



View from L-Weibdeh over Jabal Amman.  
Jordan 2022, © Martine Rønne Bjerg.

# Embracing Positionality: Navigating Objectivity during Field Work

## Reflections from the Jordanian Field

MARTINE RØNDE BJERG

When investigating young men and women's complicated feelings about female labor inclusion, where do you place your own gender? How do you achieve the most nuanced and objective research, when you both identify and are perceived as a part of the group you investigate? In this article, I dive into methodological and ethical considerations I had during my fieldwork, investigating youth in Amman and concerns regarding their inclusion in the Jordanian labor market.

In Jordan, many young men and women fight to change the social and institutional structures for the gender-unequal labor market. A part of my fieldwork in 2022 focused on young men and women, who believe in the professional abilities of women, but are against them working on the same terms as men. High youth unemployment has young people fighting to get included in the

labor market, and the question of who needs the jobs the most, can create contradictory feelings of solidarity and resistance, complicated by fear of shaming and professional and social exclusion (Sieverding et al 2021, 7-8, 11; Assaad et al 2021, 114).



## A subject in the field

During my fieldwork, I realized the complexity of researching a particular group, of which I was also considered to be a part of. I was seen both as an outsider, being non-Jordanian and “Western”, and as “one of them”; a woman and a student. While believing the female labor exclusion was limiting people of all genders, I had not “picked a side”, and believed I could collect my data from an objective point of view. However, realizing I was perceived as anything but neutral in the field, I had to acknowledge that there was some truth to my own subjectivity.

This became clear when I walked towards downtown Amman and was cat-called by a car full of women. Hearing a string of whistling, cheers, and mildly offensive expressions, which under a “typical catcall” would feel humiliating or threatening, felt uplifting coming from a car with more Jordanian women hanging out the windows than traffic safety would allow. It was amusing, encouraging, a hidden protest and acknowledgment of shared repetitive decade-long experiences as women. They treated me as a part of their team, and my immediate response of laughter and retaliated shouts made me further reflect on my own position. How could I pretend to be a neutral being in a gendered field?

I stopped trying to simply disregard my gender and started to reflect actively on what it meant for the quality of my interviews. How could acknowledging a personal “bias” help obtain a more nuanced picture of the field?



View from Manara, a popular hangout spot for young people in Amman. Jordan' 2022, © Martine Rønde Bjerg.

## Using your Bias: Patience and behavioral changes

Acknowledging that I had a personal motivation to obtain a true understanding of the reasons behind not supporting a gender-equal labor market, made it easier to stay (curious) in conversations, which were hard to stay engaged in from a personal level. Letting myself reflect on my past gender-based experiences, strengthened my patience when listening to the (few) interlocutors questioning my entire gender's professional abilities or right to inclusion. I got to observe interlocutors going from displaying irritation and even superiority, to expressing vulnerability, shame, and immense pressure, which helped to build a more nuanced picture for myself and the

“ My dad started shouting, crying, saying ‘when I die, do this’. He would feel too much shame if she worked, while he himself is still alive.

research field. In short, when being personally challenged during data collection, it was a strength to have both acknowledged and allowed a personal value to exist while conducting research.

Additionally, I found that the closer I came to understanding my subjectivity concerning the field, the more clearly, I understood how I was perceived by my interlocutors. Realizing the connotation of the Western woman as an “angry feminist”, made me careful in how I presented myself. I caught myself leaning into the gendered expectations to cancel out their initial expectation, by showing a milder attitude and smiling more than I normally would in professional environments. An initial defensive attitude decreased during the conversation, and a vulnerability entered. One male interlocutor, “Karam”, explicitly told me, that I was nicer than expected, which made it easier for him to talk openly. He went on to reveal his concerns about gender-equal labor inclusion; that if women “took the jobs that are meant for men”, he feared what it would mean for his masculinity, social reputation, and prospects of starting a family. As a child, he had suggested to his father that his mother could help him earn money for their family, while his dad was in prison. He said: “My dad started shouting, crying, saying ‘*when I die, do this*’. He would feel too much shame if she worked, while he himself is still alive.” These gendered expectations had always caused anxiety for Karam.

My (perhaps overly) gentle attitude undoubtedly helped open up more in-depth interviews with the interlocutors who expressed resistance or doubt about equal female labor inclusion. However, this initiated new ethical considerations. Was I “over-conforming” to gender expectations in order to encourage their vulnerability? And was this unethical towards my interlocutors who were actively trying to fight the gender-specific expectations? Listening with a sympathetic ear to reasons why women should not have (equal) access to the labor market, felt like a lack of solidarity towards them, perhaps I would have argued against it under other circumstances. Of course, my objective was to conduct research, and not to be an activist. Additionally, I genuinely sympathized with these interlocutors’ worldview, understanding the pressures they felt – and leaning into my gender expectation was a way to calm down the person in front of me. However, was this supporting a structure that seemed to cause some degree of pain for all genders? Or was I so aware of my position in the field, that I had over-analyzed my behavior, and confused empathy, an overall human quality, as leaning into the expected gender role? (Goldstein 2009, 241-42).

My reflections led to discussions with my female interlocutors about when or if it was okay to use the gendered expectation consciously. Some saw it as a way to secure their professional space or make people listen without defensiveness (Baird et al 2019, 5). Others saw it as pure survival, some as weak, while others stated that femininity was not the reason for patriarchal structures. Notably, all of them had more than one of these opinions. Reflecting on my position and behavior as a woman doing research in Jordan initiated my understanding of the contradicting thoughts and reflections that my interlocutors went through when it came to their gender identity, professional identity, and hopes for the future.

### Bibliography

- Assaad, Ragui, Caroline Krafft and Maia Sieverding. 2021. "Youth Transitions to Adulthood in Jordan: High Aspirations, Challenging Realities". Amman: UNICEF. Available online: <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/media/8361/file/Youth%20Transitions%20to%20Adulthood%20in%20Jordan.pdf>
- Baird, Jones; et al. 2019. Adolescent well-being in Jordan: exploring gendered capabilities, contexts and change strategies." *Overseas Development Institute*. London: GAGE .
- Goldstein, Donna M. 2009. "Perils of Witnessing and Ambivalence of Writing: Whiteness, Sexuality, and Violence in Rio de Janeiro Shantytowns" in *Women Fielding Danger: Negotiating Ethnographic Identities in Field Research*. Edited by Martha K. Huggins, and Marie-Louise Glebbeek, 227-250, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,.
- Sieverding, Maia; Ragui Assaad; Caroline Krafft. 2021. *Barriers to Economic Participation for Young People in Jordan: A Gendered Analysis*. Amman: UNICEF. Available online: <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/media/9156/file/Policy%20Brief-%20Barriers%20to%20Economic%20Participation%20for%20young%20People%20in%20Jordan-English.pdf>



#### About the author

Martine Rønne Bjerg is a graduate of the Human Security master's program and has a bachelor in Arabic and Islamic Studies from Aarhus University. In her thesis, she investigated the conflict dynamics behind gender inequality in the Jordanian labor market, focusing on the root causes of personal and communal desire and reluctance to change inequality drivers.

**Email:** [martinebjerg@hotmail.com](mailto:martinebjerg@hotmail.com)

[Connect on LinkedIn here](#)