

Doing Refugee Law Empirically: Reflexivity from the Field

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The field of forced migration has engaged with the empirical studies with refugees for a while. There have been calls for a shift from research about refugees to research with refugees, underscoring the need for participatory approaches. However, international refugee law has been a latecomer to these discussions, as its study has traditionally tended towards top-down doctrinal analysis. The last couple of decades have witnessed an increase in qualitative research in refugee law as well, particularly among socio-legal scholars who critically analyse legal principles and norms in their particular social and political settings. Nevertheless, there is not much reflexive work among legal scholars on the design and conduct of empirical research with refugees.

This panel brings together legal researchers who have conducted extensive fieldwork with refugees and NGOs in Turkey, Jordan, Germany, and Bangladesh. Building on researchers' own experiences and encounters, the papers offer reflexive accounts that touch on the theoretical, methodological, ethical, and emotional dimensions of conducting empirical research. Each paper examines hidden and overlooked aspects of field research and reflects on the ways researchers dealt with them through their personal strategies. The panel contributes to the growing discussions on the 'reflexive turn' in legal scholarship on displacement and highlights how knowledge production has been shaped by researchers' identities, subjective experiences, influence of power relations, and research participants. By foregrounding reflexive empirical approaches, the panel explores how rethinking methodology in refugee law can yield more grounded insights and meaningful responses for the displaced.

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