

Interviewee: Dr. Noor Ali
Interviewers: Grace Crockett and Samantha Hardwick
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Transcribers: Grace Crockett and Samantha Hardwick



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Abstract:

Dr. Noor Ul Sabah Ali was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1980. She attended a Catholic school in Lahore up until high school when she decided to move to South Carolina to attend the College of Charleston for her first year of undergraduate studies. She then moved back to Lahore to attend Kinnaird College, where she obtained her bachelor's degree, as well as a master's in literature. Since returning to the United States, she has achieved a second master's in inclusion education from the University of New England as well as a doctorate in education from Northeastern University. Noor and her husband, Adnan Rehman, have three children together and have resided in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, for the past 11 years. She currently serves as the principal of Al-Hamra Academy in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, which educates children from infancy to eighth grade. In this interview, Noor discusses her experiences with moving so frequently and how she believes it has impacted her life. Additionally, she emphasizes how important her religious identity is, and the ways it has impacted both her research and her personal life as a whole.

GC: So our names are Grace Crockett and Samantha Hardwick and we're here with Dr. Noor Ali in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, and it is March 21st, 2023. So we're completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 national women's rights convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's health education, work and politics, and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with your work. Thank you for your help in this important project.

NA: Thank you.

GC: And is it okay to record your oral history today?

NA: Yes it is.

GC: So what is your full name including both maiden name and married name if applicable?

NA: My full name is actually Noor Ul Sabah and my last name is Ali. I go by Noor Ali because it's a mouthful.

SH: Do you have a pen? Can you spell your maiden name just so we can transcribe it?

NA: Yeah sure it's N-O-O-R space U-L space S-A-B-A-H my last name is Ali A-L-I.

SH: Perfect thank you.

GC: And when were you born?

NA: I was born on March 1st, 1980.

GC: Oh really so your birthday was the other day?

NA: [laughs] Yes it was.

GC: Have you ever married and if so what was the name of your spouse?

NA: I'm married to Adnan Rehman and he is, he studies philosophy and religion as well and I've got three kids. I can spell his name for you A-D-N-A-N last name is Rehman R-E-H-M-A-N.

GC: What are your children's names?

NA: So the eldest is Mahin, that's M-A-H-I-N and the second one is Momin, M-O-M-I-N and then last is Amal, A-M-A-L.

GC: Okay and what cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

NA: So I was born in Pakistan and so that would be the culture and ethnicity that I identified with.

GC: Could you tell me a little bit about your parents?

NA: Sure, my parents, my mom is still living my dad is not. My father was an engineer and my mother was a teacher and they were actually—both of them were actually born in India but then the partition happened between the two countries and they traveled from India to Pakistan and then Pakistan is where they settled.

GC: So when did you move to Worcester or what neighborhood did you grow up in?

NA: I moved to Massachusetts 11 years ago and I moved from New Jersey and when I came to Massachusetts we were—we actually live, we've always lived in Shrewsbury here.

GC: So how did you feel like the move went like how did you feel different from being in Pakistan?

NA: So I've actually been in a couple of places and I think it's important to kind of recognize that because I think someone who has moved a lot their sense of home is very different. They might not have a sense of home at all which I think is... is where I am at, like I don't know what place to call home because I was born in Lahore Pakistan, and then I came to South Carolina to study, and then I went back to Pakistan, then I lived in Malaysia for three years which is where my second son was born, and then I moved to New Jersey where I lived for— I don't know, five or seven years, and then, I've forgotten how many years I was in New Jersey, and then I moved to Massachusetts and I've been here for 11 years now. So I've moved a lot. It's— it's kind of hard to tell what a move was like because every move was different, but between New Jersey and Massachusetts I definitely like Massachusetts more. [laughs]

GC: Yeah. so where do you live in the city now?

NA: I'm in Shrewsbury.

GC: And do you have family members that live around here?

NA: I have some extended family yeah.

GC: Yeah. So what challenges do you think that this city still faces since you've been here and what would you change about it?

NA: So I know that the project is more about Worcester, but I think that one of the issues with Shrewsbury is that it sees itself in isolation from its neighboring towns and cities. So for example I think Shrewsbury is pretty—sees itself almost separate from Worcester and I think that's indicative of a larger problem in terms of the diversity and inclusion. It is very different in Shrewsbury than it would be in Worcester. A lot of it has to do with economics and the—the... just the living standards that people have in Shrewsbury. I do feel that Shrewsbury has a growing diverse population but does it have a population that feels a sense of belonging? I don't think we're there yet.

GC: So what distinct characteristics do you think make Shrewsbury the place that it is?

NA: Sure I think it's—I mean it's a suburban neighborhood and I think that's what it is. I also think that there is very distinctively, you know, differing demographics, like the older population in Shrewsbury is predominantly white and a lot of the policies or the culture of the place that exists is predominantly white mainstream. I do think however that it has a growing diverse population. For example I think 49% of Shrewsbury High School is a non-white population so, you know, that speaks a lot about the diversity. I think that's kind of, this change in demographics is also pushing for a change in what the characteristics would be like.

GC: And do you feel like this is an experience that is shared among many women in Shrewsbury?

NA: I would think definitely for women of color that would be an experience that's shared.

SH: Yeah okay, alright so I'm just gonna ask you a few questions about your education.

NA: Sure.

SH: So where did you attend school?

NA: Oh we're going to have to go back a little bit. [laughs] So I went to a Catholic school growing up in Pakistan, in Lahore, and that's where I had my first eleven years of schooling. It was an all-girls school and then I went to a coed high school. After that I did one year of undergrad at the College of Charleston SC, but I actually did my undergrad and my first master's—which was in literature—in Lahore at a college called Kinnaird College. After that, I moved a lot, then I did my second master's in inclusion education from the University of New England, and then I did my doctorate in education from Northeastern University.

SH: OK, wow you moved around a lot with school too huh?

NA: Yes. [laughs]

SH: So you said you got your doctorate right?

NA: Yep.

SH: Okay so that was the next question, what were your challenges in education?

NA: I don't think that there were any challenges. I mean I hated elementary school. I did not like the culture of the school at all that I was in and I think I was too young to recognize it except that I was very uncomfortable all my elementary and middle school years. It was when I went to my high school that I think I kind of really stepped into my person where you were sort of allowed to be yourself. Yeah so I think that was— that was really important. Then I was in South Carolina for a year, which you can imagine that the undergrad experience is very different because it is not a diverse population at all, and for someone who looks like me you're— you're always going to, you know, stand out. So I think that was definitely an issue in the beginning. The master's, the doctorate in education, I don't think there were any academic struggles but I definitely think there are major struggles in terms of representation in curriculum and in academic spaces, which is a lot of what my own research work is centered around so I mean that's definitely a challenge.

SH: Upon finishing your formal education what did you see as your options?

NA: So when I was—I mean my formal education has been dotted, right, around my timeline so I never thought I would actually come in the field of education. I always, I was actually really interested in law at one point but I think literature is something that is just really close to my heart. So that first master's really seems to have been on point. After that when I moved to New Jersey I started teaching and when I started teaching I was like, “I think I want to do a master's

in education,” so I kind of did it because of the work that I was doing. I wanted to learn more. And then the doctorate was just because I wanted to do a doctorate in education. I wasn't really pursuing it with like, “Oh these are my career goals,” or whatever I just wanted to do it and I did. About a year before the doctorate finished I had moved from teaching into becoming the principal at this place [Al-Hamra Academy], and I'm also full-time faculty at Northeastern [University] in their Graduate School of Education now so I think those options just opened, they weren't things that I was looking for essentially when I did the doctorate but you know it just came my way.

SH: What support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

NA: I think that mentorship is a beautiful thing to happen and I think it is a rare occurrence for it to happen. I think maybe many individuals don't have a mentor. I—like I said, my elementary and middle school years, I didn't like that at all. In high school, there was a teacher and her name was Mrs. Rahman. I never took a single class with her, she was a history teacher and I didn't take a course in history, we could choose. But I think if I am to say which person in academic spaces has had the single most influence on me I would say it's her because she—somebody really described her well they said she's an inspiration for all ages. So she was older, like much older, but she was so inspiring to us who were like 17 at the time and she really pushed forward...high school is when I did drama, high school is where I did speech and debate and all of those things were things that I had not recognized as any potentials for myself in elementary and middle school because the environment was very stifling. But when I went to high school she was like, “Oh you have to try out for this,” and actually one of the first things she said to me when she looked at me, she was, “You are Puck in Midsummer Night's Dream Shakespeare's play,” and that year we, they actually ended up putting up A Midsummer Night's Dream and I was given the role for Puck. Maybe I just look like Puck [laughs], but you know like just seeing that in a person and saying that you know you can do things. I became the president of the student council there, I was on the national team for a debate. I was representing Pakistan with the green blazer for the country. We went to London, Australia, and Malaysia for this, for the debate club— for the debate league. I think all of those things and just coming into your person are things that she just facilitated. So I'm just really inspired by her and I think that has also inspired my own practice in the sense that here at Al Hamra when I was a teacher and now one of my biggest pet peeves always is how can we bring more opportunity for our students. So the kids over here they're doing drama, they're doing speech and debate all the way from elementary to middle school—the opportunities, I'm eager to bring them and I think it's because I have that little experience myself.

SH: Yeah.

GC: Yeah. What were your primary responsibilities in terms of housework and childcare?

NA: Well, I'm mom, so the kids have always naturally gravitated towards me. My first son—my three children are all born in three different countries, which is—I've actually written a paper about that—the eldest son who is at Assumption [University], Mahin, he was born in Lahore [Pakistan], and Momin was born in Malaysia, and Amal, who is three— is four now, she was born in Worcester [Massachusetts]. So, they've all been born in different places and have been at a different part of my life when they came along. When the first one was born, my husband was just beginning his master's, so we were—and I was doing my masters at the time, so we were both students and we were very young parents. I was 22 when I had Mahin. So I think that was a different thing. My husband took it much easier— I feel like it was much more natural for him to be a parent than it was for me, so I really do think that he took more care of Maahin than I did. When Momin was born, we were in Malaysia and my husband was a full-time student, and I was a full-time stay-at-home mom, but I was homeschooling Mahin and I was homeschooling kids in the neighborhood, we had just made our own homeschool there because we were all international students and we didn't have access to a Malaysian school because we were not residents. We had kind of made our own school, and I think that's really the first time I taught young kids. And then with Amal, Amal was just born four years ago, that was a completely different experience because I was full-time working. My husband was a full-time student still, he was doing his Ph.D. when she was born. So I think we've tag-teamed really well, but that's also—a lot of it has to do with where we were in our careers, right? We aren't studying anymore, so our schedules could be flexible, you know?

GC: Yeah, so do you feel like it made it more— I don't want to say easier, but it was better to balance between parenting and student life because you guys were both doing such similar things like pursuing a master's?

NA: I think so, definitely.

GC: So what are some of the pros and cons of the path that you've chosen?

NA: I think the pro of this journey that I have taken is that I do feel fulfilled, that I did a lot. The con is the same thing, that I did a lot. And I think that I did too much, and I packed my nights and my days with everything that I was inspired to do, and I feel like I may have tired myself in the process, so I think the pro and the con is two sides of the same coin, essentially. If I hadn't done it, I would have probably been like, "Oh gosh, I didn't do x,y,z," you know? So I did do x,y,z, but I really do feel that it took its toll on me as well.

GC: So how do you feel about the choices you've made in your life, and do you have any regrets?

NA: I don't think that I have many regrets except that I would have liked to stay a little more grounded through the journey. I also wish that I had practiced a little bit more slowness than I did, to be intentional about the pause. I don't think I was intentional about pausing. I was very intentional about going and not about pausing, so I think that would be the only thing. Did I not enjoy myself in the process? No, I did, I'm inspired by everything I've done. I also think that I have a really hard time saying no, so I think that there were several things I did where I could've just bypassed them because they weren't really adding value, but I did them regardless. So maybe if I had been more intentional about slowness, I would have been able to pick better, the things that were truly valuable and the things that maybe were just surface-level, you know, commitments to whatever. I do think, however, that when one extends themselves like I think I have, you build networks around you of relationships and support.

GC: Yeah.

NA: And I think I was really blessed to have that, maybe that's the other side of not being able to say no as often.

SH: Do you consider yourself active politically?

NA: I do think that I am active politically, yes, I have strong political viewpoints. I participate in the electoral process and push people to do the same. I am very active in works of social justice, and I think that is— I mean, I think living is a political act, and I'm also an elected official in the town of Shrewsbury [Massachusetts]. I serve on the board of trustees for the Shrewsbury Public Library, and I am a town meeting member, both of them are elected positions, so yes.

SH: Have you been involved in volunteer work?

NA: Yes, [laughs], my life has pretty much been all of that. I have volunteered and done a lot of community work. I think part of it is also being a community leader, and in that space, there's just— so much that's—you know, that you do because you want to uplift the community. So yeah definitely, whether it's interfaith or simple things like clean-ups and whatnot, and even larger projects, it's been a huge part of my life.

SH: What role has religion played in your life?

NA: A very pivotal role, I'm very proud of my religious identity, and for a very long time too. I chose the head covering for myself, it was not something that anyone in my family did, so, contrary to popular stereotypes that we are forced into it or whatever, it was the opposite. There was pressure on me to not wear it. So, I think that's been really pivotal to grounding me, and all of my research work that I do now in education, in the graduate school of education, the book that I've written, all of that, is centered around religious identity and the oppression, minoritization, and marginalization that happens to religious minorities.

SH: So, switching the page a little bit, how have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

NA: I don't think that has been the case, I think I've been really blessed in that. My youngest—well, one thing to consider is my pregnancies were all—the first two pregnancies were threatened miscarriages. My first son was born one month early. Second one was full-term, but Amal was born two months before her due date, so I had to be hospitalized. I was at UMass Memorial [Hospital] for 10 days before she was born, you know, pre-term. And then she was in the NICU [neonatal intensive care unit] at UMass Memorial for a month. I think that has—I can certainly recognize what serious health issues can do, in the way— in a person's lived experiences because I've experienced that in that short period of time— but other than that, I think I've been very blessed. My family has completely messed up health histories, I carry really bad genes which are now catching up, you know, so now I'm like okay, start medication for x,y,z. So those types of things are creeping up and that's the other thing, like I didn't—I don't think I took that great care of my body in the last 20 years. So that's kind of catching up and I'm trying to fix that and I hope it's not too late.

SH: What are your experiences in accessing quality and affordable healthcare?

NA: I mean, I don't think that there were many issues, I feel like—I feel like MassHealth was great when I needed it, and I do feel that access to healthcare is really important and I know that this is a huge struggle, like even with insurance and everything, there is—nothing is for free. And I think that—I do believe that there is a responsibility of the state to provide health and education to all of its people regardless of their income status. And I think that this country has a lot—a long way to go in that sense.

SH: Who's health are you responsible for besides your own?

NA: So my kids.

SH: Yeah. Okay, so how do you get through tough times, and what kind of thoughts keep you going?

NA: Oh, I think a lot of it, because I'm so centered in faith, a prayer is really important in my faith's perdition, and I certainly count on that a lot, and friends. I think friends are really important— friends, family, faith. Oh wow, they're all F words [laughs]. All of those three things are really important, just knowing that you have family support and having a network of friends where you can share what you're feeling I think is huge, is huge. And you know, faith gives us an element of trust that there is a greater larger plan and things will work out and I'm not going to be left stranded, so I think that's really important to me.

SH: How do you define success in your life, and has this definition changed over time?

NA: Success was always—it was never money. And I don't think it is either now. It was service, and it is contentment. Many times you find your contentment through service, which I think is the pathway I've taken, but I do think that the cost of living is so high right now that being financially stable is important for one's well-being, you know, not success, because I do think that comes in the way of all of these big ideals or dreams that we're talking about.

SH: Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

NA: I think really know yourself, is going to be most important. Know how to say no, extend yourself, but not at the cost of yourself. And I think practice pause, the other very very big thing that I've learned over the years is how real imposter syndrome is, because we live in a male dominant society which is incredibly patriarchal, women are constantly second-guessing themselves, you know, we're always checking, like, "Does that make sense? I don't know if this makes sense. Am I being clear?" Like we're always doubting ourselves, we're doubting our abilities, our academic abilities, our career pathways, so I think we have to be very intentional about dismantling that. You know, you're here because you deserve it and we shouldn't let the imposter syndrome come in the way. But it's easier said than done.

SH: Yeah. Okay, so we're working to tell a fuller story on the history of women than has been recorded in the past. What should we be sure to include?

NA: In my story, or in stories in general?

SH: In your— we'll just go in your story for now.

NA: I mean, I don't know, I think that one-dimensional stories are problematic, so I think a good story is a story that is multidimensional, that looks at a person's lived experience in totality, not just one part of their identity. Like if you were just to look at my experience as a woman, it would be inadequate because one's lived experience is intersectional. I am a woman who is brown who covers—who is identifiable as Muslim, who is American, who has done a doctorate, who has three kids... so there's many layers to our lived experiences and I think that's really important. A lot of the work that I do in my research is around counter-narratives, and I believe that counter-narratives are really important because a lot of times people are like, "If you don't tell your story, no one will tell your story. Your story won't be told," and that's actually not true. If you don't tell your story, someone else will. And that's deeply problematic because when someone else tells your story, it is a hijacked story. It's telling from their perspective.

SH: Yeah.

NA: And in many cases, the stories of minoritized people are whitewashed to fit particular stereotypes or angles, and that's why I think counter-narratives for minoritized populations are really important and that's my commitment to the work that I do, is to make sure that those counter-narratives are out there and they're heard, because we have to tell our own stories, you know, because that's where the truth lies.

SH: Alright, so, that's the end of our questions, do you want to ask a couple more or...?

GC: Yeah, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about Al-Hamra and the opportunities it gives some of the kids?

NA: Yeah, sure. So Al-Hamra, it's a growing school, when I joined Al-Hamra 11 years ago. I was a fifth-grade teacher here, and I became the principal six years ago now, and it was a preschool to grade eight school, but now it's also infants, toddlers, all the way to eighth grade. So the project's really grown big, and some of the things that we're doing over here, we're a NEASC [New England Association of Schools and Colleges] certified school, accredited school, we're also STEM [Science Technology Engineering Math] certified, so really big on STEM education. We have our own school garden, we have our trail outside that the students built in the woods in the back, we have a weather station, we have a space that we want to make into a pollinator garden, we've kept chicken on campus, so it's pretty robust in terms of citizen science. We're also a very high-performing robotics team in Massachusetts, we do a lot of robotics, a lot of speech club, and there's just a lot of extracurricular activities and opportunities that we're bringing to students just because I want them to have a robust experience growing up.

GC: And do you feel like your own life experience and your research kind of contribute to some of the opportunities that are offered?

NA: One hundred percent. Both ways, I think the experience here has contributed to the research, as well as the research having, and my own lived experience, having contributed to the work here, so yeah definitely.

GC: Okay, do you have any more questions?

SH: I don't think I do, thank you.

GC: Yeah, thank you so much.

NA: Thank you for coming.