



## Working with Civil Rights Groups: Q&A with Neda Maghbouleh and Meeta Anand

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On May 30th, [Meeta Anand](#) and SSN member [Dr. Neda Maghbouleh](#) joined us for a Q&A focused on collaborating with advocacy groups.

Maghbouleh is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses on the exclusion faced by Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Americans on official forms. ([Read more here.](#)) And as a result of her public engagement work, the American Medical Association has now added a MENA box to their forms and the U.S Census is on its way to doing the same. Recently Dr. Maghbouleh was appointed to the U.S. Census Bureau's new 2030 Census Advisory Committee.

Anand is the Senior Director for Census & Data Equity for the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. She most recently served as census consultant to The Leadership Conference Education Fund. Prior to this role, she served as New York Immigration Coalition's Census 2020 Senior Fellow where she spearheaded the organization's efforts to ensure a fair and accurate count of New Yorkers, particularly immigrants, in the 2020 Census.

**Here are some highlights from their conversation:**

### How Neda and Meeta met:

**Neda:** "I ended up getting invited to a convening a month or so after my article [[Middle Eastern and North African Americans may not be perceived, nor perceive themselves, to be White](#)] came out in [the scientific journal] PNAS. That is where I met Meeta because this was a convening that brought together academics, folks from the federal government, including Census folks, but people from other agencies as well.

I definitely felt like this is not a room where I recognize folks, so I was a bit shy and quiet. I didn't bring up MENA directly at the time. But then this person across the room—in the course of her comments and introducing herself—[shared] this really cogent, informed argument for why the government needs to consider breaking MENA out of the white box and moving toward that being its own standalone category option.

And I thought, who's this person? As soon as there was a break I told her my name and she said, 'I have your book. On my shelf. Look, I know your name.' And so it was this really exciting moment. I didn't know that the book could potentially travel to places beyond academia. So to [meet] someone like Meeta who had a copy of it was super exciting. After that, Meeta needed a place to store her suitcase. I said, put your suitcase in my room. And since then, we've been collaborators."

**Meeta:** "A long time ago I discovered this great secret, which is that people love it when you read their books. And if you read their books and you reach out to them and you tell them you read their book and you'd love to talk to them, you know, unless they're like some gigantic bestselling author, they will actually write back to you and meet you for coffee.

So this is something I have done in various stages of my life. So when I met Meeta at the conference, we had already established one of our goals: [by] summer 2024, seeing a revision of OMB's race and ethnicity standards, which amongst other things include a MENA category."

### On how researchers can "shape shift" their work in a way that makes sense to a bunch of different people or audiences:

**Meeta:** "For community organizers, the word data sounds scary, but it's, how do you convince people that actually the data that are collected about us shape our everyday lives? So it's about providing those concrete examples. You don't pull out a table and say, this is what my research shows you. Just pull out a story that you collected during your research.

Whereas I think with policymakers, they like the idea of credentialing things. They like the idea that there's research behind it. So it does matter to be able to not just have the example, but to have, oh you know, several well-known historians have written about this. Or, you know, we have this statistic and you pull out the statistics. So there the credentialing becomes more important.

And I think the media is more interesting because for the media it's literally both."

### On how to keep energy and optimism going when working in the policy space:

**Neda:** "[There have been moments when I felt that takeaways I was trying to put forward] were misinterpreted or times where it just hasn't landed. In those moments, I have taken heart in the fact that we belong to a bigger community of people who might ask specifically different questions, but broadly we're in a shared research enterprise and doing this kind of work.

The science is really a collective endeavor. And so it's been about connecting with other researchers in my area, so sociologists, but also people in disciplines who come to these research questions from their own disciplinary vantage points. And so it's been about connecting with those folks to, on the one hand, blow off steam and kind of stomp our foot about ways that the research has or hasn't landed or got taken in a direction we didn't feel comfortable with.

So we're doing that, I think as an emotional coping strategy. But also, when someone does have a win, we're not just seeing that as something that belongs to that person who was able to get that success, but a collective effort."

**Meeta:** "Do I ever get frustrated? Uh, yeah. I'm working in the civil rights space. Every day feels like a total disaster when I wake up. But, you know, I'm usually better by 2:00 PM. But I find the way the United States is structured is actually really helpful.

So, if you're feeling like things are just hard for me, if I'm feeling like things are just horrible at the federal front, then I'm like, okay, what are we doing at this state level? And if I'm annoyed with Congress, I'm looking at what conversations are we having with agencies, you know? So it's always about the opportunities to find levers for where change can be made.

There's a local level, there's the state level, there's always some lever that can be activated. And I am thinking through how those can build upon themselves. I think it's really, really important to celebrate any win of any level."

## On dealing with conflicts of interest or differences in priorities between research objectives and advocacy goals:

**Meeta:** "As I mentioned before, Neda came to a conference held on the proposed revisions to OMB's race and ethnicity standards. And there was a panel in which Neda's takeaway as to what was said on the panel was different than my takeaway from the panel. Neda was like, 'I can't believe what happened on that panel.' And I was just in shock. I was like, I thought we did well. It was interesting and it was a very nuanced point in some ways that I don't know others would have gotten.

In that moment we heard different things. What was good about that for me was to realize, here's someone I really like and respect, whom I've shared convening spaces with before, and we walked away from a panel with different perspectives.

That was a good reminder of, you have to be constantly listening and checking in with people. Also, messaging is hard. You're not going to satisfy everyone all the time. So I think even though the people on the panel and Neda and I all shared the same goals, we all walked away from that moment with like very different experiences, which was ultimately good because it allowed me to reflect on how we are conveying this very important but nuanced point."

**Neda:** "[At the conference], I was in the researcher's corner, aka the haters corner, which is: critical academics who are just there to poke holes. So it was really cool that you were receptive to hearing my takeaway, which was different than what you had heard. It was very cool that we had enough of a baseline of respect with each other that we could—not necessarily see eye to eye by the end of the conversation—but we could have the conversation in the first place. And it led me to think with a lot more nuance and sensitivity about different organizations, the positions they hold within the field, and how it is actually important to vocalize some of the dissent. It's okay to be messy and let out some of the drama behind messaging, because that's healthy and also reflective of the complexity of these issues too."

## On whether the Canadian government better utilizes academic researchers in creating public policy:

**Neda:** "Fundamentally, Canada is a smaller nation than the United States, and there's actually much stronger policy links between academics and the government in Canada. So I think part of that is due to the size, but also a lot of other factors having to do with science and funding.

If you took the state of California in the United States and you turned it on its side, that's basically Canada in terms of the number of people who live there, it's roughly equivalent to the population of California. So when you're talking about disseminating your research, you need to scale down from what you think of as the United States to trying to penetrate something that's basically the size of California.

And [while] grant amounts are more modest and small in Canada, they're disseminated so much more broadly across a wide swath of academics who do different kinds of research."