



## Citizenship for All

Interview with Sadia Syed, social worker, member of Council for Socially Marginalized People  
(chairperson of the International Committee),  
member of Danish National Council on Social Welfare  
by Vision – den om lighed

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*What were your thoughts on the topic when we invited you?*

When you first contacted me, I was thinking that one doesn't encounter the idea of colonialism in relation to the North very often. It is mostly centered on the West in general and how it has subjugated the rest of the world. So I see it as an interesting proposal to reflect on the North.

*Is it something you have reflected on before?*

Not particularly in relation to the North, and yet somehow, because I have been working with equal treatment and discrimination of especially poor groups and ethnic minorities – and this relates to the worldview and the power which a government or a state holds.

*Is it strange that we have no awareness of being an old colonial power when one considers that even today Greenland and the Faroe Islands haven't obtained full autonomy?*

Sure. I often experience – and one should be cautious not to generalize – that many Greenlanders have the same experience as many other ethnic minorities in Denmark of not being acknowledged and not feeling as a part of society.

*They make a big deal out of saying that Greenlanders are Danish citizens, but the Greenlanders do not see it that way themselves. In recent years, there have been a lot of discussions in Greenland about independence and autonomy. Just like in the Faroe Islands. They have strong bonds to Denmark, but at the same time they have an independent identity as Faroese, with their own culture, faith, etc.*

As a social worker I am familiar with their situation. I work a lot with vulnerable groups and so my interaction with them is mostly professional. The mechanisms of alienation are by and large the same for Greenlanders, Faroese, and another ethnic minorities in Denmark; there are communalities.

One thing is to be viewed as the person you are and not as a representative of the culture you belong to, another is how you are being acknowledged as a, say, Faroese coming to Denmark to study or for that matter as an ethnic minority person born and raised in the country; they are treated differently and spoken about as foreign. This difference finds expression in the media, but also from political quarters where the rhetoric is rather negative. Difference is seen as a hindrance and not something that could possibly be conceived as contributing in a positive way to the development of the society.

*It is a little difficult to compare the oppression of colonial master and subject to the more hidden oppression that takes place in contemporary Denmark, Sadia tells. The reason is that it has become more subtle. We see it in the increasing focus on “otherness” and how it is being regulated through legislation and media discourse, in which citizenship seems to be a matter of comparison. The experience of discrimination is so subtle that it can make you doubt whether your experience of a situation is correct, until you meet others with similar experiences. It is difficult to do something about a singular negative experience on the street, but when discrimination occurs systematically, by a public authority for instance, then it is less complicated to point it out. Whilst discrimination was based on theories of race earlier on, it is now aimed at specific cultures and faiths. Perhaps you don’t exactly kill people any more, but the rhetoric and the consequences are still the same. You exclude people socially and culturally, and of course it has great consequences to be denied access to, for instance the labour market, which in Denmark is the primary site for social and cultural integration.*

*On which ideals does the Danish self-perception base itself?*

When we talk about human rights – and people do that a lot in Denmark – then it is mostly about those abroad. Foreign cultures are included in dialogues and curricula, but one has difficulties looking inwards at one’s own position. How do we do things here at home? Many people find it provoking when you question the democracy or human rights in Denmark; you do not see yourself as an oppressor – in fact people think they did the Greenlanders a favour! This also relates to the question of who actually wrote the Greenlandic history; we Danes did it. Danes in good positions in Greenland have described their encounter with the people of

Greenland. The Greenlanders, who have an oral tradition, were not asked for their version. So it is fair to say that the Greenlandic report is one-sided, as we are the ones who wrote it.

We only need to go back to the 1960s when Greenlandic children were removed from their families by Danish authorities in order to re-socialise them as Danish in a completely foreign home in a foreign country. It was a systematic undermining of the original Greenlandic culture. The hunter culture was to be replaced with a modern welfare culture. Colonialism is characterised by robbing its subjects of their identity. From official quarters, it is wrapped in sophisticated notions, but the facts remain and we know what has been going on.

The documentation and the subsequent history writing mean that we are presented with an image of ourselves in school, which is incongruent with the actual injustice. The one, who writes the history, possesses the power and the history goes that we did them a favour. What is being transported is a romantic idea of a caring colonial power; for instance that Denmark was active in abolishing slave trade, which doesn't take the consequences for the colonized into consideration. The voice of the oppressed is not being transported. Parallel to the first wave of immigration, the Greenlanders that I know experienced that more focus was put on the new immigrants whilst interest for their stories diminished. They face difficulties getting their voices heard in the media and hence the representation of them is characterised by prejudices regarding suicide and alcoholism. It might be a problem for Greenlanders, but it is definitely also a problem for ethnic Danes. The Danish society has massive problems in regards to alcohol; just consider the expenditure on treatment, violence, unhealthy family patterns, etc. As I see it, it is a part of Danish culture and a huge taboo. When we want to have a good time, there is always alcohol involved – it is always easier to focus on the Greenlanders' abuse than on our own.

This image contributes to keeping the weakest Greenlanders in a marginalized position in the Danish society. We have documentation from for instance *Magtudredningen* [a scientific report on power and democracy in Denmark commissioned by the Danish parliament, ed.], which indicates that Greenlanders have a very low degree of participation in politics in Denmark. This again indicates impotence in relation to the society they live in. At the same time, however, there are a lot of Greenlanders who speak Danish well and perhaps also are with a Danish partner, who do not see themselves as being discriminated. So, I would

say that the perception that we as a people have a long tradition of supporting equal human rights is not valid or true.

*What does the government mean by integration, you think?*

The normal understanding of integration is that two equal parties meet in a common cause. But if you read the various legal acts and the different proposals made on immigration, then it is a completely different picture, namely a picture of assimilation of minorities. Of course, you can't say so, but it is nonetheless a result of systematic oppression. Family reunification is a case in point where in the footnotes furthest down, it will say something about the incompatibility of family patterns and the like. In some places, the aim is absolutely blatant, in others it is more subtle.

As a minority person you have no access to influencing the political agenda as it presupposes equality with the Danes, also in practice. They need support and there are plenty of possibilities of securing equal opportunity in the legislation. Still, there are plenty of examples of discrimination, for instance when they introduced "Starthjælpen" in July 2002 [start-up benefit for new-comers corresponding to between 50 and 70% of social welfare, the so-called "Kontanthjælp", ed.]. You know that it will affect the newly arrived refugees; the aim is to reduce the inflow and with this act you say, "Your stay is merely tolerated, and not more than that." It is one of the weakest groups in society and then you tell them, while completely ignoring the facts of the labour market, that they will just have to find themselves a job. Wrongly, the Starthjælp is seen on a par with SU [State Education Grant and Loan Scheme in Denmark, ed.], but only 2% of the receivers of SU survive on that alone. If the possibilities of supplementing the Starthjælp are so meager as is the case in Denmark, then granting it to refugees is clearly an expression of discrimination. There is a reason why Kontanthjælpen is on the level it is! The problem is that these types of inequalities are not met with enough resistance. We do not have a strong lobby in Denmark, which represents these groups and fight for their rights (as we have it for other groups in society as disabled people, gay men and lesbians, etc.)

Once, they established a Council for Ethnic Minorities, but they have no visibility. Just like the Council for Socially Exposed, of which I am a member, it is set up politically, but does not function as a medium for the group whose interests it is supposed to look after. It has proved difficult to get organised across cultures, religions, and interest communities. That is probably one of the reasons why

there is not strong representation. Throughout the 1990s, we witnessed a rise in association amongst ethnic minorities, though many of them ended up being a one-person association primarily promoting private interests, or so it seemed. Another problem is the way these associations are met with demands of scientific documentation for their observations, but if you have limited means it is difficult to keep fighting and getting heard.

You don't always need scientific proof if you work for a governmental program. You can find examples of individuals, whose personal stories are being used to the advantage of the government and which amplifies the xenophobia. They are one-person associations, which receive tons of funding to promote the government's propaganda. Whining is the typical response to critique.

*What is the situation in the labour market?*

Different initiatives have for quite a number of years now eased the people with another ethnic background than Danish into the labour market by making it attractive for the employer. Various subsidy and mentor programs that have been rather unsuccessful. The international organisations with an established policy and tradition for diversity show other results. If you understand the solution of integration as a question of employment, then there lies a huge challenge ahead for Danish companies.

There is intended discrimination and unintended discrimination; it could be that it is the lack of a clear procedure for how to deal with a job interview that makes some people feel that they were not seen as the person they really are when leaving the interview room. Many feel that the potential employer only pays attention the person's ethnicity and not the actual qualifications – "Will she be able to work together with male colleagues?" "What about the Christmas company party?" You also see employers, who complain that their customers will not deal with "one of those." The acceptance of this explanation leads to job consultants pointing out a client's ethnic background when talking to a potential employer, even when it is irrelevant. This way discrimination is reinscribed on all levels.

We all experience it, but we are not all equally aware of the obstacles that exist or equally alert to how we are received by others.

It goes for each and every one; *Jante's Law* [a social code between egalitarianism and oppressive group mentality thought to be particularly

Scandinavian, ed.] controls the Danish mentality. Society's minorities experience it on another level: if you don't have Nordic features, you are unavoidably subject to the societal regimentation in which it is risky to stand out.

*"Do you advocate honour killings?"*

What one doesn't encounter! That only proves that you are seen as a representative for a group with barbaric traditions. It is just as remote to me as it is to most sensible people. Today all courtesy is gone and it has become legitimate to be biased and discriminating. We shouldn't underrate the politicians' power and responsibility in this development. The government and the Danish People's Party have abused this power. You see, the hard rhetoric comes from them and people accept their interpretation of the extend of these problems. Whether we talk about mass rape, honour killings or the terror threat – we have collectively defined who's to be the scapegoat.

*How do you perceive Denmark as a Pakistani-Danish woman?*

I have strong bonds to Denmark; this is where I grew up and where my family, friends and piers are. I do not see it as two opposites; I'm a part of it, but I'm probably a great deal more critical than most, due to personal and professional experiences. This is an expression of my interest in the society I live in, where I try to create awareness of inequalities and what we ought to change.

*What would you wish for Denmark?*

That citizenship would apply to all and that it isn't compared. That the highly praised ideals preached would be more respected. That we acknowledge that in any society certain groups need extra support.