

“It is a lot and it’s unpaid labour”

An interview with Jerika Loren Heinze about ‘The Fieldwork Initiative’

Laura Thurmann

In late 2014, I first began to engage with the topic of sexualized violence in fieldwork in the context of my Master’s thesis. I remember starting my study by searching the internet for groups or initiatives dealing with this issue. Ultimately, I had to find out, that at this point in time, no such group existed or at least wasn’t visible enough for me to be found online. In the following years, with the #metoo movement all over the news, an increasing number of social scientists started to raise awareness of the topic. In my PhD research on gendered security practices and violence in fieldwork, I encountered eleven more or less formalized different networks, groups or initiatives which were founded during the last decade and address issues of sexual harassment in academic spaces. One of the most visible ones is The Fieldwork Initiative. For this special issue, I was asked by the editors to interview the main person behind this initiative: Jerika Loren Heinze.

At the time I conducted this interview with her, in September 2021, Jerika was in the final stages of her PhD at Radboud University. Her thesis focusses on youth and urban departure in the aftermath of the Greek economic crisis. In this interview, however, we talked about her commitment as the founder and head of The Fieldwork Initiative and her work on making fieldwork safer for future researchers. The Fieldwork Initiative is an organization that provides training and support for those who are at risk of or faced sexual harassment, violence, or discrimination during fieldwork. Next to their “Fieldwork

Initiative to Stop Sexualized Trauma” (FISST) training on fieldwork safety, the organization hosts the podcast “Field Stories” which features interviews with researchers working on sexualized violence and harassment in fieldwork as well as inclusivity, racism, discrimination, and related issues. On the website of The Fieldwork Initiative one can also find an extensive and regularly updated list of resources such as literature recommendations, links to events and connections to other networks and initiatives.¹

The organisation evolved from an informal whisper network of researchers mainly working in the Balkans. In 2017, after having been confronted with unsafe conditions in her own fieldwork in Greece, Jerika first decided to start a conversation with fellow researchers about the issue of sexual harassment in her fieldsite. It soon became clear that many of the people she talked to about this subject had their own stories of harassment, violence, or lack of security during fieldwork. After another violent incident in Greece, namely the rape and murder of the biologist Suzanne Eaton on Crete, Jerika saw the need for a more organized and formalized way to raise awareness for the gendered risks that many researchers face during fieldwork. What, as she phrased it, started out as “conversations we had in bathrooms at the conferences we’ve been attending”², was finally turned into an official organization in 2019.

Laura: When you say “we” or “the whisper network”, who are the people who supported you [when you set up the initiative]?

Jerika: These were other researchers I had met, mostly on conferences, in field schools or summer schools. It was the people I came across, who had similar experiences and realized that nothing was done. I would say that it was mainly born in Greece or in the Balkans but it wasn’t limited to that. Most researchers were international. So, it’s everybody who had this problem [...]. What unites us is experiences and the feeling that there was nothing supporting us. [...] Every time I met someone

who told me they had an experience, I felt further frustration at how that could be such a common thing and there wasn’t anything that exists. When we originally started the website, there was an idea that maybe we would involve a volunteer or that it would collectively be manned, but I’m not comfortable of having anybody work without being paid because this is a component of exploitation in academia. [...] We have many members that are activists who do this work and who are sort of on their own. We also have networks like LOVA, so it’s sort of the collective “we”.

Laura: I had the chance to get to know your work a bit over the last year, so I know you’re doing the FISST training and the “Field Stories” podcast, you have the Facebook group [Women* in the Field³] which is quite active and you also have a great website with a lot of literature recommendations and links about sexualized harassment, discrimination, and violence in fieldwork. This is quite an extensive list of tasks, I imagine. How do you manage those and who’s supporting you with this?

Jerika: It is a lot and it’s unpaid labour. Mostly, I do the work and there is also a lot of support of folks in our network. When we need advice, we just put it out there and say: “Can anybody help this person” or “Is anybody able to mentor someone who is not comfortable working with their advisor”. So, there is a lot of work and there is no support really. We occasionally get donations or funds from the training. We often do it for free as well. But it’s just work that happens when it’s needed. [...] There is 24/7 response if someone is in the field. They call our number and they reach us or me usually [...] With the pandemic, the emergency need has lowered because fewer people are in the field but we do imagine that this will pick back up when folks are going back to fieldwork. So, there is a huge, huge lack of support which makes us dig our heels in even further and say “We’re not going anywhere. This is a problem” [...].

Laura: This really does sound like a lot of unpaid labour.

Jerika: Yes, it really is. I could complain for a long time about it being unpaid labour. I don't necessarily want to be doing this. I wish there was something that would have helped me when I had this experience and universities should have something like this already. But in a way it is also very productive and healing for me because if I imagine my experiences in my fieldwork and if nothing came of it, if nothing was put forward, if this was it, [...] if nothing productive came out of it, I would probably really struggle. So, it is also a healing act for me to make sense of my experiences and to see that they weren't in vain [...].

Laura: Maybe we can take a closer look at the trainings you give. Could you give me and the readers a short overview about the topics and aims of the FISST training?

Jerika: Absolutely! In the training we want students, or researchers, or anybody to have a realistic idea of what fieldwork entails. Usually, before we go out into the field, everything exclusively focusses on getting the data, getting the funding. So, [it's about] all of the academic aspects and very little of the reality of what fieldwork is. We want students to know that sexual harassment often happens in fieldwork and that, if it happens to them, [...] it's not because they are not professional enough. [...] Because what many people experience is wondering "Oh, gee, I never heard about this. Maybe it's me or maybe I'm too sensitive." There is a lot of confusion because there is a lack of true narratives and conversations about it. So, we want to have a real conversation about that it happens and that it's common. We talk about statistics and the data about it. We then talk about [...] how fieldwork is problematic in its history. We don't have conversations because historically, fieldworkers were heteronormative white males, working in colonial spaces [...]. So, we really challenge pedagogies of

fieldwork who have swept these problems under the rug. We then talk about [...] common things that fieldworkers experience that [...] are scary or uncomfortable or situations in which we don’t always know what to do. For example, we talk about what happens when we’re trying to interview someone and they are making unwanted advances. And how difficult that is to manage because if you pull away, they might no longer want to help you with your study. If you just try to endure it, however, it might get worse and there is a lot of difficulty for the researcher in that moment. [...] We then talk about strategies. [...] We let people know there is not one strategy that works but we try to put a toolkit in front of them. [...] In the training, we want to have a conversation. We invite students to talk or ask questions or share their experiences. We always get some emails afterwards where people say: This happened to me, too. And then we also try to challenge students to put down their boundaries, whether with their advisors or with their school or in the field. But we let them know we want to change the toxic culture of academia and we do this by prioritizing our wellness and our selfcare and our needs. [...]

Laura: I know from my own work on gendered violence in fieldwork that this can be quite a contested topic. Have you encountered any challenges during your work with The Fieldwork Initiative?

Jerika: Absolutely! It’s a challenge just to have folks host the training. We know that students maybe want it or need it, but many universities aren’t willing [to host it]. They say: “We’ll do it ourselves”, or, “We have a sexual harassment training when they come to the university”. They really don’t understand the need for this. We have people who heckle the training. I’ve been harassed while giving the training. We have people who complain about the strategies. They say: “How am I supposed to remember all this?” We’re taught in academia to criticize everything we see and so people criticize the content. [...] Of

course, we always want to make it better but we want to create a reality where we don't criticize survivors but instead just listen to what they say. [...] It also happens that people don't believe that this is a problem and many male - not always male but often elders in academia - think that this is not an issue but this is somehow feminist war. Many people say: "You need to get over it, it happened to me it's no big deal, you just need to get a thicker skin". We also get this kind of very traditional victim blaming. [...] We encounter a lot of online harassment or harassment in general. I mean, I've gotten death threats before. So, things like this happen. It's really about challenging power and when you challenge power, usually, people in power don't like it.

Laura: There is still a lot to be done, I think. So, what is motivating you to move on with your initiative despite all these hurdles you just mentioned?

Jerika: I have anxiety when I think about maybe somebody going and working in the area I did [...]. I want to somehow warn them about what might happen. And that's not just the area I worked in, but in general. It's the idea that people are going into the field without that knowledge or without this information or without somebody saying: "If you're harassed in the field, there is nothing wrong with you. Something is wrong with fieldwork and something is wrong with society and our world and all these things". I have a visceral reaction when I think of all the people that are unknowingly walking into fieldwork with the expectation that maybe they just have to endure this. Because that's how I felt and many others. [...] Also, when we have people that need help and reach out for help that motivates us. Many times, I hear stories that I simply cannot accept and I am angry on their behalf of things they had to endure but I'm also motivated because I see a lot of other folks doing this work, too. We see a lot of initiatives popping up

with this #metoo movement and that motivates me because the more we are, the less they can deny that this is a problem. [...] Hoping that in the future there will be really big changes [...] in the way we approach knowledge production to make it more inclusive, that makes me warm inside.

Laura: Yeah, that’s quite relatable (both laugh). You just mentioned the other initiatives, I’d say there is almost a movement going on with a lot of people working on the topic [of sexualized harassment in fieldwork] [...]. How would you situate your initiative in this movement?

Jerika: I’d say we are among many. And I really believe that we are just a collective of folks with lived experiences that don’t want this to be the experiences of the next person. So, I think that we are part of the #metoo movement, I think that we are part of the academic movement of inclusivity. There are so many wonderful initiatives that have popped up. In France, *Paye ta truelle* is wonderful, in the UK there is the *Pride Field Network* which is wonderful and excellent. There are many, many initiatives that we see. So, I’d say we are one fist. We are united as one fist. No pun intended because our training is the FISST (both laugh). [...] It’s sort of crazy to imagine that that’s a radical thing to say: “I was harassed in fieldwork and that’s not okay and it was not my fault and I’m a good researcher [...]”. These [...] are the things that we really want to challenge because the researchers have to produce their work despite everything [...], whether they had trauma or not. So, it’s as I said: We’re one out of many and hopefully among more to come. [...]

In the following years, Jerika plans to expand The Fieldwork Initiative and the FISST training, ideally offering it in multiple languages, in different countries, and with a greater team of people involved in the initiative. While raising money to offer support for fieldworkers in crisis is one of her goals, Jerika sets the main focus of The Fieldwork

Initiative on prevention. She hopes that in the future, fieldwork safety trainings will be commonplace in universities and an established part of research preparation. However, this still seems like a long way to go given that, until now, fieldwork safety trainings are rarely offered or funded by universities and other research institutions.

Like The Fieldwork Initiative, many of the currently active initiatives against fieldwork violence are run by unpaid volunteers, often students or early career researchers. Efforts to establish trainings, support structures, or workshops on dealing with difficult research experiences as part of syllabi or research programmes often fail due to missing funds or bureaucratic procedures and policies. This is to say that whether researchers have access to safety trainings or peer support groups often persists to be highly dependent on the commitment of individual scholars. Given the often precarious positions and time-limited study programmes these scholars hold at their departments, however, newly established prevention and support structures are at risk of disappearing with those who build and lead them. At the same time, with increasing media attention focussing on sexualized violence in higher education and an increasing number of anthropologists raising awareness for gendered risks in fieldwork, I am hoping that such issues cannot continue to be marginalized by funding agencies and policy makers. As Jerika pointed out: “It would be nice [...] to really see that universities see, accept and acknowledge that [sexual harassment in fieldwork] is a problem that they are willing to support prevention on”.

I would like to thank Jerika for taking the time to take part in this interview. I would also like to thank her for her ongoing dedication to the prevention of sexual harassment, violence, and discrimination as well as her support for those struggling with unsafe fieldwork conditions all over the world.

About Jerika Loren Heinze

Jerika Loren Heinze is an anthropologist, trauma specialist, and the head of the Fieldwork Initiative who is currently teaching online at the University of Arizona. She is a graduate of University of California and is in the final stages of her PhD at Radboud University. Concurrently, she is a Resource Specialist at the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and is a partner network member for the National Academy of Science’s Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education.

About the author

Laura Thurmann is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. In her research she examines gendered security practices and violence in ethnographic fieldwork. She previously conducted research on police and security in the DR Congo and Niger and has been working on issues related to gendered violence since 2014.

Notes

- ¹ See <http://fieldworkinitiative.org/>.
- ² All quotes by Jerika are drawn from the interview on 28th September 2021. The interview is shortened where marked and has been slightly language edited by the author to improve readability.
- ³ See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1371032973034593/>.