

## HOMInG INTERVIEW

with MARTA BIVAND ERDAL

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Conducted by Sara Bonfanti

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Marta is Research Professor in Migration Studies at the [Peace Research Institute Oslo \(PRIO\)](#). Her disciplinary background is in Geography, and she has conducted extensive research in South Asia (mainly Pakistan), Norway and Poland. Her interests include migration processes and transnational ties, as well as living together in culturally and religiously diverse societies, focusing on citizenship and nationhood. Among her recent publications are: Erdal, M. B. (2019) 'Negotiation dynamics and their limits: Young people in Norway deal with diversity in the nation', *Political Geography*; Erdal, M. B. & Ceri Oeppen (2017) 'Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.



**Good morning Marta, and thank you for taking the time for this interview with me. Could you please introduce yourself to our readers?**

So, always a choice, whether to start from the professional side or the personal one? Well, I am a Research Professor in Migration studies, and a Geographer, and I work at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in Norway. I guess my life trajectory can say much about how I got there, and about my interest in migration studies. I was born in Poland to a Polish mother and a British father. We moved to northern Norway when I was three years old, until my parents decided to move south in Norway, to Bergen a few years later, where I mostly grew up. I chose to go to London to do my Bachelor degree in Geography. As part of this I did fieldwork among Afghan refugees in New Delhi, India. I moved to Oslo for my Master's degree, and focused on Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora engagement in development in Sri Lanka. I came to PRIO as a PhD student, to work within a research project on remittances, transnationalism and integration, where my focus was on Norwegian-Pakistani families. So, I would definitely say that my own personal experience is related to migration and that through my training in Geography, issues of home, including the different experiences of specific migrant groups, have been central.

**That's an excellent gateway to our standard icebreaker: what does home mean to you, in terms of your research experience and disciplinary background?**

As I mentioned, my personal experience affects my research, and the other way around, as I guess is the case for most of us. Going back to my biography, growing up with two sets of grandparents who lived quite far away and spoke two different languages from the one I used daily in school made me

aware of the complexities of managing a mixed cross-cultural home space, at an emotional and practical level. This stimulated me to understand the symbolic identity attached to one's home, being reflective about positionality, gender, age, race and so forth. So, my personal and professional understanding of home and belonging are definitely in dialogue with each other: home is never singular and static, I see it is a process and a space for plurality. This may be seen as general framework for understanding home, but it especially applies to people who migrate. In fact, I first approached the study of home when I was writing my undergraduate dissertation on Afghan refugees in Delhi, and read a book edited by Nadjie Al-Ali and Khalid Koser (2002) [New Approaches to Migration: Transnationalism and Transformations of Home](#), which made a strong case for how the material and the existential experience of home are integral to one's identity, not least for people who try to recover a sense of safe anchoring despite physical and legal precariousness.

I am a bit critical of the saying that goes "home is where the heart is", which I find simplistic, at least if it is not pluralized. Home is always also a material space and a set of relations that change over time. From interviews with migrants, whether the ones I have conducted, or those you conducted within the HOMing project, we really get the sense that homes can be – and often are – plural. Furthermore, people's memory and projections of home change across the life course and as one's socio-economic situation changes. An illustration from my own work would be the changing ways in which Norwegian-Pakistanis relate to Pakistan "as home" over time. While building houses in villages of origin was common previously, it is now not uncommon to choose to buy a house in a city in Pakistan, Islamabad or Lahore for instance, though there may not be ancestral ties there. These housing investments are made for a range of reasons, including being a financial investment in growing cities in Pakistan, and as a place to stay during holidays – enabling shorter visits to ancestral villages. Such holiday visits to parents' or grandparents' countries of birth are important as part of transferring knowledge about culture, language, religion, or at least providing exposure to these other cultural contexts, as one among multiple ingredients in the upbringing of children of migrants, or grandchildren of migrants, in a context like Norway. How and to what extent this is about "home" at this stage, I think is an empirical question, but most of the time for these descendants of Pakistani migrants, home is firmly in Norway now.

**This reminds of a drama movie I watched last year, *What will people say?* about a father forcibly sending his teenage daughter back to his homeland Pakistan in order to elude allegedly inappropriate lifestyles in Norway...**

Yes, it's a Norwegian-Pakistani film, which presents a dramatic case of a father and daughter, especially, set within the landscape of challenges of complex belonging for Pakistani parents settling in Norway. The film puts the limelight on forced marriages as a clear-cut case of human rights violation, which is unfortunately still necessary in South Asian contexts. But, I have to say after watching the film, I did wonder: why not make a film about the nuances and ambivalences, equally suffered, but much more lenient, of parents who desire the best for their youth, but who navigate this landscape without the use of force?

The visibility of family-everyday-bargaining for feeling at home is rarely made explicit, failing to convey their struggle to belong in dual places and in changing times. Parents really are so often navigating how to best help their children, how to best express their love and let their love guide their interaction with their children in new contexts. This dynamic is not exclusive to migrants of

course, but often in Europe, at least in the Norwegian context, there is a clear assumption that the elder migrants' apparently resist cultural change, with resulting pressure on their youth. This is a picture which needs refinement, for change is occurring, and so this apparent resistance clearly is not black-and-white, and arguably, it is too simple to argue that change is only coming about as a result of the actions and choices of the children of migrants, although evidently this is a major driving force.

Meanwhile, instead of refining an understanding of the dynamics of change which are playing out, the public discourse tends to culturalize, and make connections with Islam and religious dogmatism. So, put a little crudely, while this is an important film – and sadly the focus on the harm forced marriages do is still necessary – I did somehow feel that the film was more framed according to the media critique of repressive and traditionalist migrants, than being framed in relation to the reality of life experiences of many, many Norwegian-Pakistani families, which are much less clear-cut and somehow open to change over time, also in relation to a changing balance of where and what constitutes home. [cf. <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=10828>]

**I agree with you that this process of generational change is anything but linear and can be applied also to non-migrants. The necessity to de-culturalize or de-ethnicize this critical discourse can be effectively pursued moving out of monolithic group representations and comparing different cases...**

Absolutely! This is also one of the reasons I started to look comparatively at Pakistani and Polish migrants' considerations about return migration, to understand how they related to the possibility of returning to contexts of origin after a shorter or longer time abroad. Besides the specific political or economic situation in the country of origin, I found that return considerations to such a great extent are shaped by the length of stay of migrants in the country of settlement, by their age at migration, and by their life-course stage. [cf. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2014.971041>] You see, it's common to hear long-term migrants, who have been staying in the country of immigration for a long time, saying that they are not completely at home, neither in the country of settlement, nor in the one left behind. These migrants often acknowledge that their previous home, cherished as it was, does not exist anymore, at best it is frozen in their memory. There are also psychological or emotional diversities that frame the experience of re-making one's home elsewhere. I mean, Pakistani and Polish migrants in Norway are so different, but in fact in terms of their relationship to home and migration there were patterns of similarities, such as the need for anchoring, and for establishing the physical spaces of home with their loved ones who were in Norway. [<https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.5117/CMS2014.3.ERDA>] So, in spite of the different race relations they experience in a Nordic, predominantly white, country, these similarities were really striking, and speak to some generalizations about the migrant condition, which can be made, across ethnic, cultural, national or religious groups.

I also consider that the legal status of migrants really matters, also in terms of processes of feeling at home (or not). So, most of my research participants over time have been documented migrants. Those migrants who do not have a regular status, or a secure regular status, certainly experience both practical and emotional dimensions of home very differently, which comes down to a basic sense of security and predictability. [<https://samfunnsforskning.brage.unit.no/samfunnsforskning->

As for those who do return to their country of origin, in fact, among the Pakistani migrants I worked with, most had also acquired Norwegian citizenship, prior to return [<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/psp.1966>]. This is central to understand, whether we are interested in understanding home and migration, or migration-dynamics more generally. A desire to return to the country of origin, may well only be realised, if the security of knowing you may return again to the county of settlement is also there. Having migrated once, essentially, means we can assume that the threshold both to return, and to re-migrate again, or to lead a transnational life across nation-states, is lower than for someone who has never migrated internationally at all, because of the experience, networks, and comparative perspective on opportunities and constraints which is being gained.

**Since we both work with South Asian diasporas and as we said Islam is often framed as a challenge for integration in Europe, I was wondering to what extent does religion matter in considerations about return migration or simply for the wish to remain transnationally mobile?**

Well, I have come across different cases where religious motivations or networks played a role in migrant's choices and opportunities, not only to move in the first instance, but also to return. But, as you said earlier, if religions are 'total social facts' like Marcel Mauss (1924) first argued, then to us who engage in migration studies, religion should not come as an isolate variable in people's movement, but one among many. Religion was more visible while doing my fieldwork in Pakistan, than in Norway. In Pakistan, I was as a matter of course, taken along to visit some shrines, where faith-based activities were one among many habitual forms of commitment to the place. As a researcher, I wonder how we can best engage with the religious, as a part of people's everyday lives – and as profoundly part of their life worlds: Should we single out religion, risking to emphasize its motivations or salience too much, or should we see it as blended in, simply as part of the socio-cultural realm? Sometimes a short-sighted concern for religion which leaves out of the picture coexisting social or cultural aspects may lose its analytical value altogether. Whereas, a lack of interest for religious phenomena risks to deliberately ignore salient aspects of people's life worlds, whether we are now thinking specifically of migrants or not. Although I'm a Geographer, and I work more with conversation-based methodological tools, primarily interviews and focus groups, I think this kind of acknowledgement requires an ethnographic engagement with people's everyday lives, a research *praxis* which Anthropology clearly contributes to the rest of the social sciences.

**Turning to your specific disciplinary competence, can you tell us something about the geographical approach to home?**

Yes, there has been a consistent interest in home and housing, and dwelling and domesticity in cultural geography, and a refined theoretical elaboration on the concept of home, also mediated through gender awareness. As Doreen Massey (1994) argued, distinguishing place from space, home is first of all a relational place. Home is a particular relational place, which is continuously made and remade through the involvement of many people at different times. These days people may be present at home even at a distance, especially thanks to the use of telecommunication means; home then is a node connecting people, in a family, a village or neighbourhood, and yet it is not

bounded to a single location. Studying migration and home has made us recognize the importance of distance: the cost, time and travel that allow people to connect via this node, at once symbolic and material. I think a geographical approach to home in many senses is a two-step approach: First, to be descriptive, before turning to more interpretative dimensions. So, it entails the use of techniques such as mapping the space and cataloguing the architecture, engaging with the surrounding physical landscape, so as to subsequently ground the deeper understanding in the structures which are co-producing the relational place of home.

As a geographer, I also express my reservations over some exceptionalism in looking at home and migration. I think we run the risk of overemphasizing the salience of home – in its different articulations – for migrants. Home is of course important, but it is important for people in general, how and to what extent can we assume home is more important for migrants than for people who do not migrate, we could ask.

**I have often felt the same puzzle, since as researchers we co-produce the reality we are researching. I can only respond that, at least within HOMInG, we are trying to see how the meaning and experience of home for different migrant groups is comparable across country cases and also with respect to so called natives, or non-migrants. Considering the necessary comparative trade-off of our work, what would you suggest for making the most of the rich but case-specific data we have collected?**

Well, I've known your project since the start, and I engaged with Paolo's book *Search for Home* (Boccagni 2017), but I might not be updated with all that you've been doing. I understand that a five year qualitative multisite investigation must be piling up tons of ethnographic data, and from the session you also participated in this morning I can see that this double gaze on homes as physical and emotional spaces is there, as much as the interest for different scales of home.

Perhaps, given my research perspective, I would recommend to see not only issues of identity and belonging through 'home in migration', but also consider questions of membership more. So, different types of membership and their interlacement. Membership of the household or the family, the community and the neighbourhood, the city, the local, but also to the national level of one's place(s) of residence. Of course, this leads then to the issue of formal national membership, to citizenship. I think your study of home-making among migrants cannot neglect this highly political issue. You may see that national membership, with its sets of rights and duties, for naturalized immigrants, grants them the access to some formal participation (to housing entitlements for instance), while other informal aspects of membership remain marginalised. Migrants' diversity in terms of race, ethnicity and/or religion might leave their belonging continuously questioned, and it would be important to understand how this questioned belonging relates to their feeling at home in their contexts of settlement, in relation to formal citizenship status. How do migrants cope with this partial membership in the place where they live? Which strategies do they devise to participate, trying to meet different socio-cultural demands? And how is this contingent on – or affecting – their sense of feeling at home?

**This is very interesting, in my work with Pakistani and Indian migrants, the chance for the first but not for the latter to gain double nationality differently impinged on their formal and informal membership to the country of residence. Generally speaking, how do you frame the linkage between home and citizenship?**

Well, there is a strong relation between these ideas, again in term of membership to one's specific places of origin and residence. I'll relate this to dual citizenship specifically.

From my research, I would argue that dual citizenship is related to a sense of dual belonging, not in that it produces it: we know that belonging is not conditioned on formal citizenship status alone, in a one-to-one manner. But recognizing dual formal membership, through dual citizenship, certainly can contribute to enabling an experience dual belonging. One might ask, what do countries which do not permit dual citizenship gain from this? Migrants who can naturalize in a new country while retaining their original citizenship, can more easily remain transnational and are less likely to question their belonging to either country of residence or country of origin. For those instead who are not allowed to gain a second nationality, it may be more difficult to naturalize abroad and resign their former nationality. This could be difficult at an emotional level, or in terms of rights e.g. related to inheritance or the ownership of land or property, which could challenge transnational family network practices.

This said though, I don't think dual citizenship automatically solves the difficulties of living in a country of residence where you might feel your belonging being questioned, because you don't speak the language without an accent, or look different than the majority population does. I wouldn't say that dual citizens have an easier experience of becoming an integrated part of the country of residence, but naturalization does provide them with a sense of security that is shielded by the law.

There is a trade-off between formal and informal membership, citizenship and home like you asked, that is quite complex. Given the huge growth in the prevalence of dual citizenship in Europe, but also globally, it is a little puzzling that this is not a more central field of research in migration studies today. I think connections between dual citizenship and home, on the backdrop of both migrant transnationalism and integration processes, are in need of further scrutiny, both empirically and theoretically.

**Moving to some methodological aspects of our research, as a seasoned geographer in migration studies, what kind of techniques would you bring in if you were collaborating in a project like HOMInG?**

To start with, I would try to implement the visual and participatory methods I know are planned as part of your research (e.g. making a short documentary in the field engaging our informants). Certainly, I would try to move beyond the present moment, and look longitudinally at some of your data, such as tracing migrant's housing trajectories over time (over their life course, but also in historical time). Then I think that the comparative dimension across cases is a key winning point of your project, which I hope you manage to make the most of, despite the inherent challenges to comparative work based on ethnographic data. From a geographic perspective, I think some mapping techniques would pay well off, and I think you have been using such mapping techniques.

An easy experiment could be asking your participants to track their movements in space across the city over a single day, using the GPS on their phone, and then interviewing them with this mapping as a prompt for discussion. It could be a great way to understand their movements in the neighbourhood and see where they go, for what purpose and with whom. It's a good way to elicit narratives starting from the walkable use of everyday home spaces. I can imagine you do walk-alongs with research participants, but this is another way of seeing what they do on their own, and



only later you get a chance to hear their explanations. It's another way of entering their routines and the ways they inhabit the place, and it can complement nicely what has been done with ethnographic observation and co-presence.

**Coming to a close with a reflection on your extended research with Pakistani migrants in Norway, which are the findings that really struck you?**

There are many things, but I'll mention two here:

First, a striking finding was learning about the life experiences of elderly Pakistani women in Norway, and understanding how different these experiences are, from popular representations. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12134-016-0470-4> These women are often seen as somehow detached from the country of residence, as "not integrated", however you want to relate to that term. So building on the fact that many women in this generation wear the *salwar kameez*, have relatively weak Norwegian speaking-skills, even after decades in Norway, and often have not worked outside of the home, or not very much at least (where in Norway, like elsewhere in Europe, occupation is a marker of integration, and women do participate in the labour market to a far higher degree than in many other European contexts even). In my interaction with these women, through interviews, focus groups as well as informal chats, I was struck by their accounts of what they appreciated about Norway: they were so much more appreciative of the freedom they experienced living in Norway. A freedom at the individual level, as women and as mothers. This was something that would have been hard to achieve in Pakistan (especially considering the time when they migrated as young adults, in the late seventies, or in the 1980s). Raising their children in Norway, interacting with society in their own ways, over the long-term, the individual freedom they experienced, was something they cherished, and expressed as a key asset of life in Norway. This was striking, I thought, not just because it counters public discourse, which is perhaps not so surprising, but because it underscores how migrants relate comparatively to the contexts which they engage in – relative to the freedom they experienced individually in Pakistan pre-migration, their experiences in Norway, for better and for worse, led them to articulate an appreciation for the kind of individual freedom they experienced in Norway.

This kind of insight is not something that you could easily grasp with a survey. It would be hard to know which questions to even ask. You need time to sit down with people and let them speak with their own voice, about what they think is important to share with you. And it's not by chance that these narrative moments of disclosure often happen in spaces which are experienced as safe, which could be within private homes, or in other settings which specifically allow for getting access to life truths that would otherwise remain unspoken.

Then the second thing that I'd like to mention is something I found really fascinating while doing my PhD research. This refers back to what we said before about religion and migration, about migrant transnationalism and *zakat*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/011719681202100401> Actually, I was both surprised by the close relation between remittances and *zakat*, but also, I think, by my own surprise. The connection, once you consider it, is rather obvious. If remittances are understood as sending money back to one's family left behind, *zakat* is a religious deed in Islam that is expected from everyone, where you share your wealth with those in need, and the size of your *zakat* payment, is defined by the level of your wealth.

There is a clear overlap between these transnational economic practices for migrants. The way family, cultural and religious obligations come together in these financial transfers interlinks with Islamic solidarity and prescribed charity. Remittances is an area where religion has been a theme in research, but more often than not in quite binary terms – remittances as altruistic, or not. In reality, the overlaps are more complicated, even if the rules about who is to receive zakat, and how much zakat is to be paid based on wealth, are rather clear. My research participants at times spoke about remittances and about zakat, or Islamic charity more generally, in ways which did not produce clear-cut distinctions, including among research participants who were both religious or not very religious. In this sense, remittances and Islamic charity, including zakat, are an interesting set of interlocking transnational practices, connecting multiple homes, households and communities across transnational social fields produced by migration.

If I look back at my research findings, I can see that the home – migration nexus you are focusing on sits in the background of many other questions, and it's promising that you have come to put it at the forefront. Let's stay in touch and see what comes up next from our common interests.

**Definitely, it's been a pleasure to talk to you. Thanks Marta for your time and for sharing this all with us!**