

Chemistry, Courage, and City Council

Philadelphia City Councilmember Dr. Nina Ahmad, is not a typical politician. A chemist turned into an activist, then into an elected official, she has spent decades forging a path through spaces where people who looked like her were rarely found. In a recent interview centered on the theme of women in politics, Dr. Ahmad spoke candidly about the war that shaped her worldview, the science career that launched her into public life, and how she believed every woman has a voice worth hearing.

A Journey Shaped by War

To understand Nina Ahmad's passion in politics, you have to start with the War of Bangladesh.

Dr. Ahmad was born and raised in Bangladesh, and as a child she witnessed the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 – one of the most brutal conflicts of the 20th century. Women and girls were sexually brutalized, millions were killed, and countless families were stripped of access to food, school, and safety. For a child growing up in this place, the war was not an astounding headline heard from the news, it was the world Dr. Ahmad lived in.

Science First – Then Something Clicked

After the war, Dr. Ahmad eventually made her way to the US at a young age. Instead of what we thought of a typical politician who would start participating in politics in early age, Dr. Ahmad started out differently. After earning an undergraduate degree from college, she then moved to Philadelphia in 1983 to pursue a PhD in chemistry – a city where she built an exceptional life in the lab.

But something changed within her values. Information, she realized, could mobilize a community in a way that no policy memo could ever have done.

So she made a pivot – beyond science. She got involved in the Philadelphia Mayor's Commission on Asian American Affairs. In 2014, when President Obama appointed her to his Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, she became the first Bangladeshi-American ever to hold a position in a presidential administration.

Building Firsts Along the Way

Dr. Ahmad's career has been marked by breaking barriers and creating opportunities for others to follow.

When Mayor Jim Kenney appointed her as Deputy Mayor for Public Engagement, she became the first Asian American Pacific Islander Cabinet member in the history of the Philadelphia mayoral administration, where she used that platform to establish the city's first-ever Department of Public Engagement. More than that, she founded the Pennsylvania Democratic Party's first AAPI Caucus despite resistance, challenging the view that Asian American voices didn't matter – it's now a permanent party institution. In 2023, she became the first South Asian American to serve in an at-large City Council seat. Her takeaway: the path is never straight, and that's the point.

Childcare and Work of Council

Now in office, Dr. Ahmad is focused on tangible, day-to-day change for Philadelphia families. One of her signature priorities is expanding childcare access. Her office is advancing legislation to provide grants to small daycare centers so that providers can reduce costs for working parents and stay open in neighborhoods where affordable care is hardest to find. She knows firsthand how the burden of childcare falls disproportionately on women, shaping their careers and their ability to fully participate in the workforce. She is determined to use her seat on Council to change that equation for Philadelphia families, treating childcare not as a private burden but as public infrastructure the city has a responsibility to support.

This same commitment carries into her broader economic agenda – grant programs for small business owners, particularly women and immigrants long overlooked by traditional funding, and a push for city-wide resource hubs offering financial counseling, emergency assistance, and job training under one roof.

On Women in Politics

Asked which policies have made a real difference in women's lives, Dr. Ahmad pointed to gains made right here in Philadelphia. (add an example)

However, women – especially women of color and immigrant women – remain underrepresented in the rooms where budget decisions are made, and that absence has real consequences for what gets funded and what doesn't.

For teenagers who are watching and wondering whether politics is for them, Dr. Ahmad believes young people don't have to wait until they're older to make a difference. Get involved in student council. Volunteer for a cause you believe in. Follow the news – not just for the headlines, but to understand why things happen the way they do and who is making those decisions.