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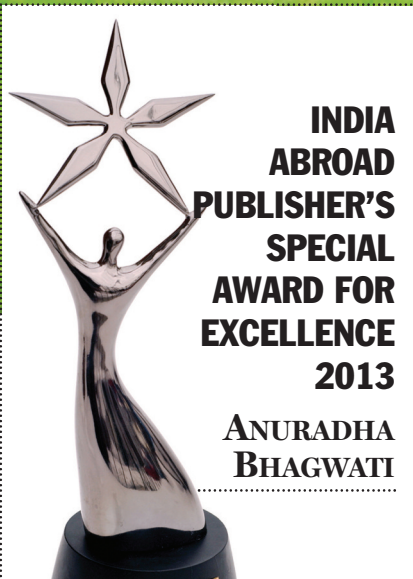
INDIA ABROAD PERSON OF THE YEAR 2013

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COURTESY: SWAN



SEMPER FIDELIS



‘The military teaches battlefield leadership really well, but does not teach moral leadership well’

She witnessed daily sexism, harassment, homophobia and racism, all a betrayal of the supposed values of the military. **Anuradha Bhagwati** tells **Arthur J Pais** that she just couldn’t sit still when she saw injustice.

The fascinating story of the former Marine who embodies Semper Fidelis and is the winner of the **India Abroad Publisher’s Special Award for Excellence 2013**.



COURTESY: SWAN

Anu Bhagwati, right, became a captain in the Marine Corps and the second woman to complete the Marine Corps Martial Arts program instructor training school, earning a black belt in close combat techniques. She left the Marines in 2004 with an honorable discharge after being in the Corps for five years

When Anuradha K Bhagwati joined Yale University to study English literature some friends and family thought she was going to follow in her parents footsteps into academics. She surprised them, and surely her parents — Columbia University Professors Jagdish Bhagwati and Padma Desai — by joining the United States Marine Corps.

She went on to become a captain, the second woman to complete the Marine Corps Martial Arts program instructor training school, earning a black belt in close combat techniques.

People who did not know the turmoil she was undergoing in the Marines and her frustration and anger at not being able to get justice for the women victims of sexual harassment and assault thought she was going to be serving in the military for some more years — or even seek a full-time career.

But in 2004 Bhagwati, better known by her shortened name Anu, got an honorable discharge after being in the Marines for five years and began to study at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, focusing on international human rights policy.

Perhaps, some might have thought, she was thinking of running for Congress or preparing for a key position in the government. She surprised many by turning to activism, and taking on, with

the help of her newly floated organization, Service Women’s Action Network, the most powerful military in the world.

SWAN had many big battles on its hands. It sought to heal veterans through a helpline and legal sources. Bhagwati would not only speak on behalf of harassed, battered and sexually exploited women, she would also teach them yoga and offer her own narration — of being healed physically and emotionally through yoga after she quit the Marines.

Her interest in helping military service members who have survived sexual assault comes from her first-hand experience of the problem in the Marine Corps.

At the time, there were few places where Bhagwati — or the many women and men in the same situation — could turn. But now she is waging a fierce war from outside the armed forces

The Marines are responsible for the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and other land operations. They develop tactics, technique, and equipment used by amphibious landing forces in coordination with the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Bhagwati was one of the more than 200,000 women in the active-duty military, including 69



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HONOR ROLL

INDIA ABROAD PUBLISHER’S SPECIAL AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE

VANITA GUPTA (2004)
Lawyer

**ANURAG KASHYAP, ALIYA DERI, SAMIR
SUDHIR SHAH, RAJIV TARIGOPULA**
(2005)
Spelling Bee Stars

SUNITA WILLIAMS (2006)
Astronaut

RENU KHATOR (2007)
President and Chancellor, University of
Houston

JHUMPA LAHIRI (2008)
Pulitzer Prize winner and Novelist

MADHULIKA SIKKA (2009)
Executive Producer, NPR

RAJU NARISSETTI (2009)
Then Managing Editor, The Washington Post
ABHIJAT JOSHI (2009)
Screenwriter

SHEENA IYENGAR (2010)
S T Lee Professor of Business in the
Management Division, Columbia Business
School

SIDDHARTHA MUKHERJEE (2010)
Pulitzer Prize winner and Assistant
Professor of Medicine, Columbia University

VIJAY IYER (2010)
Grammy-nominated jazz musician

NEERA TANDEN (2011)
President, Center for American Progress

AMRIT SINGH (2012)
Human Rights Lawyer

Anuradha Bhagwati

For being a forceful voice for
women in uniform; for
spearheading reform to end
sexual violence and
discrimination in the armed
forces; for being an agent for
change for a better military.

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generals and admirals. A quick look at women in the military, according to Pentagon figures, recently quoted by CNN: About 203,000 in 2011, or 14.5 percent of the active duty force of nearly 1.4 million, that number comprises about 74,000 in the Army, 53,000 in the Navy, 62,000 in the Air Force and 14,000 in the Marine Corps.

Thanks to the fight a handful of people like Bhagwati started against sexual assault in the armed forces, and their success in taking the fight to Congress, major newspapers and television stations have been running stories and reporting court cases against the government.

The military, as films like *The Invisible War* and articles in *Rolling Stone* magazine show, has a rape problem of epidemic proportions. It is estimated that one in three military women are raped by fellow defense personnel, twice the number of their civilian counterparts. One survivor of multiple rapes quoted in a *Rolling Stone* article calls the military a 'giant rape cult.'

In 2010, the Department of Defense found that 19,000 service members were sexually assaulted. Of those a paltry 3,100, or 13.5 percent, were reported, and of those only 17 percent were prosecuted. All too often, critics of military justice say the attackers receive a slap on the wrist while their victims lose their careers and their futures, sometimes falling into homelessness, despair and suicidal thoughts.

Bhagwati and other activists say that thousands of men and women who are the victims of sexual assault do not report their humiliation, trauma, physical injuries and fears because of this.

Bhagwati's fight is backed by a handful of members of Congress who have initiated efforts to curb the widespread abuse. Though her efforts failed, United States Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York will be remembered for introducing legislation to change the way the military handles allegations of sexual assault. She believed — and Bhagwati backed her efforts — the military action against erring sexual predators and assaulters in the armed forces should be "more parallel to the civilian system."

As her proposal was making rounds, the Pentagon said that 26,000 troops last year claimed anonymously to be sex assault victims (up from 19,000 in 2011).

'Sexual violence in the military is not new. And it has been allowed to go on in the shadows for far too long,' Gillibrand had announced. 'Congress would be derelict in its duty of oversight if we just shrugged our shoulders at these 26,000 sons and daughters, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, and did nothing. We simply have to do better by them.'

Thanks to the fight mounted by Bhagwati, Gillibrand and some others, we now hear the voices of the victims in the mainstream media. Bhagwati, who details in the interview below her fight against sexual assault and harassment, which she started while serving the Marine Corps, has spoken at length about her experience to the media. She understands people like Army specialist Chantelle Henneberry, who spoke of some of her experiences in Iraq to the BBC: 'Everybody's supposed to have a battle buddy in the army, and females are supposed to have one to go to the latrines with, or to the showers — that's so you don't get raped by one of the men on your own side. But because I was the only female there, I didn't have a battle buddy. My battle buddy was my gun and my knife.'

Bhagwati testified in Congress on behalf of sexual victims.

'The military teaches battlefield leadership really well, but does not teach moral leadership well'



COURTESY: SWAN

Anu Bhagwati marches with SWAN at the Veterans Day Parade in New York in 2011. SWAN has raised attention about issues affecting women in the military.

With a small staff and a modest office in New York, she sought to engage policy makers to bring about positive change in the military. Her work began getting the attention of America's most powerful media, especially when SWAN joined like-minded organizations and sued the government.

A lawsuit on behalf of 16 military rape survivors, filed in 2011 against the Department of Defense for not only failing to prevent rape and sexual assault, but also of mishandling cases brought it attention. She said it 'really rocked the system.'

She had also told Nobel Women's Initiative, 'It was the first time that the Department of Defense in the United States ever responded in the proper way, not making excuses for itself, finally recognizing that it has a lot of work to do.'

Recently, SWAN and another veterans groups filed a federal lawsuit against the Department of Veterans Affairs, claiming VA experts make it far tougher for military rape victims to prove their post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms were caused by sex assaults suffered in the ranks.

Like PTSD victims, Bhagwati too underwent emotional disturbance and physical injury. She knows what it means to feel like one's life or the lives of others are in danger, or that one has no control over what was happening, some of the symptoms of PTSD.

VA officials regularly impose a higher burden on military rape survivors than they do all other Veterans when it comes to verifying their reports of post-traumatic stress disorder, per the lawsuit. That disparity was a form of 'discrimination,' the advocates asserted, and violated the Fifth Amendment.

'There's the devastation that happens with the military from that horrible (*sexual*) violation,' she was then quoted as saying in the media. 'There's another betrayal that often happens when their commander or your fellow service members don't believe you. And there's the third betrayal from the VA ... The Veterans Benefits Administration is really where hope goes to die.'

She has not only spoken of harassment of women in the armed forces and their victimization but has also discussed domestic violence in the Marines.

Asked by a reporter about men facing sexual harassment in the Marines, she did not hesitate to admit that men too faced sexual harassment, and if their numbers were big, she said, it was because of the larger number of men in the services.

She will readily acknowledge that SWAN is putting up an uphill fight, but she has no plans to slow down.

She has spoken to thousands on challenges faced by military women, including access to combat assignments, military sexual violence, the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy, reproductive justice and the VA health care and benefits system.

A regular contributor to the media, she has been featured widely in mainstream media as well as the Academy Award-nominated documentary *The Invisible War*.

And she is seeing results. 'You get calls, the e-mails; you get to know that people are healing through this sort of acknowledgement,' she told Nobel Women's Initiative

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‘The military teaches battlefield leadership really well, but does not teach moral leadership well’

some time ago. ‘That our advocacy work is healing people is the greatest reward that you can get.’

Bhagwati still believes in the Marine motto of being always faithful, *Semper Fidelis*. But that also includes being faithful to the idea of a moral fighting force, of an institution without sexism, racism, male supremacy, and a culture of sexual harassment and assault.

What is your typical week like?

I don’t have a typical week. That’s one of the special things about our organization. We’re ready to respond to multiple needs. We do a lot of advocacy work on Capitol Hill. We do daily media work. We have reporters calling us everyday, sometimes several times an hour, asking for responses on breaking news.

We’ve managed over the years to get a lot of attention raised to the issues of women in the military and it’s taken several years of really knocking on and breaking down doors in Washington to get people to care about these issues, and I think they finally care. (Whether or not they care for the right reasons, I don’t know. But they care, certainly, for their own electoral future. So, that’s saying something.)

And so we are, several times a week, commenting in the press, about issues related to sexual violence, to issues pertaining to women in combat, to how women are treated by the Veterans Affairs Department, whether or not they’re getting their VA benefits approved by the government after they serve the country.

Just this week (*the interview was conducted May 2*), we sued the government and we were talking to Pentagon officials about their annual sexual assault report (*released in May*). We were telling them what they did right and what they did wrong. We were all over the press talking about our lawsuit.

We sued the secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs for sex discrimination when it comes to how VA claims disability claims are awarded. We’ve been doing years of research with our attorneys at Yale Law School. We’ve banded together with another major veterans organization, Vietnam Veterans of America, to sue the government over these claims. We’re usually representing very traumatized veterans, veterans who have been betrayed in uniform, who have served their country and they’re not getting the recognition that they deserve either in the form of awards, or benefits or health care.

These are mostly women who really loved wearing the uniform, really wanted to serve their country and they were betrayed in some way by the government. That’s the need that we fulfill.

It requires a lot of courage to stand up to the military and sue the government. Where do you get your courage from?

I think I get my courage from my mother. I didn’t really realize how much she had done in her own life until maybe 10 or 15 years ago. But she was quite the fighter. I remember experiences when I was in my early teens and I was a very shy and quiet person and so my mother was my main drill sergeant back then and really get me to conquer my fears — in a compassionate way, not like a drill sergeant actually does!

No, my mother is not a tiger mother at all. But, she’s fierce, she’s fierce. She’s overcome a lot of obstacles over the years. She’s faced down demons in terms of abusive rela-



PARESH GANDHI

Anu Bhagwati, center, with her father Professor Jagdish Bhagwati, left; mother Professor Padma Desai, second from left; novelist Salman Rushdie, second from right, and tabla artist Suphala at the India Abroad Person of the Year celebrations in 2008.

tionships, in terms of parental pressure, in terms of immigrating to this country and starting her own life and being one of the first women to earn a PhD in her field and so on and so forth. She is fierce. Even the way she cultivates younger women, that’s a huge responsibility.

She never let me give up; she never let me let my fears take over.

She especially cultivated my skills in the area of speaking out loud and being heard. She didn’t want me to let the boys in my class dominate the conversation.

If I had something to say, she wanted to make sure I learned how to say it. When the thought came to my head, she made sure I learned how to raise my hand and not be afraid to speak. So, I get special joy in trying to help other young women and girls in doing what my mother helped me with.

People sometimes meet me and assume I came out of the womb with a complete lack of fear. I wasn’t like this when I was a young girl. I was shy; I was scared; I was quiet. I have really had to work at it.

You studied literature, right? Did you think at that time that you would go into this kind of work?

I studied English at Yale. When I was growing up, a teenager, a young person, I was always interested in issues of equality and justice. But I didn’t really know what that meant. It hurt me when other people were hurting. That was a part of me even when I was a kid. It can be a blessing and a curse to always feel what people are feeling. Well, I think I feel people’s pain; it is empathy.

Empathy can be a blessing and a curse because it weighs on you.

But my military experience is really a place where I cultivated a sense of what it meant to speak truth to power because there was so much that was happening around me and to me on an hourly basis that was really wrong, that

really went against the code, the culture, that the military told us it was cultivating, or the traditions that it upheld.

There was really so much hypocrisy. And having cultivated the ability to speak up when I saw things were wrong, I started speaking truth to power.

It is a very risky place to be speaking truth to power within. But it needed to be done.

I always felt a little bit like an outsider because I don’t look like the average soldier, obviously. In multiple ways I’m not the average soldier. So, I think that helped me cultivate the ability to speak frankly to people who had much more authority in the military than I did. It was very unusual for them to hear that.

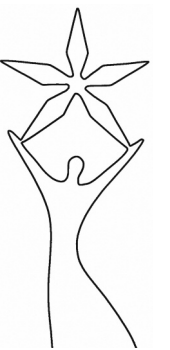
It was risky for my career every time I did it, but it had to be done. I don’t think I would have done it any other way.

What did do you within the system to fight for justice?

Well, it’s not like everyday that I opened my mouth and spoke up. There’s a great deal of indoctrination and cultivation of skills that help you survive in a military context that are antithetical to doing the right thing in a social justice context. Group-think is definitely cultivated. It can be a powerful tool when you need to follow orders.

But summoning up the courage to speak out when your commander is telling rape jokes or when your fellow service member who has barged into a room and starts sexually assaulting your room mate — these are the things that happened to me early on, and those are just two of dozens of examples that I think off the top of my head.

You have to choose your words carefully. I attempted to speak to various people and

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was shut down, and so I was trying to navigate what it meant to witness abuse or witness inappropriate behavior or criminal behavior and to be shut down.

It was really normalized, so that the act of speaking out is like an act of whistle blowing every time you speak.

I remember I was in a room filled with lieutenants, very early on. I was about six months in my service. There was a guest speaker and I raised my hand and asked a question that was on my mind just like my mother had taught me.

I asked when women would be allowed to serve on submarines and the entire room started booing and hissing.

These were my fellow lieutenants. These are the guys I serve with. I just kind of stood there and took it and sat down, and I don't remember what the guest speaker said. It was certainly wasn't another decade or so (*ago*) until that happened, in part thanks to advocacy work like ours.

It was a very hostile work environment. Being a woman in the Marine Corps is an act of survival, there's no question about it. There's so few of us, so we're scrutinized, we're sexualized, we're exploited. It's a very hostile environment.

How did you survive those years?

There is some amount of despair that grew inside of me because there was a lot that was wrong and I was feeling it, and I didn't know how to handle it. Every time I spoke out I was not treated well.

I don't know. Maybe in 40 years I'll know.

(*Pausing to contemplate*) There's some sense that there is something more important than this uniform; there's something more important than the name Marine; there's something more important than the words I'm required to say because I wear the uniform or the orders I'm required to follow. It's deep stuff.

You're really indoctrinated on a cellular level.

I think your DNA changes when you're in uniform. You really don't respond to normal human circumstances in the same way, after you get out. And I don't think there's really a good understanding of that.

I was really going through a hard, lengthy experience with sexual harassment in my unit. There was an officer sexually harassing all of the women in my unit and I was supervising him. My commander was punishing me for raising the issue. So I ended up filing this huge outside investigation, raising a stink and I knew this was a career ender and all this... but it's something I had to do. It was just absurd. There was a huge cover up, and I went all the way to the top of the Marine Corps.

Frankly, I think I shocked the hell out of everybody in the entire organization. It's a small organization, the Marine Corps. Yeah, I went out with a bang.

It's a miracle I got an honorable discharge. There was so much hostility against me among the higher brass for exposing this lieutenant for what he was doing. It took about 10 years... I just found out last year that basically what I did stunted his career. It didn't get him kicked out, but he would have much more rank at this point, much more power, much more influence had I not spoken up.

I think he absolutely did continue his abuse. There's no question of that. But the authority that he wielded was a little bit less because I spoke up. He could have had command of a battalion by now, if I hadn't spoken up. But that never would have happened because he was not promoted.

What helped you when you were going through this despair?

I think this is human courage stuff. There's no god I

'The military teaches battlefield leadership really well, but does not teach moral leadership well'



COURTESY: SWAN

A stunning moment of symbolism as the military top brass watch Anu Bhagwati testify at the Senate Armed Services Committee's Personnel Subcommittee hearing on Military Sexual Assault in 2013.

turned to. Family didn't understand; they had no idea what I was doing or what I was going through. It was the hardest time I experienced in my life at that point. You know, just keeping yourself together.

I was a commander, so I was in charge of my entire unit at the same time that I was going through all this. I had to keep it together. So, I was not about to break down in front of my troops.

How many soldiers were under you? How many of them were women?

About 450 were under me. It (*number of women and men*) differed month to month when we were training. More than gender, at that point, those kids were so young, 17 or 18 and straight out of high school. They saw me as kind of a god. When you're an 18-year-old private in the Marine Corps, you look at a captain and think he or she is some kind of deity.

We command fear, just based on rank.

And you felt more despair because they looked up to you, and you could only do so much?

It was my staff I was most concerned about: The women sergeants, the corporals, the 20-something year olds who were in charge of all these kids. They were the ones being harassed, these sergeants and corporals, by this predatory lieutenant.

They were the future leaders of the Marine Corps and they were being harassed by this god awful lieutenant (*the same lieutenant she mentioned earlier*) who was given a lot of leeway because he was a lieutenant and was also considered at that point a war hero because he came back from Iraq with a lot of medals. So, the brass was protecting him. They were also protecting themselves from a public scandal.

He had a lot of issues with women that I found out about. The idea that he worked for me was probably the biggest

insult he had ever faced at that point. To be an infantry officer working for a woman, just imagine his horror.

You had many more things going against you apart from your gender. You came from a minority community and there were hardly anyone like you in the Marines.

I was probably considered a freak of nature. There was a kind of running joke in some of the units I was in; people thought I was a spy because somebody like me would never have otherwise joined the Marine Corps, I was told regularly. Because I did not talk like other Marines, I think I inspired some contempt among a lot of guys that I served. So, it was an experience!

Then, of course, I served when 9/11 happened. I started seeing some pretty awful things among my peers. Racism quickly rises to the surface.

I think it would have been a little different if I were a man serving at that time in uniform.

I know some of my peers who were Arab American, Muslim American — they got a lot of heat, faced a lot of racism from other folks in the ranks.

When Abu Ghraib happened, that was a hard moment, that was a hard moment. People did not hide their racism well; not that I want anybody to hide their racism. I prefer that they weren't racist. But, things changed and that's the kind of thing I saw, that's the kind of thing I would try to check, wouldn't let pass. I would speak out against that. But, it got to be a lot.

Did you as yourself at that time why you got into this? What was that you liked about being in the Marines?

I loved what I was doing. I loved commanding troops. I was very good at my job.

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But for me, I think, there was always a higher calling.

I love taking care of people, I love serving them.

There were just some phenomenal young people that I’ve met, a lot of people that I learned from; talented, selfless people that I wouldn’t have met had I just stayed doing what I was doing before the Marine Corps. I was really humbled serving in the Marine Corps. I met a lot of decent, hardworking human beings.

Give me a few examples of decent human beings....

There were a lot of great Americans from other parts of the country that I probably never would have met in school, never would have met in NYC, or anywhere really.

Americans with good old-fashioned values, you know. They were people who believed in kindness and family and doing the right thing: Not in showing off, or earning accolades.

They were just good people trying to lend a hand.

Some of the folks who inspired me the most were young enlisted women. You could just see them leading these young kids around. They could do anything in their lives. They had this incredible leadership potential. That was the biggest joy, seeing that happen. Yeah, women leading others.

Women are always undervalued, always underestimated. At the time that I was serving, I was serving in a billet, which only men had really held before me. I always tried to serve in the billets, in the job assignments that were off limits to women.

Now, some of those assignments that were off limits are finally open to women, thankfully. It took some of SWAN’s work and our partners’ work to make that happen.

So these women were pushing the envelope and then these infantry guys — the infantry makes up the heart and soul of the Marine Corps; they are considered the Navy Seals of the Marines — they were really shocked and impressed. And they were shocked that they were impressed. Wow! She’d make a good grunt, which means a good infantryman. These women were working their asses off — they didn’t complain; they made the guys work harder because the guys feared being outperformed by the women.

It’s really, really amazing to see that kind of talent.

What would you tell young women and men who want to join the Marines?

The answer to that question is always evolving. I would say to young women that if this is the thing what you really want to do, do it with your eyes wide open. Go in there, well-trained physically, outperform the guys and be ready to face a whole lot of bullshit, because you will.

You will face things you should not have to face and there are doors that have not yet opened and it will probably drive you crazy because you deserve to have them opened, you deserve the right to qualify for any job that the guys have.

That’s the kind of thing that drove me crazy. The military doesn’t know how to manage its own people. Why would it limit people’s potential so much by closing these jobs to women who are qualified?

The answer to men: I feel that a lot of men join the military to explore their masculinity, to have something that’s missing in them validated.

I think it’s a risky business. There is a lot of courage in joining the military, but I feel today’s military is entrenched in sexist attitudes. I really don’t want to see another genera-



COURTESY: SWAN

Anu Bhagwati speaks to West Point cadets at the Margaret Corbin Forum in New York. She tells young women that if they enter the military they must do it with their eyes wide open: “Go in there, well-trained physically, outperform the guys and be ready to face a whole lot of bullshit, because you will.”

tion of men indoctrinated in those attitudes anywhere, frankly.

I didn’t meet enough men who challenged those attitudes inside the military. I think men who are willing to speak up and do the right thing are increasing. But the military still cultivates and condones those attitudes.

It’s a sad thing because veterans put a lot on the line and it’s hard to kind of gain back that sort of sense of compassion for one’s fellow human beings and respect for women.

It’s a whole another world of hyper-masculinity and aggression and I do feel that people often join to fill some kind of void or emptiness in them, or to cover up or heal some kind of wound. That goes for men as well as women who join.

But I believe that people should follow their dreams. People are so young when they join the military for the most part. And the military is not an institution that’s particularly open minded. So, what you get when you are 18 may just stick for a while. What you are indoctrinated with at 18 gets wrapped in a lot of bravado, in a lot of pride. You start believing in it.

It’s a whole paradox for me. I can’t speak for others. For me, loving what the institution represents while recognizing everything that’s wrong with it is completely paradoxical. It’s a lot to integrate. It’s the work of a life time, really.

To be indoctrinated in violence and to work toward compassion at the same time is hard work. I don’t know how the human psyche integrates these two worlds. These are some of the themes I wrestle with as I study yoga and practice meditation.

What did you do once you left the Marines? How did SWAN come to be born?

I went to grad school at Harvard University. But like many veterans, I was dealing with unresolved feelings and experiences from the Marine Corps. So, I wasn’t really present in grad school, the Kennedy School for Public Policy, even though I was in grad school.

Like all things, and like with all human experience, if you don’t resolve things, they’re going to come to the surface eventually.

I finished Grad School, but I was still very angry, still very upset and hurt, still dealing with all of these feelings of betrayal from the Marine Corps. So, I met some other women veterans and realized that they were feeling very similarly, not necessarily for the same reasons, but they were feeling the kind of betrayal and double standards and the denial that their service meant anything and was as worthy as men’s service. That kind of thing.

So a few of us banded together and SWAN came out of these gatherings of women who wanted to support women.

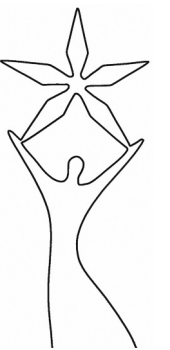
When I took over, I really wanted to attack the problem at its root, rather than just deal with traumas and inevitable effect or impact of service. If women are traumatized because they’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted or they’ve been discriminated against, why not stop the discrimination at the root, instead of serving them after they get out.

So, we organized and strategized and took our fight to Washington DC. That really had never been effectively (*done*), not for women in the military.

Did anyone tell you it can’t be done?

You know it’s interesting. From the women veterans community itself there was so much antagonism, initially, in terms of what we were doing. I think many of them felt very nervous and conflicted about us calling attention to abuse of women in the military.

Women in the military don’t want to be seen as different. They don’t want to draw attention to themselves. They certainly don’t want to be seen as victims. So there is, again, this inherent paradox of wanting to

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call attention to the strength of women who serve in the military and recognizing at the same time that many of them may be victimized.

Both of these things are true at the same time. That's a lot to swallow for anyone and so we took on these issues knowing full well that we may not have support of an entire community of women in the military or women veterans. But that there were enough women who were impacted by these issues, including us, that this was worth pursuing. So, we took on the most controversial issues. We took on 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' during the time when it was not okay among the community of military members or veterans that gay people would serve in the military.

We took on the issue of women being denied combat positions; even though they were being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, they were not being allowed to officially serve in certain combat units. So, women in the military, also women veterans were very kind of gun shy of taking on that issue.

I think it's symptomatic of many oppressed populations to not want to be seen as victims but particularly for women in all-male institutions or mostly-male institutions, you really don't want to be isolated or be seen as asking for more than you deserve. We did not have a lot of support, I realize, in the beginning. We had to convince people that this stuff mattered.

The biggest issue of all for us has been sexual assault in the military. I cannot tell you how many people I have talked to over the years, when I first started this, who were saying ... Oh this is grossly exaggerated. This is not really happening.

I'm talking about women who have served denying the prevalence of this crime. Some of these women were even sexual assault survivors. You just look at them (*and wonder*) what's going on here? But that's also a symptom of trauma and denial and wanting to belong. And the trauma runs so deep. There are still so few women in the military; it's hard for women to support women in the military. So there's a lot as with other populations that are marginalized or are in small numbers. It's hard to support one another, sometimes.

We would not let that stop us... You sort of have this instinct that you are not going to be supported by the majority. The whole idea is that you've got to change people's mind.

It took us about 5 years and here we are and all of these issues have been tackled head on. Have they been resolved? Not yet.

What SWAN did on these issues was speak up without apologizing. The military cultivates a lot of deferential attitudes. It's how the chain of command operates. You take orders; you're not supposed to question authority. That works really well on the battlefield, but it does not work well when it comes to issues of civil rights or what I call moral leadership.

I told the White House that the military teaches battlefield leadership really, really well, but it does not teach moral leadership well at all. I think the military will not



COURTESY: SWAN

Anu Bhagwati not only speaks on behalf of harassed, battered and sexually exploited women, she also teaches them yoga and offers her own narration — of being healed physically and emotionally through yoga after she quit the Marines.

agree with that, but I've seen far too much proof of it.

Moral leadership still requires an act of whistle blowing, far too often. That means putting your neck out there.

Your piece in the *Huffington Post* talked about the problem of acknowledging being gay in the armed forces.

I knew gay people serving in uniform. My best friend was gay. The whole thing was so odd to me that these incredible service members lived in terror of being seen holding hands out in town. It was a horrible system. I'm glad that some of that is over.

Tell us about how yoga has helped you overcome the physical injuries and emotional scars.

For me, all of the work of letting go of wounds that have happened in the military and wounds that have happened before the military, that's the real work of being alive. Transformational work is when we change our own minds — literally, our thought patterns — about how we treat ourselves and one another, that's the real work for all of us.

I still teach yoga to veterans in New York City. They're an amazing group of students.

When I was a lieutenant and I had a few weeks (*off from*) training, I went to the Sivananda Ashram in upstate New York; I was curious about yoga. I think I had some distant relatives who practiced yoga in India but no one I knew really well. It certainly didn't come from immediate family.

The ashram was run by a bunch of American dudes. It's an interesting thing, experiencing American yoga as an Indian-American. I'm an American kid, I'm Indian too. So, it has been such a bizarre experience.

Regarding yoga in the West, some of my teachers are white American swamis; but they are ascetics just like ascetics anywhere in the world. The first swamis who came over in the '60s, there were a handful in the yoga community.

One of Sivananda's disciples, Satchidananda, spoke at the Woodstock Festival. He indoctrinated a whole generation of

hippies. He was such a fun-loving, warm and joyful guy, apparently. I never met him.

I think I was drawn to his school because I came out of the Marine Corps. And, there are some very dogmatic schools of yoga here; there are yoga drill instructors and boot camp styles of yoga.

Of course, there's some good debate out there about whether that's "real" yoga. But I said, I don't want that, I don't need that. I just came from that. I don't need to do pushups and break myself.

I have done all that and then some and guess what, it worked: I'm really injured now and wounded from a bunch of things. It's time to cultivate the stuff that has nothing to do with the body.

And so, Satchidananda's school is known as Integral Yoga. It has a very heartfelt, compassionate feel to it. You come as you are, and cultivate how to create more ease in your life. This is good stuff...

I do not need to know how to do a perfect downward dog. I don't care. How does that make me a more peaceful human being, or happy human being? The truth is it doesn't, not for me.

And I had so many injuries. I was in the Marine Corps and I was doing some crazy stuff, a close-combat program. I was injuring everything, left, right and center. I can't really run anymore. I can't do a lot of things that normal people can do. So I ended up being forced to do these very slow, meditative things. Honestly, it was like torture at first. You can't run away from your problems as much when you literally can't run.

To be forced to do something slow and meditative is quite an irony for the culture we live in... If we are not doing something fast, something's wrong with us. So, I've cultivated a restorative yoga practice. B K S Iyengar really was the father of that.

It's so interesting because I have many identities when I practice and teach yoga because I am of Indian origin. There are things I see and notice that might not be as obvious to the American yoga community.

Meditation is really one of the greatest gifts human beings have. I have never witnessed a more powerful tool for true, true self improvement and self realization and self awareness. It is the warrior path; it is the work of real warriors. It is the hardest thing I've ever done.

In mindfulness, you get at the root of everything. The things you really don't want to get at the root of, you get at the root of. It's the real mirror. It's hard work.

So I sit with these Veterans, we talk about life, we do these practices and life comes up, and trauma comes up, and pain comes up, and stubbornness and anger, everything comes up and that's our little laboratory for improving our lives.

How much have you healed?

I see a lot of things I didn't used to see in myself. I think healing is work for a life-

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'She remains steadfastly committed to the fight'

Anu Bhagwati is there on the front lines, leading the charge on behalf of countless men, women and families, says US Representative **Niki Tsongas**

When I first began working on the issue of military sexual assault almost seven years ago, it was not a well-known problem and the voices of those affected were but a whisper. Too many soldiers feared for their own safety and too many survivors feared retaliation if they came forward. I attended a luncheon at which a female soldier, who herself had never been assaulted, admitted to carrying a concealed knife with her on base because, as she said, she was more afraid of her own soldiers than she was of the enemy.

But in recent years an intense public spotlight has been turned upon the military sexual assault epidemic. This is the result of tireless efforts on the part of numerous parties, from government to military to survivor organizations to survivors themselves. And Anu Bhagwati has been at the forefront of it all.

Anu is a powerful leader who has helped amplify the voices of the brave survivors who have come forward to tell their stories. She has been instrumental in catching the attention of key decision makers and forcing them to look at the hard truths surrounding this crisis. Her efforts have helped lead significant reform on behalf of the men, women and families impacted by these terrible crimes.

Through her own experiences as a former captain and company commander, Anu brings an informed voice to the conversation about military sexual violence and the place of women in our armed forces. She is a passionate advocate for improving the position of women in the military and ending sexual violence within the ranks of the armed services. She is an experienced, powerful speaker who recognizes the wholesale changes that must be made to our military with immediacy.

In order to address sexual violence within the armed services, we need to transform the culture throughout the military. Meaningful and substantial reform that eradicates sexual violence from the armed services is only possible through persistent education and raising awareness of the issue.

As one of the organization's co-founders, Anu's leadership at the Service Women's Action Network has consistently helped bring important issues affecting military women and survivors of sexual violence and assault into the national discussion. Public awareness of the challenges facing today's military will lead to informed discourse and put pressure on Congress and the military to enact meaningful reforms.

As a co-chair of the Military Sexual Assault Prevention Caucus and author of several bills that combat sexual assault, I have had the pleasure of working with Anu to address this important issue. I have seen Anu's work up close, and we have stood together to pass tough new laws focused on prevention and survivor support.

Anu has been supportive of our bipartisan efforts in Congress to address the way the armed services handle issues of sexual violence, assault, and rape. She has always given her honest input, keeping the needs of survivors far ahead of politics.



COURTESY: CONGRESSWOMAN NIKI TSONGAS'S OFFICE



COURTESY: SWAN

Left, Anu Bhagwati with US Representative Niki Tsongas. Above, Bhagwati with US Senator Kirsten Gillibrand.

Anu and SWAN stood by us in 2011 when we passed the Defense STRONG Act, which included provisions that grant victims the right to a base transfer, the right to legal assistance, and the right to confidentiality when seeking assistance from an advocate. Over the years we have built on those protections through the annual National Defense Authorization Act.

The 2014 NDAA made unprecedented changes to commander authority by removing the ability to overturn a jury verdict. The legislation also ensures that every military victim of sexual assault gets an attorney.

These major steps forward would not have been possible without the unyielding advocacy of Anu, SWAN and others who have been so passionate about enacting positive change.

Department of Defense reports over the past several years have highlighted the widespread and deep-rooted prevalence of sexual assault, perpetrated at every level and rank in our armed forces.

This year, the Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Office found a rise in incident reporting, which possibly signals that legislative and military changes from recent years are having a positive impact. But it does not obviate the simple fact that these heinous crimes continue to occur at an alarming rate, to both men and women. This is not just an issue of personal safety, but has an impact on our national security.

Our work on this issue is far from over. We must continue to fight this battle on all fronts, from prevention to prosecution to fostering an environment where men and women can come forward without fear of retaliation or repercussion.

It is heartening to know that Anu remains steadfastly committed to the fight and is there on the front lines, leading the charge on behalf of the countless men, women and families impacted by these crimes. ■

US Representative Niki Tsongas, who become the first woman in 25 years to serve in Congress from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts when she was elected in 2007, represents the Massachusetts Third District. She also serves on the House Armed Services Committee and the Military Personnel Subcommittee.

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Anu has earned this award through her advocacy. She has taken on the issue of sexual assault in the US military and has taken it directly to the chain of command. She has advocated on behalf of victims, men and women who were subjected to the worst kind of violence, to make sure that justice is possible. She has advocated for reforms such as taking the decision making of whether or not to proceed to trial out of the chain of command and giving it directly to trained military prosecutors. She knows that until there is transparency and accountability justice can't be done and she believes that these men and women who serve in our military deserve justice.

— **Kirsten Gillibrand**

The US Senator from New York had introduced the Military Justice Improvement Act of 2013, a bill that would remove responsibility for prosecuting sex crimes out of the military's chain of command.

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'The armed forces and the country need more people like Anu'

Anu Bhagwati speaks with Major General Gary Patton, then director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, in March 2013. Lawrence Korb, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, has said while many people have joined the discussion about sexual harassment in the armed forces, they have not been able to articulate issues the way Bhagwati does.

No one has been to articulate the issue of sexual harassment in the armed forces the way Anu Bhagwati does, **Lawrence J Korb**, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, tells **Arthur J Pais**

Over 10 years ago, Lawrence J Korb, a former naval officer and former Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Ronald Reagan administration who was then serving as a senior fellow and director of National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, got a call from another member of the Council, a distinguished economist who was also a professor at Columbia University.

"He said his daughter was thinking of joining the Marines," Korb said of Professor Jagdish Bhagwati. "He wanted my thoughts on it. I said it was wonderful to hear that she would be serving her country as a Marine. I also said that among the armed forces, the Marines had the least number of women and it was tough for women to make progress there."

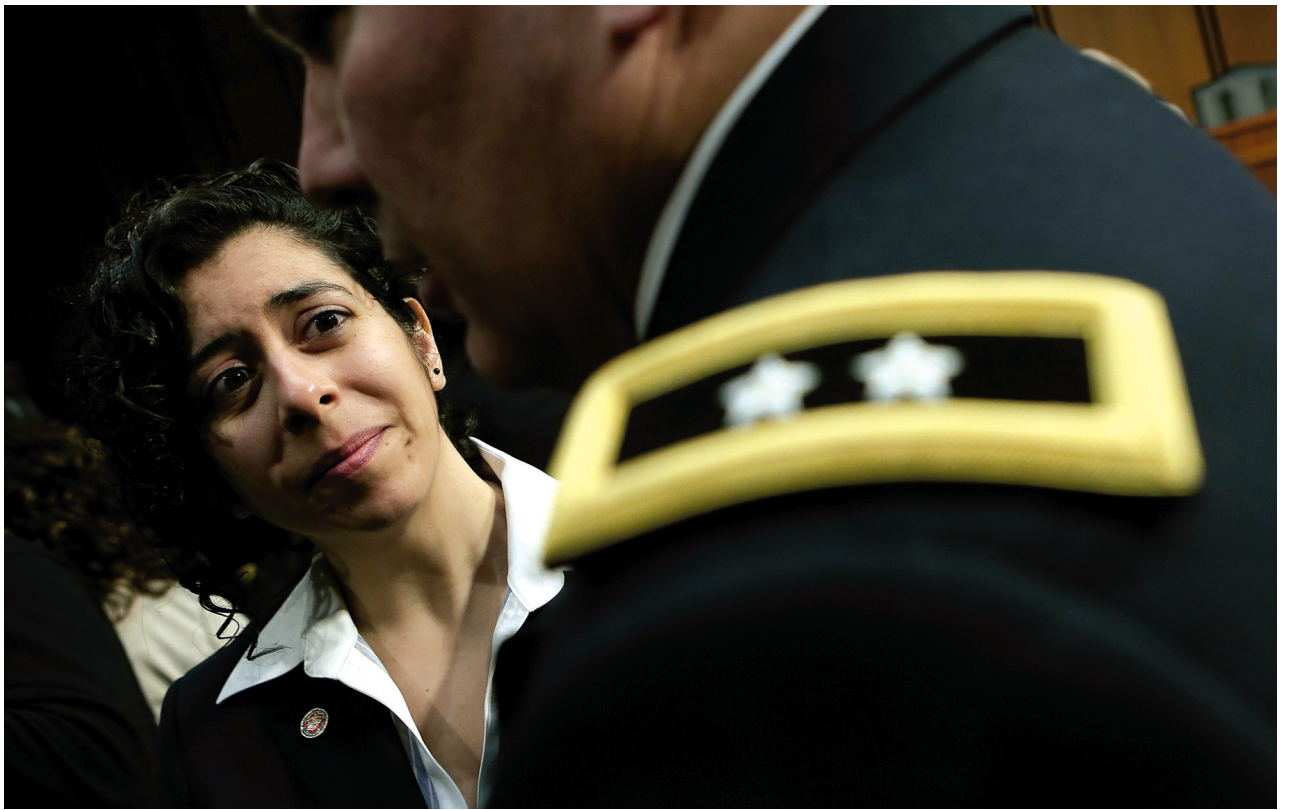
"Nevertheless, I also thought with her academic background, her intellect and her analytical thinking, she would make an excellent Marine, and I applauded her for her willingness to serve her country," Korb recalled.

Little did he know that a decade later, he would join former Marine captain Anu Bhagwati in the fight against sexual abuse in the American armed forces. Bhagwati is joined by a number of organizations, including American Civil Liberties Union, the Vietnam Veterans of America and the Center for American Progress, where Korb is now a senior fellow.

Two years ago, Bhagwati and Korb wrote a much-discussed op-ed in *The Baltimore Sun*, outlining their views on the problem of military sexual assault and suggesting solutions. This op-ed was reprinted many times, and continues to reverberate today.

'Being sexually assaulted in the military is a unique experience; a victim cannot quit his or her job,' they wrote. 'You are forced to obey orders, even from your perpetrator, if he outranks you. The vast majority of victims are junior enlisted. They have very little freedom of movement, barely any privacy, and little authority to fight a system based on respecting rank and following orders.'

'Women and men who have been assaulted frequently say that they do not feel safe reporting their assault. Many have a well-founded fear of retaliation by their perpetrators, by their peers, and often by their own commanders. Survivors are often punished after reporting, including being forced to work with their perpetrators; charged for



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"fraternization," "adultery" or "conduct unbecoming;" demoted or denied promotions and awards; or discharged from service with a false mental health diagnosis.'

'Many survivors rightly perceive reporting (*sexual assault*) as a career-ender, whereas sex offenders thrive in this low-reporting, victim-hostile climate; they can target their victims and commit their crimes knowing that the chances of being caught and convicted are slim.'

Many people have joined the discussion about sexual harassment and related problems in the armed forces, Korb said, "but they have not been able to articulate the issues the way Bhagwati does. She also brings up her own experiences in witnessing this harassment and her ability to understand the problem."

It is never easy to speak out against these problems and fight them in the courts, but Bhagwati, he added, "has been raising awareness of military sexual assault and advancing solutions by allying with like-minded organizations and a few Congressional leaders, like Senator Kirsten Gillibrand."

As Korb said during his address before the Service Women's Action Network's Truth and Justice Summit, he had realized even during his service in the Reagan administration that 'without women it was clear we were not going to have the quality of volunteer military we needed.'

When Bhagwati wanted to join the Marines, Korb had the same thought. He sounded frustrated as he spoke

about the need to include more women in the higher levels of military. He was a participant in an effort to compile a list of qualified women who were subsequently passed over for promotion to general and flag officer positions, including a female Air Force officer who was also an astronaut, General Suzanne Helms.

Korb pointed to his admiration of people like Bhagwati, and her dedicated work to repeal the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy against gays and lesbians in the armed forces: "When the government does not change its stand, when you don't get satisfactory action from the executive branch of the government we take the recourse to the courts and ask them to interfere and Bhagwati has done that."

"The nature of the military is such," he added, "that when you join it, you give up some of your rights, including the right to publicly condemn the actions of your superiors."

Yet some people, like Bhagwati, had the courage to speak out about the wrongs they observed, even though it could result in disciplinary action.

He also admires Bhagwati's courage for beginning to fight military sexual assault while she on active duty in the Marine Corps and for continuing to fight vigorously through SWAN once she left the Corps, rather than pursuing more lucrative opportunities in the private sector.

"The armed forces and the country need more people like Anu," he said. ■

Vietnam Veteran
Marsha Tansey Four
tells **Arthur J Pais** about
fighting a very different
fight alongside
Anu Bhagwati

Marsha Tansey Four, a Vietnam veteran and chair of the Women Veterans Committee, Vietnam Veterans of America, remembers seeing Anu Bhagwati nearly four years ago at a roundtable on women veterans hosted by then US Representative Bob Filner (Democrat from California).

"I wondered why I had not her seen before," Four — who was recognized by the White House as a 'Champion of Change' for women veterans last year and a

Sisters in arms

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs' Veterans Hall of Fame inductee — tells *India Abroad*.

"Then I came to know that SWAN (*Service Women's Action Network*) was a newer organization, but I also realized that Anu was fighting very hard to make it serve the women veterans. I also noticed she had real empathy, empathy and not sympathy, for the veterans' plight, and she wanted to bring around real changes. We began our association talking about our shared experiences. I found her commitment and courage admirable and her love for humanity was inspiring."

Four, who has worked on a number of issues pertaining to the veterans, especially those who had become homeless and served them for 25 years, bonded quickly

with Bhagwati who was at least two decades younger to her.

"We have built a sisterhood, a strong coalition between our associations," she continues, "and Anu has played an important role in the process. There are times we wonder if we have the capacity to fulfill our responsibilities and duties towards the veterans. In those moments, we get quite a bit of strength from this sisterhood and sister organizations like the one Anu leads."

Bhagwati, Four says, subscribes fully to the idea that military sexual assault is a multi-generational issue and for decades, it has been swept under the rug. The problem affected men and women; of the 26,000 service members who reported unwanted sexual contact in 2011-2012, 52

percent were men.

These assaults often result in devastating, long-term psychological injuries most notably post-traumatic stress disorder; sexual violence correlates with PTSD more highly than any other trauma, including combat, according to SWAN and VVA.

Bhagwati has highlighted PTSD and the alleged reluctance by the Veterans Affairs to deal with victims of the syndrome.

A few months ago SWAN joined VVA in filing a lawsuit against the Department of Veterans Affairs 'for ignoring a petition on behalf of the thousands of veterans suffering from PTSD related to Military Sexual Trauma caused by military rape, harassment, and/or assault.'

"Anu and I share our journeys," Four adds. "We learn from each other, we learn from our mistakes and we learn from our success. And we always know that we are there for each other, and make this world a better place for the veterans."

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'The military teaches battlefield leadership really well, but does not teach moral leadership well'

time. I really do. And processing experiences are the work of a lifetime. Joy, and compassion, all of these things make themselves known more fully as you practice and cultivate them. These aren't material "goals" you can achieve overnight.

I came from a very Type A, go get them, go-accumulate-your-degrees type of upbringing. I'm in a very different place now.

I love the journey, it's very fascinating, very provocative, learning and studying these practices.

What are the books and films that have influenced you the most and in what way?

BOOKS: *Water Dancer* by Jennifer Levin, about a marathon swimmer who overcomes her biggest fears — it still brings me comfort and inspiration; the poetry of the great feminist Robin Morgan; *Girls Like Us* by Rachel Lloyd about her work to end the commercial sexual exploitation of girls in New York City made me feel like I was not alone and that I too had a story to share; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which shook me to the core way back in high school; J D Salinger and Kurt Vonnegut — it's probably not a coincidence that both of them were military veterans. Few fiction writers have connected with me on this level.

TV SHOWS: *Scandal* by Shonda Rhimes, which is some of the greatest writing I have ever witnessed, and which makes me believe anything is possible in America; also *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by Joss Whedon, because Buffy and Willow still make me want to kick ass every day; and *West Wing* by Aaron Sorkin, because I am a crazy sort of policy wonk and idealist, and who doesn't love C J Cregg?

FILMS: Woody Allen's films were a huge part of my life, because they helped explain the neurosis within my family and culture, but now you couldn't pay me enough to see one of his movies.

I had to tear down one of his movie posters in my apartment because I was so upset about his daughter's allega-



COURTESY: SWAN

SWAN's Veteran Day 5K Swim Fundraiser. Anu Bhagwati, who started open water swimming a few years ago, loves swimming in the Hudson and in the ocean at Coney Island.

tions of sexual assault and his terribly cruel response in *The New York Times*. No father who truly loves his daughter would have written that op-ed.

Who are some of the leaders (and even ordinary men and

women, soldiers included) that have inspired you the most?

Melissa Harris-Perry, who is hands down the most talented and thought-provoking news host on television today;

Hillary Clinton, who has survived and risen above all of the challenges in her life and is still a force of nature;

Mona Eltahawy, the Egyptian writer and feminist who is still rabble rousing in Cairo; the television writer Shonda Rhimes, who dares to show us the inclusive America we can be; Navy Admiral Michelle Howard, the first African-American female 4-star general officer in the US Armed Forces, who also commanded the ship that overtook Somali pirates; Allyson Robinson, a former Army officer who is an indomitable advocate for transgender rights both in and out of the military; former Sergeant Miranda Hamby, a kind soul and fearless Marine who really and truly was head and shoulders above her male counterparts.

What gives you joy?

I would say children, animals and old people.

People at the beginning and the end of their lifetimes really say things as they are. I really appreciate authenticity. In our work at SWAN we deal with a lot of unauthentic people... working with the government, and media, and exploitation, it can be pretty toxic.

So when I see very young and very old people putting their truth out there because that's the way it is, it makes me hopeful.

Indoctrination hasn't yet taken hold of little people, and older people have gone beyond indoctrination and often come back to a place of truthfulness in the face of mortality; these people are in a place of real connection to what matters.

And, I love the ocean. I started open water swimming a few years ago. Swimming in the Hudson is one of the most incredible things I have ever done, because you are just nothing out there next to the giant ships, and out at Coney Island you are just a little body in the Atlantic Ocean. It's awesome!

'She's at her best when she has to step up, stand alone and be confrontational'

'She doesn't take any guff from anybody regardless of how many stars they have on their shoulders. She's incredibly strong, incredibly courageous and will go head to head with anybody to make sure that policies and legislation that can help, actually gets passed,'

SWAN's Greg Jacob tells

Arthur J Pais

Greg Jacob, Policy Director, Service Women's Action Network, served in the Marines for 10 years as an infantry man. He was stationed in Okinawa at about the same time as Anu Bhagwati. They did not know each other then. He didn't meet her until later.

Jacob, who has been with SWAN for a little more than three years, came to it part time at first from a corporate job.

"Anu had just taken over the organization a couple of years earlier and was interested in turning it into something that was a force for change, an agent for change within the military," he says.

"My experience in the military as a male and as an infantry man was different to hers largely because women are not allowed to serve in the infantry, which is something that we've been working hard to overturn. And we're actually well on our way to making that happen."

Jacob describes his job at SWAN as pushing the policy and advocacy work done in Washington, DC in working towards reforms for the military and the Veterans Administration.

"Trying to make them better, safer, places for women to serve and to make sure that they are fair and honest when it comes to giving women the benefits that they have earned and that they deserve as Veterans," says Jacob.

"The systematic discrimination, harassments, racism, gender issues, misogyny — all those kinds of things Anu experienced head on while she was in the Marines and as a part of that institution, as part of the male patriarchy within that institution... I could definitely see that a lot of what she went through was difficult, it was unfair and it shaped a lot of where my feelings are on these issues."

So, when he had the opportunity "to come to work for SWAN, to come to work for Anu, go down to Washington, DC with her, talk to members of Congress, and push reforms through the Pentagon," he continues, "it was a huge opportunity."

"Anu brings with her a tremendous amount of experience, credibility, a tremendous voice for women and for other



COURTESY: SWAN

The SWAN team — including Greg Jacob, right, and Anu Bhagwati, second from right — met Valerie Jarrett, second from left, senior advisor to President Barack Obama, in June 2013. According to SWAN, they discussed transforming military culture, and focused on why the President should support military justice reform.

under-represented members of the armed forces," says Jacob, an imposing man with a preacher's voice.

"She advocates very hard for them. She doesn't take any guff from anybody regardless of how many stars they have on their shoulders. She's incredibly strong, incredibly courageous and will go head to head with anybody to make sure that policies and legislation that can help, actually gets passed. That's really been where I have seen her at her best, I think, (*her best*) is when she is in a situation that requires her to step up, stand alone and to be confrontational, to push these agendas and to push these issues forward."

"Because if somebody isn't there making a fuss," he continues, "then the change won't happen — and, Anu is definitely not afraid to make a fuss about these issues."

Just to join the Marines is a pretty courageous act, he muses. "To remain in the institution in the face of such discrimination, such sometimes outright hatred and disdain takes a lot of nerve and a lot of guts," he adds.

"Then when she got out (*of the Marines*), it was very clear, especially to a person from the military, that it is very difficult to change the institution from the inside. It's almost impossible to change it from within. The best way to effect change is to change from the outside. That's what she did."

When Bhagwati left the military, "she stayed committed to seeing the institution become better because, ultimately, what's going to make the military better is for it to be a

place where people can serve safely, can explore the limits of their creativity, their abilities and for the military to really truly become a meritocracy where people can advance on the basis of their own merits outside of all of these unfair and unequal types of policies."

How did she overcome the biggest odds against her?

"There are a couple of things (*that we must understand*). The military is rooted in tradition and that tradition extends to a time when women had no freedoms and no choices in this country," says Jacob.

"It goes all the way back to the founding of this country. There's a lot of institutional tradition and institutional inertia. The military doesn't like change because it is afraid to change for the most part. They're afraid that in order to change they're going to have to sacrifice certain aspects of their institution that have been proven to be effective over the years."

"I think what Anu's unique perspective is is that she's looking to improve the military. She's not looking to eliminate it. She's not looking for it to stop doing what it's doing. She's wants the military to be a better place, a more effective institution and the way to do that is to tap into the talents, abilities and skills of every person whether they be a man or a woman. For her, her motivation is not adversarial in reforming the military. She wants to partner with them and make the military a better place." ■

‘She says things that are very difficult to say and difficult to hear’

When you really love an institution, you want it to be its best self and you want it to change for the better. I think she’s very unafraid to make that happen,’ says Lauren Gray

Lauren Gray, who was the Communications Director at SWAN till recently, had heard about Anu Bhagwati’s work before she met her.

“I followed her in the media,” she said, referring to the stories on Bhagwati’s advocacy in mainstream media. “I worked for a human rights organization in Philadelphia and was just very wowed by what a dynamic presence she was on the human rights scene,” Gray said recently, “Her ability to tell truth about institutions of power was very innovative and very brave!”

You hear that refrain about Bhagwati’s bravery as an advocate again and again from the handful of people who work in her crowded, modest, office in Manhattan.

Why did Gray think it was courageous for Anu Bhagwati



Anu Bhagwati addresses a sexual violence rally in New York City. The refrain about her bravery as an advocate for change and justice is heard again and again among her colleagues.

to join the Marines?

“There are very few women of color represented in the Marines,” Gray offered. “She is a natural leader and sought a leadership position in the Marines because that’s just part of her nature. She challenges herself to take on physical as well as intellectual challenges and it was a very good and

natural fit for her there which is amazing!

“But I think that also, those same qualities led her to challenge the institution to be its best self and that sometimes institutions are resistant to change. She is very unafraid of change. She challenges us at the office every day to be our best selves. And, sometimes it’s very hard and very hard work. But that leads to an office environment where we are very proud of one another and work as a very strong team.”

When Gray met service members or veterans, particularly women service members or veterans who found out that she worked with Bhagwati, “they were thrilled and amazed by the work that she does!”

What are some of the things Bhagwati is most admired for in the veterans’ community or even in the Service ranks?

“They find it very, very, important to have a central voice speaking on behalf of a lot of these issues,” Gray says, “She does an excellent job of representing them and making sure that when she does speak she is speaking for a plurality of voices within the military; not just from her own perspective but really also on behalf of what other Service women and women Veterans think.”

The very first time Gray read about Bhagwati was in a very small magazine that was focused on women’s human rights issues. “I remember finding her very compelling because she says things that are very difficult to say and difficult to hear and she says them anyway,” Gray adds with a smile.

“When you really love an institution, you want it to be its best self and you want it to change for the better. And I think she’s very unafraid to make that happen.” ■

— Arthur J Pais.

‘Her clarity of expression is amazing’

Janet Samuels views Anu Bhagwati’s work from the perspective of a colleague and the mother of a veteran

When I first met Anu (*Bhagwati*), several years ago, I was working for another non-profit organization and SWAN needed office space. They joined us and shared office space, and I came to know about her and the work that she was doing at that time. I was so impressed with it.

It was also a world that I knew less about than I would wish to. I learnt a great deal from her and her colleagues there before we parted ways and went to different offices.

This past summer I spoke with Anu about coming to work with her at SWAN, and I decided to do so. I have been on staff only since this summer. I came to work here as the parent of a veteran and not as a veteran myself.

At the time I met her (*Anu*), my son was on active duty on the first of what became two tours to Afghanistan. It was very helpful to me to understand the context in which he was serving and also some of the information that he was sharing with me at that time. When he became a veteran, I

found an opportunity to begin to act on some of the things that I had learnt from him, which I thought were very important both as an American citizen and as a parent.

I believe that we can have a better military in this country. Better in the sense, not necessarily in its ultimate performance in the field, but in its performance as an institution, which will then improve its performance in the field.

I am a feminist, I’m a lifelong feminist, and I would like to create an institution in the military in this country that reflects those values as well.

My son is working elsewhere assisting veterans in another manner. But the way in which he most greatly helped me was in introducing me to women who were his colleagues and giving me an understanding of what it was like to be an enlisted person in the armed services of this country, which I did not know as much about.

My family had a military background, but that was somewhat distanced from me in age. So, this was new to me through him. But more importantly for me was as a woman, I believe that our military institution will be greatly improved by having an increased number of women in the military.

To do so, I believe we will have to create an unequivocal field of equality in which people can compete.

In the way Bhagwati does her work, her clarity of expression — both spoken and written — are amazing. Her intellectual rigor with which she approaches any problem and the fairness with which she approaches that analysis and

her integrity as a human being in all this.

She has a sense of humor, absolutely! I will say that my son’s background helped me get more at the jokes. In fact, one of our jokes you see is directly behind me: We have a collection of little rubber ducks: One that is dressed in an army dress, one that is dressed as a Marine, one that is dressed as a navy person and one that is dressed as the air force. I thought they were fun. That’s the first joke.

In the next five years, I believe we will be able to increase the areas in which we have been most strong, which is to educate the public and people in power about these issues, about these problems and help them understand that there are ways to make this better and the pathways through which they may do so.

I also hope very much that we will be able to engage many more members of the women veterans’ community in coming forward and doing this work and having their own voices as well and that is something SWAN is very interested in fostering in the future.

There are obstacles and there have been obstacles and I believe that Anu would do two things: She would look to the past and see what achievements have been made during the period of time that she has been doing this work and there have been many.

I also think she will look to the present and our continuing close contact with members of the women veterans’ community and be inspired by them and continue to go forward. I think those are two things that would help her. ■

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She spoke to Arthur J Pais.