

Episode 33: Kirana

****Please check against delivery.****

This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:

What does it mean to be an Indonesian woman living in a Norwegian town? In this episode, Kirana shares with us her experiences of being othered particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Her story is also about gaining child custody as a young single mother in a system that is aimed against her as a foreigner.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Kirana.

.....
F:

Kirana was born and raised in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia.

R:

I come from Indonesia. And I was born and grew up in the capital city, Jakarta. Jakarta is very diverse, like mixed. I guess there are so many immigrants from other islands because we are... I have a Chinese heritage, fourth generation. So it was my great, great grandfather who emigrated there. It was in the 1920s perhaps. So I don't know, we're very much Jakartan because even from the language, you know, because Jakartan, I think we're quite happy and proud people live in Jakarta because it's like, we have our own slang [which is] very Jakartan [and different to other Indonesian dialects], and it's not formal at all.

And discrimination, yeah, there has been some issues. But that was before the revolution [when] we ha[d] a president that, well, you might [say] has been the longest dictatorship in Indonesia. But then actually, sometimes the media is just, you know, the media says one thing but the reality is another thing because what I remember from my childhood, it was mostly a good memory. It's just that one time, that one period where there was kind of a reformation that was turbulent. But then of course, you have a new president, you have a new government, reform and everything, and then it went okay again.

And Indonesia, in general, our motto is like, "Unity in diversity" and you've got so many, like, 17,000 islands and so many ethnicities, and, you know, when you go outside to another island, if we don't speak Indonesian, basically we don't understand each other. So I think it's impressive how we can call Indonesia [as a] nation itself, you know, as a unity. I don't know how to explain this better. I mean, discrimination is always there. But then we also have a solution after that... Okay, I think in general, Indonesians, we are very forgiving. I would say that. And you help each other, you know, it's very... it's like "Keluarga", I cannot translate this in English. "Keluarga" means "family", so you see each other as a family. And then in [a] family, when you have conflicts, you talk to each other, you have a dialogue, right? Resolve more in the dialog first instead of using the legal solution as in the [United] States where people constantly sue each other.

F:

At the age of 32, Kirana moved to a town in Norway to marry her then partner, a Norwegian man. She later started pursuing her studies in nursing. She said she felt welcomed when she first moved there. But this all changed when the Covid pandemic hit in early 2020. She recalls two incidents from nursing school where she was othered.

R:

When I moved here, I felt so welcomed, also with the father of my daughter. It's just after the pandemic in 2020, I remember in March, and that's when I started to feel like, "Mmm, something's going on here." Because people will make a remark, say something that made me very uncomfortable and, you know, just [made me] question, "Did I really hear that?"

In the university, for example, the context was, it was a normal class lesson. One of the teachers was giving a lecture and was discussing some teams – it was a group work, I think it was thirty of us. And I was the only East Asian looking or Southeast Asian looking. And then I wanted to [ask a] question. So I raised my hand, and then she said the word, "Hiroshima" to me. And then that's it. And then she continued speaking as if like cutting me, telling me, "No, you don't disturb me." Like... so it's a bit weird that happened to me.

And then another experience is also relating to this study workplace. One of the senior nurses... so we were assigned senior nurses who will teach us, train us, [for] two weeks. And I remember we were in a car only the two of us, and she said something about, "Oh Indonesia is a poor country," and then mentioning about my Norwegian, "Gebrokkent Norsk". "Gebrokkent" means when my Norwegian is so bad that I have an accent, and it's not only [an] accent, [but that it's] very foreign and not "proper" Norwegian. That actually hurt. Because like, again, when I heard it the first time, [I was] shock[ed], I couldn't believe that happened to me.

F:

Kirana says that the nurses tried to make her fail her studies, but she fought back. She shares one such time.

I had to pass this exam, and it was so obvious that they worked so hard to make me not pass. I was given an essay that I had to write about communication. And so I wrote it in five minutes. I was quite angry at the time when I realized what was happening to me was not okay. So I wrote an article about how Norway supports globalization, [and so] one has to be open to... because if you expect foreigners, immigrants, to speak your language and to integrate, I think the acceptance should be mutual, like to make us feel welcome. And so yeah, I wrote a very quick five minutes essay about that in a way [where] I kind of did it criticizing them but in a very indirect way. And it was very nuanced. But I'm quite happy. And then after that, when she received it, she let me pass.

And then they tried to again, make me... [they] gave me a warning, "Oh, you cannot continue to a higher level, the next level." But then I wrote like a "Varsling", we call it, a warning, telling a higher authority what happened, you know, what they did to me, what they said to me. And then suddenly, I'm still registered as a student. So they still let me like study there. So it's a bit weird, you know, like how they do things.

F:

Kirana shares some experiences she made outside of nursing school and reflects upon the question of when she fights back.

R:

There was one time, but it's just one occasion when I was [working] part time in the restaurant. And then one of the customers – this was in the cold winter – was waiting for his takeaway. And then I was really actually very friendly, and I was just having a conversation, you know, try[ing] to welcome him. And then he would ask me, "Oh, you're from Indonesia. Do you eat dogs?" So it's just the stereotypes, you know. And when this happened to me since the pandemic, I tried to read more about these things, right, like I Google a lot. I've read lots of articles. And there's this one explanation and I like it a lot because now it makes sense. And it says, "Discrimination is not always obvious. Sometimes it's subtle

and insidious. And when there is no power dynamic involved, it is prejudice. And when it is discriminatory, it is bigotry, and when it is systemic, then it is racism."

And so I understand, perhaps, when strangers see me on the streets, maybe they have a fear, or I don't know, like stereotypes. "Oh, you look like East Asian or Southeast Asian", and then they start to... But I just... I just think it's a bit, you know, you don't have to make such comments because what's the purpose? If you don't have something nice to say, what's the purpose anyway by asking me that? And I don't eat dogs. I grew up with puppies. I love puppies. I still remember, like it was actually the puppy of my uncle, and it was called "Heli".

And then also, there is one incident in this small town. I was waiting for a bus at a bus station. There was this teenage boy who kind of like spit. I was walking towards that bus stop. And then he was already there waiting inside, and then he spit. So I don't know if he, you know, if it was directed at *me* or... it was just a bit weird because I've never seen someone doing that in Norway, or before, like after so many years living here.

With the strangers, my motto is like, when people insult you, if we give high value to them, then we will feel hurt. But then, now that I think about it, I don't know them, they don't know me. They just probably also could have perhaps [be] having a bad day and maybe they're racists or... but then like, you know, whatever. Like I don't give them high value enough for their insults to hurt me.

F:

Kirana shares her experiences on the intersection of nationality and religion in Norway, and the implications this can have.

R:

Norway also has an issue with Islamophobia. Because when they look at me, because I look Southeast Asian, right, or like East Asian, perhaps, I don't know. And they will either think I'm from... here, at least in the Norwegian context, from Vietnam, or Korea, or China. And when I say, "Indonesian", they will think immediately, "Oh, you're Muslim," you know, and... But Norway really has a problem with Islamophobia. And this has been tough also. And I think it's sad because it's kind of a mix of racism-based issues and religions as well.

And in Indonesia, we have a saying or greeting... I will speak in Indonesian first, then I will translate. So we have a saying that [goes], "Islam itu Indah, Hindu tu Cinta, Kristen itu Kasih, Buddha itu Damai, Kong Hu Cu itu Harmonis". So in English it would be like, "Islam is beautiful. Hinduism is love. Christianity is giving. Buddhism is peaceful. And Confucius is harmonious." So it's like, the beauty of love that is giving and peaceful and harmonious between religious communities and it shouldn't be a problem. But now I find it that it can be mixed as well, you know, this identity. And so definitely, they have like, kind of... I can *feel*, like some people, when I say I'm from Indonesia, they're quite skeptical.

But again, you know, Norway also has a part where you can [call it] a "Bible Belt." And there's a group, I think, that is really expressing that they don't like Muslims or Islam. And, yeah, it's quite extreme. They would sort of protest, and in the recent news, I read that some parents do not want to send their children to the mosque anymore, for example. Yeah, I think in such a country that has liberal values, it's just... it's sad, you know, that such things still exist.

.....
F:

Kirana is a single mother to a three-year-old daughter. After divorcing, her ex-husband – who is Norwegian – filed for child custody. Kirana has been going through the child custody process in Norway alone with a system stacked against her. She shares a situation she found herself in, namely

that of a public health institution wrongly diagnosing her daughter so her ex-husband can keep her, and Kirana has less time with her.

R:

My daughter, she's only three years old. Just three weeks before the trial in the district, she was given an opinion by a doctor in a public health care Institution, like a hospital, just *three* weeks before the trial, that says she has this rare, diagnosed disease. And then the documents were submitted to the court by the father and his lawyer. But at the same time, that report or that opinion is contradicting a lab medical report by one of the most prestigious university hospitals here that stated that she's healthy, you know, [that] all the genetic results are normal. But it [the medical report] was not submitted even though I discussed this with my previous attorney. And that's why I changed attorneys.

And I found that it's incompetent and unethical for a healthcare professional, like a doctor, to do such things. And then so... I'm a rebel at heart. So I tried to find solutions. So I just contacted private doctors, like pediatricians in the capital. And I talked to them, and they offered help. One of them said, "You know, sometimes doctors don't agree with each other." And he was actually shocked that I had to deal with this alone, being sort of attacked by all these officials or contact people from the public institutions that were supposed to be neutral and objective, but instead they're not. And I even wrote a letter to the ministry of health care and services just to get a confirmation that my daughter has the right for second opinions or third opinions or fourth and fifth, if I have to [get them].

Also, with the county Governor... because I complained about them, the way I've been treated. For example, the contact person that was called to be a witness would say such things like, "You know, African mothers, they hold babies on their backs, that's why they don't have eye contacts. How do you do it in Asia?" And then I was like, again, you know, to listen or to hear such remarks, the first reaction was shock and I... when you're such in a state of shock you can't say anything back, and I felt... I just felt weird. And so I just answered, "No, we hold them on the sides and I think that's fine. I sing to her in my language, and since she was born, she was breastfeeding, or comfort feeding, for 18 months, and then we have good eye contacts, [so] no problem."

And then the doctor also would, when we talk on the phone – the only phone call we had – he would [be] coughing and laughing and then mention about tea-drinking culture. And mostly, Norwegians, they drink coffee. Like very seldomly, they drink tea. But of course, I know, this is just teasing of my culture. Because he said, "Oh, I've been to Jakarta, Indonesia," and yeah, such things. And then I just... I just remembered one of my good friend's advice, "You know, even if you are being treated poorly, unfairly, discriminated, you just have to hold yourself together and do it all with respect and dignity."

But then I guess there's a line, you know, of being just being silent and then to complain back. And so I complained about what they said, about their treatment, to the County governor. And then the public hospital apologised four times in a letter. But still, they would write false statements. And when I asked to be provided with an interpreter, she [the same contact person] would say, "You know, the interpreter is there to translate. It's not there as an emotional support." And then again, I felt weird, you know. And this is not okay. Because I'm a nursing student myself. We don't do that. We don't speak like that to patients or to the parents of patients.

And I'm the kind of person that does not talk back immediately. Because, again, when I heard these things... I didn't expect people would say such things, right? Because like, I know myself as a nursing student, I have practice in, for example, in elderly home, we don't do that. We just don't... I think Asians – and I have also classmates from Africa – we are one of the most gentle and caring people out there. I'm telling you, like, you would want to hire us.

F:

Kirana reflects on one lesson she learned so far in this child custody process: the importance of meeting the right individuals even, or especially, when the issue is structural.

R:

The child custody process, I had to navigate the system alone here without help. And my family couldn't visit, right, because the border was closed. And so it was tough, for the emotional support. Of course, overseas, I talked to my friends, but mostly it's online. And they were very kind to me, they gave me advice [on] what to do, and also my consulate, to find the best lawyers and everything. But I found that – that is what I want to emphasize – that it is not about nationality, sometimes. Sometimes it's about the individual. Because I found a minority lawyer who I trusted so much, depended on her, but instead, I felt misled, like instead of just helping me to get my daughter back, she has another agenda, or like strategy, that is not giving me a solution, and then the result is I have less time with my daughter.

And then my attorney after her... basically, if one ended up in child custody, my advice is, do not go there in the first place. Like try to be like... what I'm very disappointed is, you know, we can solve this in a civil way, like, we will be parents forever, right? Even though we're not couples anymore, and one doesn't have to do this. But anyway, I found like another minority lawyer now and she's very different, professional, and soft-spoken. So lawyers are also made up of different personalities, and I learned that the hard way. But I'm grateful now. I think I have the right people to help me.

I reached out to actually many mainstream media newspapers and didn't get any response. And some famous journalists I contacted, they either said they have no capacity, or just wished me the best. But then I found two editors that are working toward the same issues. One is based in Oslo, in the capital, and he [said] would want to help me, he would want to... he understands immediately, he says, you know, and that I'm not alone. And then another one, she's a foreigner and she's working mostly for [an] English audience, like the English-speaking audience, and she's [also] investigating this matter, this discrimination towards foreign mothers or immigrants dealing with the Norwegian system. And I didn't know how to feel, should I feel sad, or should I feel relieved that I'm not alone? Because that means it's quite bad actually to find that I'm not the only one right, that it happened in Norway that values transparency and everything.

Thank God that I never have problem with the police or other institutions regarding my daughter. And the police is actually quite, very kind. I mean, I know like in the States for example, then it would be really tough because it's pretty bad, you know, the image that we read in the media is not [great]. But actually, here in Norway, at least when I call them and when I ask for help, they're quite welcoming.

And also in Indonesia, even my auntie told me, you know, it's... yes, they're institutions, but they consist of... they're made of people, right? Sometimes even the same institution, you meet different kinds of workers and you get different treatment. And then some would help you, like, really helpful and some will just like, don't care. So yeah. And the question is, how we meet those kinds of people that are more friendly and helpful, that actually care, you know, listening to our issue, like those want to genuinely help us, right.

F:

Kirana says that despite all her negative experiences she's going through in the child custody process, these experiences became a motivation for her to help and support others.

R:

I want to find the best possible solution, yeah, for my daughter, for me. And what the Father did is just... yeah, it's ridiculous, I would say. But at the same time, if this didn't happen to me... I wouldn't

contribute in such a way... Now that I understood these things [are] happening, and I talked to other minorities, they experienced the same. I mean, until we experience it ourselves, sometimes we cannot really... you know, one can have some sympathy but not empathy. But once you experience it, oh no, you know. I think we should help people that are experiencing this discrimination and racism. There is no going back for me. I mean, I will contribute, anything that I can do, you know, to help, or give people more awareness that such things happen, can happen, or has been happening.

F:

Based on her background and experiences, Kirana reflects on what it means to be anti-racist, and more specifically, how she herself can be anti-racist.

R:

It's a tough question because I'm asking myself how can I contribute? You know, sometimes I think I'm just like a common young mother who's like having this legal issue now, like, what can I do, right? But then at the moment, I look at my friend – and she's my previous manager, actually. She's very kind to me. She keeps giving me job offers. She knows what's happening to me and she's just like, yeah, tries to help me in her own ways, you know. And actually, personally, she is not well physically, but she still wants to do that, to help others close to her. And I would like to be like her, I guess, like to just care for, for the people around you, next to you, that you meet, and start from there, like one on one.

And yeah, just start to, I don't know, like, how can I help? Sometimes start asking this question. Because sometimes people, when they're used to becoming helpers, they are not vulnerable enough to ask for help themselves, and we will never know until they tell you, right? And I think I would do my best to be more sensitive for people that need help, that can't really see it, unless you talk to them. And then you start asking, you know, about their lives. Because here, what I noticed is – at least in the Norwegian culture, the context – you don't really want to disturb people, you know, others. Like, you have to be independent and you have to solve your own things. So it's not easy, especially for minorities that are experiencing discrimination, right? It's like, where do you ask for help then? And then if everybody thinks like, "Oh, yeah, but we have plenty of organizations that you can go to and you can go ask for help." So people think, "Ah, she should be fine," or, "He should be fine. They will be taken care of." But it doesn't mean like that. Sometimes... yeah, we need to be more willing to do more of just... not only [something] friendly, but also just like, really, how can I help?

This is a good question because you remind me of another person. [T]hat's like the first question he would [ask] when we speak, you know, after a long time, "How can I help?" And this is not sales or whatever, like you go to the shop and then they ask you. No. But this is just kind of a friendship talk, right? Even to people you just met. So that's like, I guess [how to be] antiracist, like how can I help others too if they're having a problem or they're feeling discriminated: How can I help?

.....
F:

You can find more information on racism aimed at Asians in Norway, as well as other articles, books and videos Kirana recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi, and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on Dec 7!

.....

This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

Music by Pete Morse, Crescent Music and Fugu Vibes. This podcast is powered by the Competence Centre for Diversity and Inclusion at the University of St. Gallen.

A big thank you to Kirana for reaching out to me and trusting me to share her raw and fresh stories, and for sharing with us thought-provoking reflections on this issue.