynamic categories, they change and evolve according to the historical, social, and political context (Barot & Bird, 2001; Garner & Selod, 2014). However, in Spain, as in the rest of Europe, it is mostly Muslim communities that suffer discrimination and racism in accessing education, employment, and social resources (Aparicio & Doménech, 2020) through processes of **religious racialization** (Galonnier, 2015, p. 571), as in the case of Akram.

Therefore, Paulo’s and Akram’s statuses and personal identities were in an ongoing process of transformation according to different attachments: (a) when socio-cultural and political barriers mark “racialized” differences between “us” and “others” generating hierarchies among social groups and (b) when people identify themselves within and are emotionally attached to a specific collectivity or group (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 12). Paulo and Akram strengthened social ties with their communities of origin through a process of emotionally and symbolically belonging to a specific group (Yuval-Davis, 2011). As other studies have also underlined (e.g., Iglesias-Martínez & Estrada, 2018), these young men had a weak social network in the host society, and they built their relationships with other asylum seekers or inside their community. Paulo built his social network in the reception centre with other asylum seekers, who were his source of mutual help, exchanged information, and resources. The symbolic identification of a

Latin American community generates an atmosphere of companionship that gave Paulo a sense of familiarity with his country of origin. For Akram, the rejection and hostility he perceived from the native population, due to his physical characteristics and his religious beliefs, limited his possibilities and revived an emotional and cultural attachment to his country of origin. Akram also kept active ties with his friends in Pakistan, with whom he shared interests, through social networks. This gave him a sense of belonging that was absent in the host country. Similarly, Akram experienced a tense relationship with the Pakistani community. He felt disappointed by his community having tried to take economic advantage of his vulnerability and preferred to remain socially distanced. The community's social class (Beltrán & Sáiz López, 2008) clashed with the socio-cultural environment from which Akram came, since most of the Pakistanis living in the metropolitan area of Barcelona come from rural areas of Punjab with very low socio-educational levels (Güell et al., 2018). In the new settlement, Akram's identity had been erased on the social map—we don't exist—unlike his social position in his country of origin.

### A Segmented and Ethno-Stratified Inclusion

In their host countries, Akram and Paulo experienced processes of segmented inclusion and ethno-stratification, a precarious insertion (Iglesias-Martínez & Estrada, 2018) with downward social mobility. The uncertainty of their legal status, their situations of discrimination and labour exploitation, and their lack of social networks (Allegrì et al., 2020; Iglesias-Martínez & Estrada, 2018) determined their loss of status, as well as a loss of the social and cultural capital they had acquired in their countries of origin. These young people also encountered many obsta-

cles in accessing social resources (O'Higgins, 2012), including psychological help, due to deficiencies in the public system, as well the limited resources of NGOs that manage the reception program.

Akram and Paulo fell into low-skilled sectors, with precarious temporary contracts and over-qualification resulting in downward labour mobility (Iglesias-Martínez & Estrada, 2018). In addition, Paulo faced administrative barriers in validating his diplomas and certificates (Federico & Baglioni, 2021). Likewise, asylum denial resulted in a condition of vulnerability for Akram, a return to "zero kilometres," due to losing his residence and work permit and any kind of social and economic assistance from the government, after leaving the reception program. As a result, this young man reverted to an unprotected condition because of the uncertainty of his legal status. Socio-political and economic forces shaped the possibilities of these young people, who simultaneously negotiated between the "immediate," attending to their present needs, and the "imagined" while seeking viable futures (Vigh, 2010).

### "Waiting": New Subjectivities and Relations

Waiting was a key concept in the narratives of Paulo and Akram. Since their arrival in Catalonia, their waiting marked and regulated their settlement process from a normative and relational dimension. Thus, waiting can be conceptualized as a form of legal status and a socio-political condition, as well as a space for new subjectivities and relations (Jacobsen et al., 2021). These two dimensions are mutually interdependent.

Waiting linked to the normative and political dimension (migration and asylum policies, integration and reception policies and programs) regulates one's legal status in the

host society, as well as access to social resources. Additionally, the **layering** (Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 105) between different levels of migration policies and programs exacerbates a condition of precariousness, like in the cases of Akram and Paulo. Waiting as a social phenomenon changed the ways these young people positioned themselves and their social positions in their new social environment. From an existential dimension, they also experienced the waiting period as stagnation and suspension, a condition of material and social precarity. This existential dimension reinforced the perception of "invisibility" (Schultz, 2021, p. 171), of "non-existence" in the receiving society, as in the case of Akram. Therefore, I affirm that growing restriction to access to legal status and resources undermined the human rights of these young people and embedded their agency in relation to their capacity for action and strategies, exacerbating a condition of **pathogenic vulnerability** (Goodin, 1985) in the host society.

The "existential immobility" and the condition of "uncertain status" constrained any action oriented towards the future or even imagining a future (Karlsen, 2021, p. 116). Akram felt disillusioned by a system that denied him a secure future in a protected environment. After being denied asylum, his endurance was his only means of finding "better ways to live or cope in the present"; it allowed him to better tolerate the condition of irregularity (Karlsen, 2021, p. 126). Endurance also helped Paulo to find new strategies for a better future and to adjust his aspirations while waiting for his asylum application to be resolved. Therefore, as a "space for new subjectivities and relations" (Jacobsen et al., 2021, p. 6), the **waiting** breaks with society's perception of asylum seekers as "passive victims" and shifts the focus to their capacity to adopt strategies to

reverse the condition of **intersectional vulnerability** and shape their decisions in search of new possibilities and future opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Akram's and Paulo's narratives highlight downward social mobility during young asylum seekers' first years of settlement in a host society caused by the intersection of **situational** and **inherent vulnerabilities**, fuelled by the uncertainty of one's legal and socio-economic situation, loss of social status, and precarization of their social and cultural capital. These young men experienced an ethno-stratified integration into the host society, which hampered their embedded agency.

The results stress how legal status and/or ethno-religious affiliation are social variables that can place young people in a subordinate position in their new environment and that limits their access to resources and weakens their ability to change their situation. Akram and Paulo experienced a precarious integration into the host society caused by institutional, structural, and socio-cultural constraints.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

This material is the author's own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere. All sources used are properly disclosed.

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