

## MARIAAM BHATTI

Travelling is one of the things I love. I never experienced it in my earlier life. Although I can now afford it more than I would have before I left South Africa, I still don't afford it the way many people here would. Like many migrants who are breadwinners, it's hard to afford my own upkeep here and look after family back home and still afford holidays.

Even though I love to travel one of the most painful realities of travelling across the borders looking African is being problematised from far. My experiences of being treated as an undesired guest at airports started with the very first officer I dealt with, twelve years ago, the day I arrived in Ireland. His welcome words to me after he stamped my passport were a threat of deportation if I didn't leave at the end of the permission he had given me. I did not know how to respond as he handed my passport back. I think I just thanked him and thought to myself 'Welcome to Europe'. From day one I was made to feel like a problem.

Then there was that one time when at the invitation of a friend I visited the beautifully mountainous and lake-filled region of north of Italy for the first time. I travelled with another friend who was a naturalised Irish citizen. When we arrived, my friend swiftly went past through her 'EU' lane while I waited my turn for the immigration desk in the 'Non-EU' lane. When I eventually emerged after answering many questions and having my passport perused numerous times and fingerprints taken, the airport was almost deserted. My Italian host, who has never had to worry about how his EU passport is perceived, greeted me with a 'what happened?' My Irish friend, who had an Irish passport also seemingly never having experienced the kind of things I experienced, seemed to be waiting for the same answer. I was actually more surprised by their curious looks and enthusiastic questions because to me this was the norm.

On those rare occasions where an immigration officer did not come close to interrogating me I would walk out of an airport feeling human again. A rare experience that I cherish to this day happened at the Dublin Airport. An immigration officer asked where I had flown from and when I told her, she asked how long I had gone there for and how the weather was before saying 'welcome back home' as she handed me back my passport.

I often hear of those who now have EU citizenship but don't look the part that they are often reminded that the queue they are in is for EU citizens, making an assumption that they are not EU citizens based on their looks. And while many might think that we, migrants, should just get used to this treatment by the border or immigration officials and just accept it as it is or 'get on with it', it does not change how it makes one feel. We are still human and their treatment of people from less well-off regions is degrading almost all the time.

The experience of racial profiling at airports that affects me and other people that look like me, the experience of being seen as the 'problem' happened to many times that eventually I spoke out. I was returning to Ireland having travelled via the UAE from Johannesburg the previous day.

When on the plane I had noticed that out of hundreds of passengers, there were probably a little over ten dark-skinned passengers on the plane. But when we touched down at Dublin airport I noticed that almost all of us were stopped to have our bags searched while our fellow Caucasian passengers, only seemed to get what I would call a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card. As I was shaking my head wheeling my

bags past I heard someone screaming behind 'excuse me!' I kept going and then another 'Excuse me ma'am!' as the officer almost blocked my way and gave me a serious look, 'I need to check your bags please.'

I complied but first made sure she saw my eyes follow the passengers who were not being stopped before I said 'okay'. I let her search and then when she finished I asked her politely

- 'May I please ask what criteria you use to stop people for searching?'

- 'We randomly stop people for searching' she said, continuing to give me a serious look.

- 'But your random stops seem to be mainly targeting a certain group of people, those who don't look European' I pointed out.

- 'Ma'am, we search everyone who has travelled from outside the EU' she answered.

- 'The whole plane with hundreds of people, majority of whom were Caucasian, travelled from outside the EU. Everyone connected in the UAE, that's outside the EU. But why are you stopping almost 100% of the small number of non-EU looking passengers that were on that plane when everyone else who is not getting stopped for searching, travelled from the same place?'

- 'Ma'am, we stop people randomly. Have a good day' she said before sprinting like she was Usain Bolt of the airport, to stop an Indian family.

I shook my head as I watched her talk to the family. I said to myself 'Welcome back home' as I wheeled my bags out to find Dublin Bus.

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Most of my work against injustice or being problematised based on who I am, is shaped by these and similar experiences. I had spent over a decade of the time I had lived in Ireland doing grassroots work with fellow migrants in low paid work sectors. Although I never thought that people like me could qualify for a seat at the decision making table I started applying for national and international advisory roles. I wanted to be part of change, including policy level kind of change. I wanted my voice and that of others like me included in designing policies. To be exact, I want to design policies that will stop problematizing people who look like me but instead see racism as the problem.