

# Fazeelat Aslam amplifies underrepresented issues through journalistic pursuits, filmmaking

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From interviewing locals in New Delhi's rural and impoverished areas to memorizing lines for her part in Disney's short film, "American Eid," Fazeelat Aslam's ('03) day-to-day life is dynamic and everchanging. Aslam attributes parts of her professional journey to experiences in ASL's international landscape, university life and her calling to tell unique stories.

*In her words, she recounts her story:*

## Finding her passion

In ASL, the one thing that I realized looking back is that there was so much affluence. That was one of the things that I really struggled with because kids had so much money and so many resources. When I left ASL and I went to a liberal arts college, I realized how much privilege I had.

I didn't know that much about American schools, American colleges, but counselors at ASL guided me, and I ended up at Wellesley College, which is a liberal arts school right outside of Boston, Massachusetts.

One of the things that I love is that ASL, from when I was really little, gave me so many resources and opportunities to explore. My parents were a lot more conservative than they are now and they wanted me to pursue a less unpredictable career. They really encouraged me not to go down that [acting] path.

Being a compliant young South Asian girl, I decided to go to a liberal arts college and pursue other things.

But, in college, I still did a lot of acting.

Even though acting was always a passion of mine, I wanted to

pursue social activism. I was involved in a lot of clubs at ASL. So, in college, I ended up majoring in gender studies and film studies.

I moved back to Pakistan after college and there I got really involved in broadcast journalism, and then ended up working in documentaries. Despite all of that, I still managed to do creative things. I did a couple of music videos with friends and I would do, you know, modeling here and there.

## Early career

One of my favorite stories that I worked on in Pakistan was about the transgender or the third gender community. Working with that community was one of the most exciting things I've ever done because this is a group of people that has been completely rejected by society because of how they identify in the world. Yet, they have such incredible vibrancy and incredible life in them. The way it's expressed is really through dance and ordination.

I thought that was so exciting as a young woman who had grown up at a time where I felt the



world around me was very conservative, and I was just allowed to express myself the way that I wanted. I thought it was really wonderful to see the community they built and it was incredibly beautiful. That's not to say that they didn't have pain or hardship. They really found ways to celebrate life despite all of the hardships that they faced.

I would say probably my favorite

professional experience was working on a documentary called "Tomorrow We Disappear." My husband and I were both 27 or 28 years old. When I met him, he was working on this documentary, and it was about the itinerant artists of India.

I'd never been to India before because it's obviously very difficult as a Pakistani going to India. I got to work with people who essentially lived in a ghetto or a slum but, because of their art



and their creativity, they had such vibrancy and such life and a means to truly express themselves without the limitations of a conservative or restrictive society.

## Pursuing acting

As someone in their mid 30s who had a very successful career in documentary, anyone who I told I was wanting to pursue acting like roll their eyes. They were like, "Are you crazy? Why would you do this?"

I didn't really know where to start. I didn't have a community of people who I could ask for help because my community was all documentary. I saw a casting call on Facebook for "American Eid" and I decided to just go for it and do it. The first thing that went through my mind was like, "Oh, what's the point?" It's exactly that kind of internal critic that I think holds most of us back.

I kept putting myself out there. I did Zoom plays, I acted wherever I could, and that also helped a lot during quarantine. And then it was September of 2020 when I got a callback. I did



Photos courtesy of Fazeelat Aslam

an audition on Zoom for the director and the casting director. A couple of days later, I got the part.

I grew up on Disney. I remember one of the first Disney movies I watched was "Sleeping Beauty" on a VHS cassette tape when I was, you know, a kid in Pakistan. It meant so much to me to be a part of this lineage of storytelling and tell a story that really felt like my story.

I have a cousin who lives in New York and she's got two little kids and they were able to watch it and my husband, he is, you know, a white Jewish guy from Philadelphia. His nephews and nieces watched it. It created this amazing container to have a conversation about what Eid is, what it means to be Pakistani, what it means to celebrate something away from home when no one else is celebrating it with you.

It's been such a beautiful gift and conversation with my family and friends and a great point of reference to engage with other people about my identity.

1. Fazeelat Aslam stands among children in a colony in New Delhi, while filming the documentary "Tomorrow We Disappear."

2. During a shoot for an HBO document series, crew captures Fazeelat Aslam in a scene in Lahore, Pakistan.

3. Fazeelat Aslam acts in a scene in Disney+'s "American Eid."

4. Fazeelat Aslam sits behind the camera, while being recorded for VICE News.



**2004:** Aslam volunteered at a children's non-profit which is one of her fondest memories.

**2007:** Aslam graduated from Wellesley College with a double major in Gender Studies and Media Studies.

**2012:** Aslam's documentary "Saving Face" is released. The film won an Academy Award and Emmy.

**2014:** Aslam worked with VICE as a producer covering topics such as fake abortion clinics and gang violence.

**2021:** Aslam starred in "American Eid" Disney+'s first film based on experiences of a Muslim family.