

# Pakistani in Europe

*By Jippe Witteveen, December 28, 2023*

Imagine you've spent all of your life in just one city. It's a city of over 20 million people - more than many countries can claim - but you've never had the chance to venture outside of it. Let alone seeing other countries. You grew up in a large family, and life was harsh. Since you were a teenager you've had to play your part in supporting the family. Now you're in your late 20s and your family has arranged for you to be married to your first cousin. And then you get a placement at the University of Barcelona. With financial support of your family and that of your wife's, you board a plane knowing that you will not see your home for at least two years. You arrive in a world where everything is different.

This is a personal story about my friend Saïd from Karachi, Pakistan. This article does not pretend to be representative of every Pakistani coming to Europe to study, but perhaps it can shed some light on what such an experience might look like. What I've come to realise in my friendship with Saïd is that many of us Westerners haven't got the slightest idea of what it's like to start a new life in Europe, when coming from a very different cultural tradition.

We met at a language exchange event in Barcelona. I had only recently moved there myself, and was eager to make some friends. When I arrived I saw that many people had formed groups, except two guys who were sitting at a table together. I asked if I could join them. They were Saïd and another Pakistani, who's also called Saïd and who's also from Karachi. We

immediately did something that was new to Saïd: we drank alcohol. After a while - some others having joined us - I jokingly proposed to order some shots. Saïd was intrigued. We had shots, and for the remainder of the night Saïd talked about things he had so far kept to himself. Opening up like this was new to him; there are many taboos in Pakistan. We all got Covid that night, but it was worth it.

Apart from the consumption of alcohol, there was another thing that was totally different in Europe: relations between the sexes. In Pakistan there is strictly no sex before marriage. Even talking about it is a taboo. More day to day interactions, too, are subject to social convention. You don't simply give someone of the other sex a hug, for example. That is quite a big deal. Saïd had taken a risk by having had a secret relationship - normally only marriage, as agreed upon by the two families, can initiate a relationship - until it ended when she decided that she did not think Saïd was going to be a successful businessman. But as the relationship had been a secret Saïd and his girlfriend had never been able to meet in a private place, which also meant that they had never even kissed. Once in Europe, it became apparent to Saïd that interaction between men and women was more relaxed.

The walls in Spanish apartment blocks are thin, and so most nights Saïd was confronted with his neighbour's active sex life. This started to itch. In Pakistan, sex is so hidden that you don't notice it around you. In European cities, however, hints seem to be all around you. One can't help but wonder what the experience would be like. This created a dilemma. On the one hand Saïd felt tempted to go along with

this free European lifestyle, though in Pakistan he had never learned how to flirt and even starting a conversation proved difficult. Although he had officially been married to his cousin one week before his move to Barcelona, there was no sign of romantic love between them (yet). On the other hand, he did not want to betray his own culture or be disloyal to his wife.

One night when I visited Saïd in Gdańsk, Poland (he had moved there for the second year of his master's programme), I asked him why he didn't just end the marriage, and start living his own life instead of the life his family had dictated for him. I already knew that he would've preferred not to have been married in the first place. Not only had the family arranged his marriage; throughout our friendship I started to get the feeling that Saïd had lived his whole life on their behalf, and that the pursuit of his own dreams had never been a possibility. I had always viewed the degree of loyalty to the family, clan or community in some other parts of the world as a beautiful thing. Sometimes I felt that in our highly individualised societies in the Western world we had lost something, that personal freedom had come at the cost of looking out for those around us. It seemed to me that families in places such as Pakistan operate almost as an enterprise, for the common interest. But now I came to wonder whether this teamwork could also be a prison, repressing the development of the individual.

Saïd explained to me that ending the marriage was easier said than done. It would have some nasty repercussions. The reputation of the family was on the line. Saïd knew that behind his back some

family members had been sceptical about his departure to Europe. Some had made the prediction that this would entail the failure of Saïd's marriage. If this were to come true this would seriously undermine the position of Saïd's father, the most respected elder of the family. Paradoxically, the quest for family success and working together as a team also created a competition to climb the family's hierarchical structure. Jealousy made some family members happy to see others fail, as it created an opportunity to improve their own position.

On top of that, Saïd did not have a scholarship and most of his tuition fee and living costs were therefore covered by his own family members as well as by his father-in-law. He was indebted to them. Saïd's time studying in Europe was seen as an investment for both families, putting a lot of pressure on his shoulders to perform. He is expected to become financially successful, to not only repay his debt but also to improve both families' financial standing and social status.

Even now that Saïd was studying in Europe, which had been one of his dreams, it proved to remain difficult to truly be free. Many Europeans go to other countries to study, but that usually also entails some travelling, socialising and often lots of partying. For Saïd, the means to do this were very limited. Exploration remained limited to the city in which he found himself to be living. Apart from studying he had to work side jobs, and so little time remained for social activities. Never in his life had he been on a holiday. Since his arrival in Europe he had been working very hard, and apart from weekends had not taken a single day off.

I was doing a roadtrip at the time. The idea arose that Saïd should come along. What started as a spontaneous weekend trip from Gdańsk to Warsaw turned into a road trip back to my home in The Netherlands and then to Belgium with some more friends. Saïd managed to get time off the internship he was doing at the time by saying that he had to go to Pakistan for some emergency. Going on a trip purely for his own enjoyment was something that was totally new for Saïd. It had been a dream of his to one day go to Berlin, and so we stayed there for a couple of days. I had been eager to go to the (in)famous KitKat club, and we ended up going there together. Barely a year earlier Saïd had had his first alcohol, and now we found ourselves in a dance club where people covered in mere pieces of clothing were among the most conservative. Saïd told me the road trip had been a transformative experience.

I often wonder where the present political currents are taking us. Political rhetoric is increasingly demonising the ‘other,’ xenophobia seems to be on the rise. Problems facing our societies are often simply ascribed to the influx of people from the Global South. But do we really know the people that the far-right is talking about? New arrivals are often accused of not integrating, but how much of an effort do we actually make ourselves to welcome them? To get to know them? Perhaps we could start with engagement, which can be as easy as some small talk. Who knows, maybe we’ve been demonising some of our potential best friends all this time.