

# Casablanca and Covid-19

**Sarah Salhany**

**MSc student in Youth, Education and Society  
Utrecht University**

The sun had only just begun to rise, but for the most part, it was still dark. As I stared out of the window, glancing around the city I had come to call home, I realized I had never observed Casablanca in such a quiet and peaceful state. Casablanca was asleep, radiating serenity, and echoing nothing but silence. Something quite different from the usually busy and buzzing metropolis that I had learned to know during my seven-weeks fieldwork. That morning we drove to the airport and caught one of the last flights available to the Netherlands; at midnight that day, the borders got closed because of Covid-19.

It was my first fieldwork abroad as part of my Bachelor's studies in anthropology at Utrecht University. Since October 2019, my peer student and I had been busy designing our Bachelor's thesis research. Our research focused on how dominant gender ideals and practices of femininity in Moroccan society construct and embody female identities of young women in Casablanca. My focus was mainly on the construction of femininity through an emic female gaze.

After months of thorough literature research and practical preparation, we began our fieldwork in Casablanca at the end of January, 2020. Slightly intimidated by the unknown, yet "armed" with a solid theoretical base, we dove immediately into fieldwork that was supposed to last ten weeks. Initially, we spent a lot of time networking and exploring the city. Within the first few weeks, we managed to schedule several interviews and meet-ups. But it was only under the wings of Farida that we became comfortable with our new environment and our role as qualitative researchers. With the

blossoming of our friendship with Farida, a kind and hospitable young woman, we went from being tourists to becoming more integrated inhabitants of Casablanca. Farida showed us different neighbourhoods, explained its characteristics and taught us about different dress-codes and appropriate (non-)verbal communication in various settings. This helped us to understand more in-depth the context of our research and allowed us to ask more accurate questions during the interviews.

March approached, and we realized we had to work harder in the remaining weeks to be able to collect the data we still needed. At that time, Covid-19 was rapidly spreading across the globe, but we had not yet heard much about it. Patient zero in Morocco was confirmed, but there was not much public or political attention to it. Despite the university's concern, we managed to get authorization to stay and continue working according to our research plan. However, the situation changed rapidly in the weeks that followed.

We had scheduled our last interview for March 14<sup>th</sup> at one of Casablanca's largest shopping malls. Then, a few days earlier, all shopping malls, along with the mosques, restaurants, cafes, hairdressers, and many other public places got closed. We saw how the fear for the coronavirus became more and more tangible. As foreigners, we could sense the atmosphere on the streets becoming more hostile towards us. Since the virus had been brought to Morocco from Europe, locals thought of us as a potential threat. As we walked through the city, people started to distance themselves from us. Some did their best to avoid us, while others passed us while shouting: "corona!" This really made us rethink our decision to stay: did we abuse Farida's and other people's generosity? The university ended up deciding for us; they did not permit us to remain in Morocco any longer.

Disbelief, fear, and chaos characterized the following days. Neither the Dutch embassy in Morocco nor the university was in the position to help us return home. Somehow we managed to get ourselves on one

of the last flights from Marrakech to Eindhoven before the borders closed. As the departure was rather sudden, there was no time for proper goodbyes nor the opportunity to thank Farida and the other people who had been so crucial for our research and our stay in general.

After arriving home, and in close consultation with our supervisor, we realized that we needed to collect more information. We decided that the most suitable approach was to do it through a survey with open questions. However, I was concerned about whether this more anonymous and quantitative approach could be integrated with our qualitative data without compromising the importance of contextual meaning. Our main moral dilemma thus concerned representation, as I felt really responsible for doing justice to all the incredible women that we had met in the field and their stories. Eventually, we managed to tackle our concerns. Farida and several other informants with whom we had stayed in contact helped us to find 37 suitable and trustworthy women within their personal networks to fill out the survey. And when the time came to integrate all our findings, Farida assisted us in that process, helping us to come to meaningful conclusions. To successfully carry out and complete our research amidst changing and uncertain times and landscapes, we had relied on our friends and informants. This really shows how invaluable our previous fieldwork had been, by doing a lot of networking and investing in close relationships. It was a really intense first ethnographic experience, but certainly, one that I will never forget.

When we drove out of the city to the airport, it started to rain. It had been nothing but sunny the days before, but suddenly a grey and gloomy cloud shadowed over Casablanca. While the sky was filled with rain, my eyes filled with tears of sadness as I waved goodbye to Casablanca, for now. I left a piece of my heart in Casablanca, but I also took a piece of Casablanca back home with me. Inshallah, we will meet again soon.