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A call to action

El Amouri, Imen

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A Call to Action: Towards a Compassionate Approach to Migration Studies

Imen El Amouri



Imen El Amouri is a PhD candidate at the Department of Criminal Law at Tilburg University researching state violence and the impact of policies and laws on the mental health of refugees in the Netherlands.

In the intricate landscape of migration studies, the tension between the academic imperative to publish and the moral imperative to effect societal change is particularly pronounced. This tension opened up to me during a conversation with an NGO worker in Amsterdam in the early stages of fieldwork. They said: “We are desperate. We are putting all our effort into individual cases, supporting and guiding where possible. But it seems like nothing is changing, and there is something systemically wrong. How can your research help us help them?”

This poignant question remains a driving (unresolved) question in the current endeavor in my PhD research in migration studies. In my experience, resolving this tension requires a compassionate approach that opens up the nuanced complexities of migration and its systemic challenges while rescuing migration studies from the ineffective pace of academic research.

The Academic Dilemma

Coming from a working-class migrant family, it was a step into the unknown when I

left my biology job for a PhD in migration studies. With this change came a constant underlying anxiety of not achieving the financial security expected by the community that had supported me in all my successes so far. The non-existent financial safety net put immense temporal pressure on my PhD trajectory, and the initial phase of my research was marked by a confrontation with the inherent challenges of academia's 'publish or perish' culture.

The pressure to publish papers to succeed in academia often comes at the expense of systematic solutions to the researched issues. Acknowledging the marginalizing and exclusionary practices that arise from the very nature of academia's organization urged me to reflect on my approach to data collection and conducting research. The fast-paced demand of academic environments impedes the ability to engage deeply with communities and hinders the exploration of nuanced perspectives crucial for understanding migration issues comprehensively.

Indeed, entering the field to extract data for a paper due in six months was not an ideal prerequisite for compassionate engagement with either research participants or facilitating organizations. Here I found that my pressure to 'finish' the job as fast as possible morphed with the academic condition of productivity for success. This is the stage where I felt the higher purpose of my research got lost – alleviating the harm of the humans we seek to support through our research.

How, then, could compassion be the answer to this problem if compassion itself is captured by such tension?

Embracing Compassion Amidst Academic Pressure

This disconnect between the culture of academia and my own ethical positioning has shaped my commitment to compassion in my research methodology. This principle extends beyond academic rigor to encompass a deep empathy for the lived experiences of asylum seekers. This approach is informed by my personal experiences as an immigrant and the recognition of the nuanced challenges faced by migrant and racialized communities in Europe. Engaging with refugee-led civil

society organizations, I sought to bridge the gap between scholarly research and asylum seekers' tangible needs and agency, aiming for a symbiotic relationship that benefits both the academic community and the individuals at the heart of our studies.

In my research, I engage closely with asylum seekers to understand their experiences of state violence and mental health harm. Yet, at one point during the preliminary stages, a volunteer friend working in refugee camps in Greece advised me against becoming emotionally involved with participants, which contrasts with the belief that empathy is crucial for addressing the colonial underpinnings and stereotypes in migration studies.

From a Compassion Gap to a Policy Gap

Streams of research generating evidence on dysfunctionalities and violence in the migration governance system are going either unnoticed, or noticed and disregarded. Despite the wealth of knowledge generated through rigorous research, much of this valuable information remains confined within academic journals and inaccessible if not ignored by the public and policymakers.

The 'publish or perish' culture often prioritizes individual academic careers over the societal relevance of research, further widening the gap between scholarly work and its application in policy and practice. As stated by the NGO worker, *how can our research help them?* I believe that without a strong foundation of compassion in our research approach, the drive to translate these findings into actionable insights for policymakers and changemakers is diminished. The absence of this effort not only maintains the status quo but also contributes to the persistence of harmful stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding migration.

A Call to Action

The poignant inquiry of the NGO worker in Amsterdam serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for migration studies to transcend academic boundaries and contribute to tangible societal change. By embracing a compassionate approach to research and fostering closer collaborations between academia, civil society, and policymakers, I advocate for a research paradigm that values empathy and

deep understanding over mere productivity: bridging the gap between academic pursuits and the urgent needs of migrants and asylum seekers. This commitment prioritizes human dignity and social justice at the heart of academic inquiry while addressing both the impossible rhythms of academia and its political and societal ineffectiveness in migration studies.



Image from my fieldwork in Amsterdam with a group of refugees and volunteers