

# Born in Norway – Pakistani Parents

## Fatima's Story

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*Katrine Fangen and Brit Lynnebakke*

Fatima was born in Norway of Pakistani parents in 1985. When we first met her she was 23 years old, and was searching for jobs on the internet at a Youth Centre in Oslo. We started to talk, and Fatima described her struggles in finding a job, but also about her passion for film-making and photography; skills she was developing at the time through a 'Film and Photo' course at the Youth Centre. Following our initial conversation, Fatima sent us a biographical short story that she had written. Her story touches on loneliness and the challenges related to migration, generational differences and integration. In the middle of the story, Fatima sums up:

*As you read in the beginning, there were difficult times. Generation to generation. People are created; differences between light and dark come into the picture.*

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We kept in touch with Fatima, and met her for an interview one year later. Fatima was asked to take some photographs, and she enthusiastically accepted; she took a long series of pictures from central Oslo, the areas where she likes to go; Grønland, Karl Johans gate, the Opera House, Aker Brygge and more. The picture above shows Fatima on the roof of the Opera House.



Early in 2010 we met Fatima again as she was willing to participate in a group discussion together with three other of our interviewees. As we will return to later, Fatima's story reveals how the feelings of inclusion and exclusion change over time and how they may relate to both the parent's migratory story and one's own sense of isolation or community.

## Family

Fatima talks a lot about the relationships within her family. Her father came as a labour migrant from Pakistan to Norway in the early 1970s. Some years later, he married Fatima's mother, who was from Pakistan as well. She had originally planned to study, but her intentions were changed as she got married, moved to Norway, and gave birth to four children. The mother stayed at home and took care of the children, while Fatima's father worked to support them all. He had to work long hours.

They normally didn't eat dinner together as a whole family. The kids would eat together first, while the parents ate after the father came back from work. Fatima sometimes skipped meals because she lost her appetite due to the atmosphere at home. Struggling economically in a three-bedroom apartment for six people took its toll on the family. Added to this, her parents wanted to nourish their Pakistani background by visiting Pakistan occasionally. The cost of these trips added to the expenses, and the father had to work even more. In her short story, Fatima writes:

*The house started to get cramped. They had lived in a three-bedroom apartment for fifteen years. (...) Quite painful and challenging when only one person has to pay back the home loan and feed six persons at the same time. It feels like a farm to me. If you have too much debt, you get no help. You have to get rid of the entire loan to get help. Especially dark people struggle with this.*

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In her short story, Fatima illustrates that when the father came home in the evenings the parents often quarrelled in the living room. The father would accuse the mother of not taking good enough care of the children. The children, however, often found themselves in conflict with the father; they didn't feel he had time for them, while the mother was always present. Her father had retained some of his traditional Pakistani beliefs that the position and decision-making role of the eldest in the family should be much more respected than what his children were taught in Norway. Fatima refers to the cultural and generational gap between the father and his children:

*'The kids are more Norwegian. They express themselves more openly, but for no use, because the father did not care, he had never talked to them like that, so then maybe he thought it was wrong'.*

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In the story, Fatima describes a father whose life had always been tough. Fatima attributes her father's remoteness from her with the fact that he immigrated without his closest family to Norway and lost his own father at a young age. Fatima's father wasn't comfortable with seeking social security benefits because:

*'... mostly foreigners, dark people who didn't have money came there. Felt like begging for money, and not least with a lot of paper work, what if someone else has no money and is dying, or asks money for their children not for themselves. .'*

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Together with the families difficulties and her father's depression resulted in him leaving the family. With her mother's low level of Norwegian skills, new challenges for looking after the children arose. Returning to Pakistan was not an option because the families in Pakistan would reject her because of the divorce. Fatima is clearly furious about this in her short story. In Fatima's narrative, the turning point came when Fatima's elder sister explained to her mother about the possibilities Norway had to offer:

*'...This is Norway, not Pakistan; a woman has as much right as a man. A woman does not need to be dependent on her husband. She (...) will not let herself be treated unjustly. (...)She said that now is your chance to be a free woman, you can go to school and learn Norwegian, maybe get a job too. Don't worry about us, think about yourself, you have not seen much, so why not take the opportunity now?'*

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## **A Free Woman**

The struggles within the family have clearly marked Fatima, and for a period of time, she was depressed too. But as we meet this 25-year old woman today, we get the impression that she has taken some life choices that she has come to terms with, and that many of the struggles of growing up are left behind. Among the photos she took for us were pictures Fatima had taken of herself in various situations. It seems as if she is finding herself, by trying out different roles, or different self-images in these pictures. The photos show a successful career woman, a woman in a hijab and an easy-going young woman enjoying her spare time.

She has now finished upper secondary school, successfully completing her final exam on the fifth attempt. Like her siblings, she chose the vocational track. She has however found out that working as a health secretary is not what she really wants to do. She has found a job in a convenience store, her first job ever. She really seems to enjoy her job, both in terms of tasks and colleagues. Fatima's dream, however, is to become a film maker; a passion she has of yet only been able to cultivate at the Youth Centre. The Fatima we met most recently seems to be a bit more open to the idea of pursuing a higher education, compared to when we met her for the first time a couple of years earlier. She has started contemplating new ways to reach her goal of working in the film industry. At the moment her focus was on getting stable employment and maybe studying film next year?

## Places and Friends of the City

The neighbourhood in which Fatima grew up in was a place where many elderly people lived. She tells us that as a young girl she'd go straight home after school, and that she did not have many friends. Fortunately, today she seems to be much less lonely, and now she goes out with friends in the evenings. Fatima has found young people she likes to spend her time with; friends of different ethnic origins she has found through the photo and film course, and colleagues from the convenience store.

In the group interview, Fatima and the others are asked to mark on a map of Oslo where they feel most at home. Fatima's map is focused around the area called 'Grønland'; an inner-city borough known as one of the most multicultural, an area that is often referred to by the populist anti-immigrants in the media as a ghetto.

*I spend all my time at Grønland. I am very seldom in Western parts of Oslo. I don't know anybody there.*

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She has previously lived in Grønland and works there today, so her description of the area has to do with familiarity. She has also expressed that she likes the area and would like to live there because *'it's good with a mix of different people'*. She does not want to live in a suburb in the north-east side of Oslo where there is a large proportion of people with a Pakistani background only.



*Park in Grønland, Fatimas's picture.*

In both the individual and group interviews, Fatima makes a stance against spatial ethnic segregation. While the group is discussing citizenship, Fatima states that;

*It's fine that immigrants apply for citizenship, but they shouldn't all come to Oslo. Everyone, the whole world, comes to Oslo. Immigrants should be placed in different places in Norway to create a larger distance.*

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## Migration Creates Resilience

Fatima's story shows the relationship between inclusion and exclusion over time. Fatima felt isolated in her childhood and early youth, she was always at home, had few friends and was never together with friends after school. She struggled to finish high school and changed schools several times. After redoing some courses, she completed high school when she was twenty-three years old.



*Photo of the Aker River taken by Fatima. The river is a physical divide between the western and eastern part of the city.*

She had a period when she was depressed, and she interprets her own depression as related to all the trouble at home. When her father and mother moved apart, her father struggled with his own depression. She is now able to understand and sees that her father never felt included in Norway, despite succeeding in building up his own shop. As a young adult, Fatima gradually found her way, came out of depression and for the first time she experienced inclusion, both at the convenience store where she works and at the course where she learns to make films. Her friends have different ethnic backgrounds. She is clear that she does not want to live somewhere where there are many immigrants, and especially not a place where many Pakistanis live.

Her road to inclusion is about to begin, since she is now doing something she is genuinely interested in (film and photography) and at the same time she has grown independent of family and ethnic ties. She is not concerned with religion, and distances herself entirely from the Muslim community. However, despite the challenges with her family and her father's tough experiences relating to his migration, Fatima has now concluded that having a foreign background is after all an asset:

*Fatima: Those who come from abroad, come from a difficult country. (..) Perhaps not so poor but not rich either. They have experienced so much, so they can tackle much. They can kind of tackle the small situations here.*

*Interviewer: You mean that they've become mentally strong?*

*Fatima: Yes. Mentally strong.*

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