

”Ali’s way”

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Biography Kirsten Lauritsen

- Research Scientist/Social Anthropologist at SINTEF Technology and Society IFIM, 1995 -2006
- Teaches social sciences at a teacher training college
- Refugee consultant for many years
- Research on gender and ethnicity and on immigration and integration (living conditions in asylum centers, unaccompanied minors and refugees in Norwegian local communities, especially from Somalia and Iran)

Sources of data

- **Formal interviews** throughout a period of more than ten years
- **Informal sources:** Meetings and conversations for more than fifteen years, as
 - Refugee and refugee consultant
 - Colleges
 - Inhabitants in a small city
 - Friends

Ali's story – a brief overview

- Background information/life in Iran
- The flight
- Transnational family networks
- Myths and stereotypes
- School and Work life
- Dignity and divorce
- Fighting for work

Background information and life in Iran

- Ali comes from a well-to-do and left-wing oriented family in Iran, with several shops selling electronic articles.
- With financial support from his family, Ali had his own shop and repair shop in 1979, also constructing articles on demand.
- His educational background is three years of vocational school, one year of university studies and he has work experience from various summer jobs.
- He and Zahra married in 1981, and have two children.
- The war between Iran and Iraq broke out, and the Iranian regime started to call up men of Ali's age for military service.

The flight – to Turkey and then to Norway

- In 1988 he and his family fled to Turkey and then to Norway. The alternative to fleeing would have been to sell the shop to pay the authorities, and next year Ali would have been called to the army anyway.
- The airport was closed, so they fled by bus. The children had to be sedated so that they wouldn't make any noise during the trip.
- They had to wait in Turkey until the shop was sold and spent all the money from the sale to pay the smugglers, who put them on a plane to Norway. Their destination was decided by the smugglers.

Transnational family networks

- Ali and Zahra had two children when they arrived in Norway in 1988. Ali's parents and a younger brother arrived two years later. His father died in 1992.
- Ali has a brother in Germany, one in Finland and a sister in the US. They have contact through e-mail and telephone on a regular basis.

Myths and stereotypes

- Ali encountered many myths about Iran among Norwegians. At first it was funny – later he found them a devaluation of Iran and of Iranian people that was difficult to accept:

"A Norwegian thinks of our country as Sahara and a jungle, which is natural. We too have different points of view on different parts of the world (...) I've heard that Germans are like this, the British are like that, but I have never heard about Norwegian people. And we thought that they were like Inuit people, just ice and Inuit houses and holes in the ice and fish. It is just the opposite – or just the same way that you think about us. (...) we see the world through TV, and it doesn't show the truth, we only see things that are not ordinary lives. (...) That's why, when I arrived in Norway, they asked me: Do you have cars, do you have fridges, and it was surprising for them that I could drive a car and turn on the TV or open the door of the fridge. The most stupid question I have had, was if we had windows in Iran".

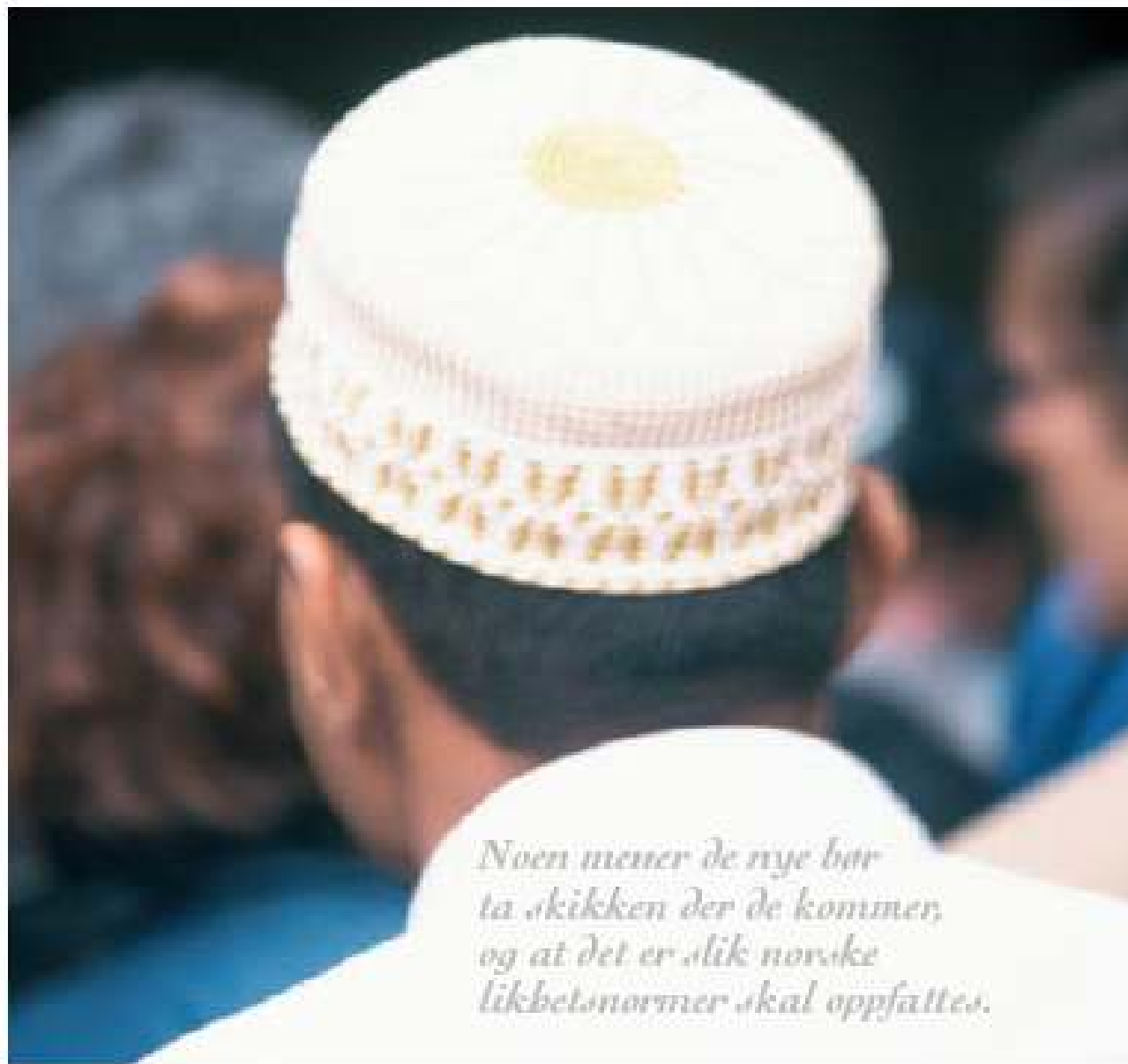


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...Partying with Norwegians

An incident that Ali and Zahra experienced contributes to dispelling some of those myths:

For a short period of time both Ali and Zahra had work practice in the same company, and they went with their colleges to a Christmas party at work. There were drinks all around, and in the course of the evening one of the men tried to kiss Zahra, in front of Ali. Ali says that in Iran that would have led to a good beating. But as someone with a minority background he was afraid of trouble. He chose to act calmly and try to talk to the drunk Norwegian. Some of the other colleges eventually took action. Ali and Zahra left the party early.

Fighting for dignity

Zahra's reaction is to decide never again to go to a Norwegian party where alcohol is served. Ali also fights for his dignity, although he finds it difficult because he belongs to a minority:

"In Iran I was an Iranian. I felt like an owner of everything there. If there was a quarrel, I didn't feel like a loser. (Here) I have to restrain myself in different situations (...) and it always turns into a defensive situation (...) We are a minority, and a minority is always under pressure in a society (...) from neighbours, from children, from grown-ups and the milkman, from newspapers and people on the street looking strangely at you. Everything is under pressure and you have to be very strong not to break down yourself."

Marriage changes and marriage problems

Marriage changes:

- Different roles and opportunities in the new country
- Different attitudes from the host country towards Iranian men and women
- Different expectations and hopes for life in Norway for men and women

Marriage problems – according to Ali caused by:

- His problems finding work and being the provider of the family and the lack of respect these problems lead to in the family
- Discrimination at work – and housing markets
- Many incidents where he feels devaluated
- Negative attitudes towards Muslim countries, and Muslim men especially

Gender stereotypes

- The oppressing Iranian (Muslim) man and the oppressed Iranian woman

VS

- The equality based / equal relationship between Western men and liberated, well respected Western women

Changes for men and women

- Ali's attitude is that the changes that Iranian men and women experience as refugees in Norway are changes in completely opposite directions:
- *"(...) the role of the man is opposite of the woman's: An Iranian woman, when arriving in Norway or another European country, she sees an open society with lots of opportunities she didn't have before.(...) Usually in the Iranian family she depends on her husband. Men in Iran have all the opportunities in society. But when they come to Norway, they feel that ... they have fewer options (...)."*

From provider and independent to dependent

- Ali explains how he feels about losing his position in society and in the family:
- *"...the main feeling you get, is to have become inferior in two areas, in society as well as in the family. It is precisely the feeling of someone who loses their power. A man who doesn't have a role in society nor in his family... if this feeling gets so strong, the man will feel that he is worth nothing. He can't make any mistakes, he can't be anyone in society, and life becomes difficult."*

...returning to Iran as an option?

- The negative experiences made the family consider returning to Iran:

"After some years living in Norway and experiencing that Norwegians will not accept us (...) this has affected us. When you are refused as a tenant because you are not Norwegian, and you don't get a job because of that, and this and that and ... You are like an unwanted child in a family, they don't wish to accept you. That's why we always thought of returning."

- To Ali returning seems economically impossible. In addition he is opposed to the regime. For Zahra this is different.

Ali moves to Canada - Zahra returns

- Zahra, Ali's wife, returned to Iran after finishing her education, trying to find work and friends without much success. She said she would return, but didn't, and they were divorced. The children are studying in Iran, and have a chance of a better future there, Ali thinks. If he had the money to pay the fine for not joining the army, he would have returned himself, he says.
- Ali moved to Canada after educating himself in different areas. He struggled to get a job, worked there for two years on and off, but returned to Norway when his mother became ill. He eventually married a woman from Lebanon. They have two children.

Meeting Norwegian working life

Returning from Canada, Ali was a "semi-engineer", as he expresses it. He has a lot of acquired knowledge but no formal qualifications. He started to formalize his qualifications at a local college, with excellent results. After a few exams he applied for more than 300 jobs, and at the same time took courses in IT and internet communication. Only five or six employers called him back, but when they heard that he was a foreigner and had an accent, he did not get the job. So far he has never been invited to an interview. He has contacted Manpower to try to get temporary work with different companies, but they were not interested.

”...not qualified”

- Ali had thought that with all his experience from electrical work, he might get a job in an electric shop, and applied for sales and repair jobs. For both jobs, people with no experience were hired.
- He applied for a job as a technician at a small hospital, and told a Norwegian friend about it. The boy applied a month after Ali, and got the job. He is twenty-four and has no previous job experience.
- He applied for two positions for engineers at a workshop distributing technical aids for disabled. A young boy who was one of Ali's fellow students, with no job experience, got one of the jobs. Ali with his background as an electrical engineer, with long experience from similar work in Iran, from heading his own business doing almost exactly this kind of work specializing in tailoring electronic solutions, is simply not given a chance.
- At a company where Ali had work practice they sell computers, telephones and other equipment to companies. He is given routine jobs like putting together things, while inexperienced youngsters are given more challenging tasks.

”...the most humiliating incident”

The most humiliating experience Ali had early on, was in connection with a solidarity project (Operasjon dagsverk) where students work one day and the day's pay goes to the project:

- *”I applied for a day's work at an electric shop. They asked me if I had a certificate of completed apprenticeship. I told them that I had a background in electronics from Iran and was a student at an engineering school in Norway. He asked for my telephone number, and said that he would call me. But I never got a call... At the same time I saw that they accepted two pupils into their shop. It means that they didn't want us in their shop. (...) Such experiences when you look at a society, they are so negative.. And I had more and more of them..”*
- Not even for a one-day solidarity project for people in third world countries, would this employer have a person from Iran in his shop.

”Background” and ”skin colour”

Ali doesn't refer to experiences at the labour market as 'racism' or 'discrimination', but he speaks about it in terms of 'background' and 'skin colour'. And he feels that he doesn't have the tools to meet this injustice that he would have had in Iran. There he would have known what to do:

”If you are in your home country (...) there are different things to struggle with, but you know what to do... But here, you know that you fight, but they don't give it to you, because you don't have the same colour, the same skin, the same background”.

An unwanted child

- When Ali sums up his twenty years in Norway, he remembers that his initial wishes for the first years were a residence permit and an education.

His next wish was for Norway to accept him. In return for that favour he too wished to do something in return – he wanted mutuality. He says that it is in order to become a full member of the society that he all these years has struggled with education, courses, work practice and job applications. His Norwegian is good, as is his technical language skills, and he has a lot of relevant practice and job experience from Iran and Norway. Still he doesn't get any job offers. He is not even invited to one single job interview. He feels that he is put on a side track – out of the system – like an unwanted child.

The future...

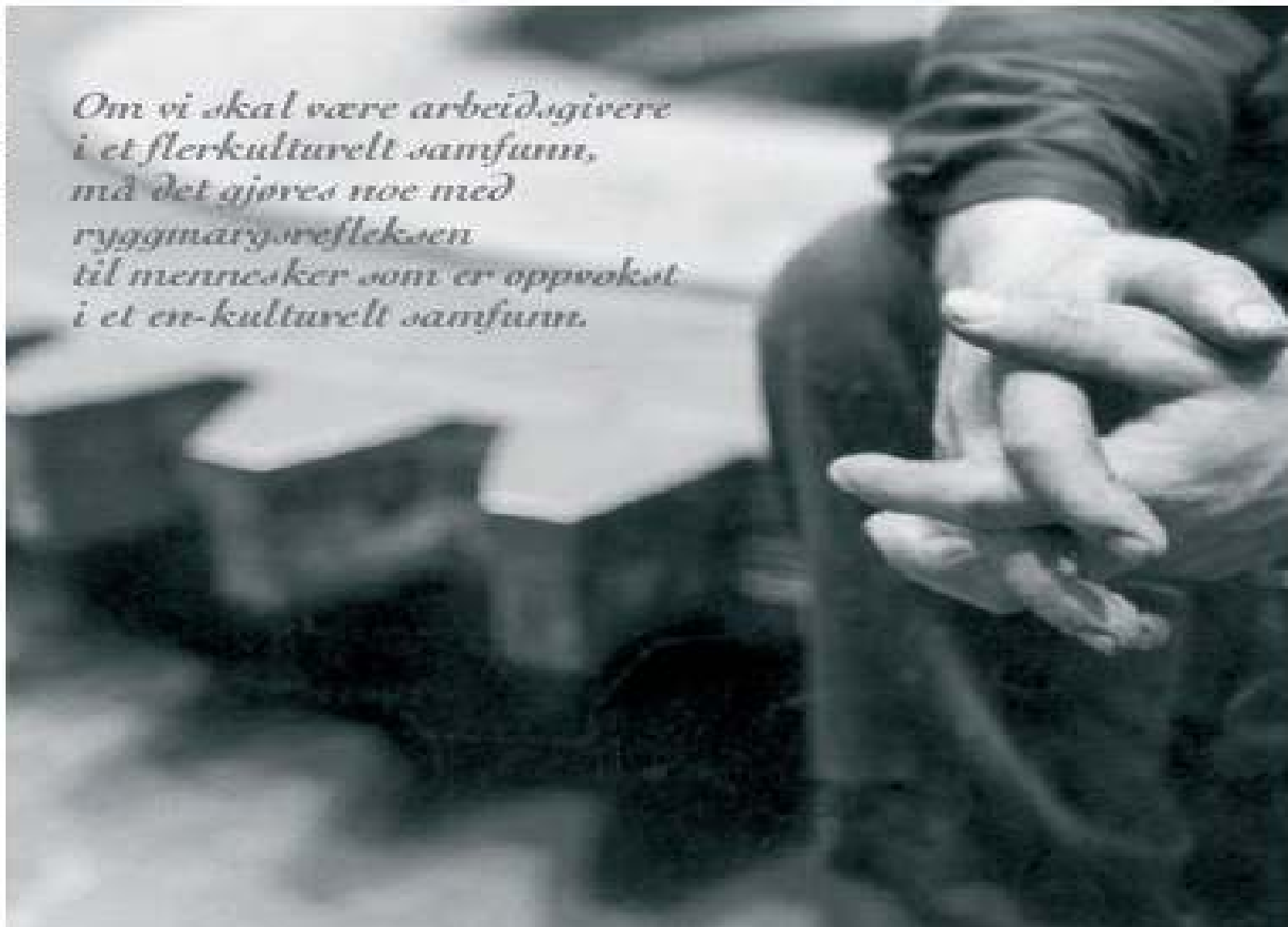
"Norway is for me like an adoptive mother – my biological mother is Iran. Anyway, I like Norway, but I don't always feel that she likes me. I manage..."

Ali says that today he has two goals in life. First, to create a future for his children. And secondly to finish his education as an engineer. He is almost there, and he is convinced that he will succeed. Recently, he has started his own little computer company. So – he has not yet given up all hopes!

A Norwegian employer: "In order to be employers in a multicultural society, we need to do something about the spinal reflexes of people brought up in a monocultural society"

Foto: © Tryge Baklund / Sandvik

*Om vi skal være arbeidsgivere
i et flerkulturelt samfunn,
må det gjøres noe med
ryggmarerefleksjonen
til mennesker som er oppvokst
i et en-kulturelt samfunn.*



Amin Maalouf: "If I learn someone else's language, and he does not respect mine, speaking his language is no longer a sign of openness, but an action that shows obedience and submission."

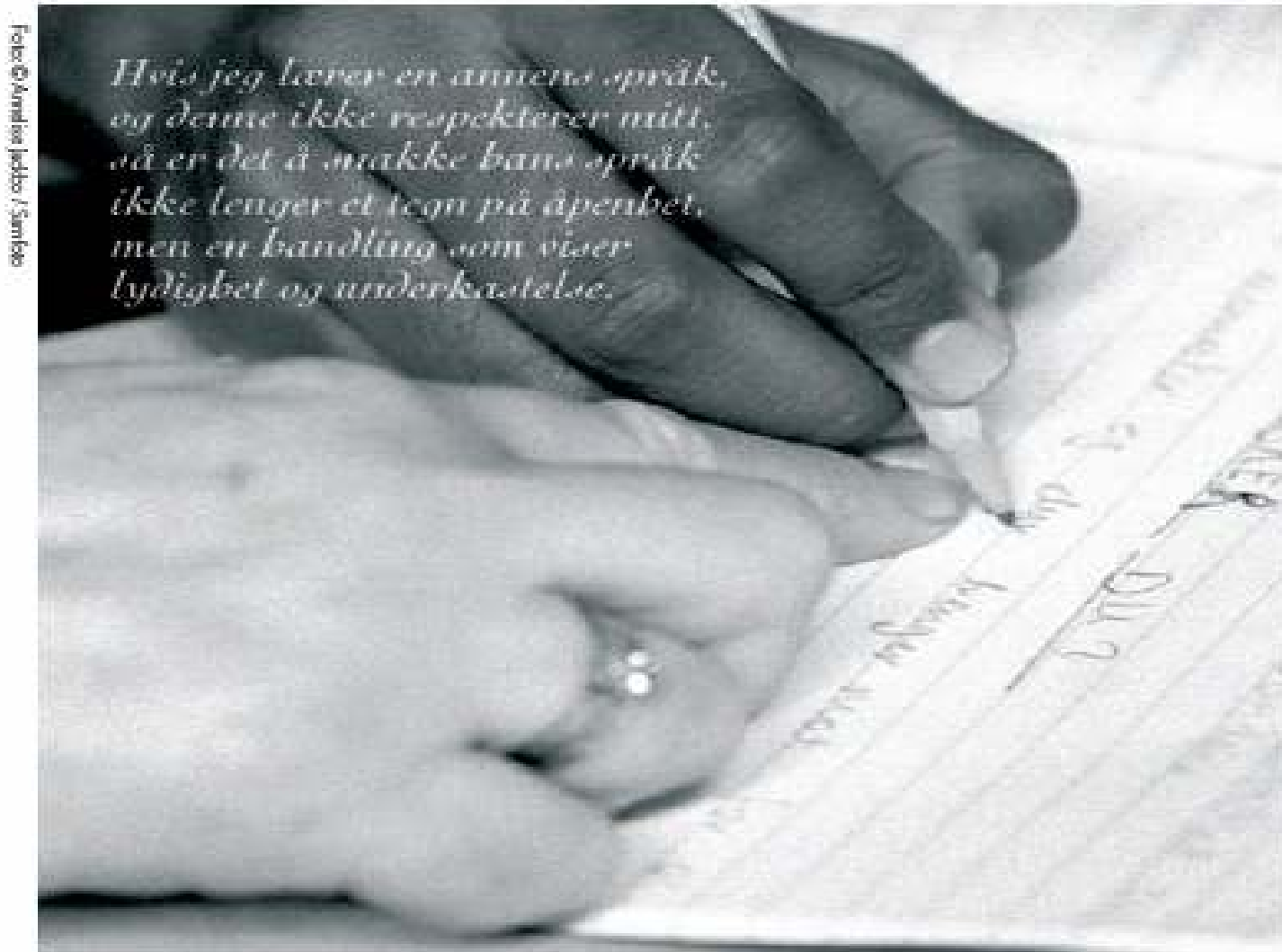


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Ali + Norway = truth?

- There are certainly challenges for minorities regarding language, relevant education, knowledge of society, rules, regulations, written and un-written codes of conduct in different work-places. Ali has met all of these demands, he seems to have done all the right things, but has had no job offers yet. Still, he has not given up.
- Ali's story points to challenges to Norwegian society, to civil servants, employers and all, there is a lot to be done. It is important to Ali's generation. It is equally important to his children who need to know that learning the language, educating themselves and acquiring professional skills really make a difference. If not – the lesson that they learn might be very destructive to any society.

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