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**Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs**  
**“VA HEALTH CARE SERVICES FOR WOMEN VETERANS: BRIDGING THE GAPS  
IN CARE”**

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My name is Anuradha Bhagwati. I am a former Captain in the U.S. Marine Corps. I currently serve as Executive Director of the Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN), a non-partisan, non-profit organization founded by female veterans, based out of New York City. SWAN specializes in policy analysis, advocacy, and legal services for all servicewomen, women veterans, and their families.

Despite the progress the Veterans' Health Administration has made in addressing the recent influx of women veterans into the VA system, the challenges in delivering adequate health care services to women veterans remain numerous and daunting. Every day, SWAN receives calls from frustrated, disappointed, and traumatized women veterans looking for legal assistance or personal support due to inadequate health care, or mistreatment and harassment by staff or male patients at VA hospitals. Many women justifiably give up on the VA, as their traumas and conditions rapidly deteriorate into drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, or suicide.

The epidemic of Military Sexual Trauma (MST)--sexual harassment, assault and rape--which has yet to be fully recognized by the Armed Forces, has also yet to be adequately integrated into the daily operations of VA hospitals. MST screening at hospitals around the Nation appears to be inconsistent, at best. A shortage of female physicians and counselors, a rapid turnover of inexperienced residents, a preponderance of culturally conservative administrative staff, and poorly trained or unprofessional medical staff contributes to a lack of understanding about how to treat veterans who suffer from symptoms related to MST. However, I must emphasize that regardless of medical condition, women veterans, when compared to their male counterparts, are largely subjected to unequal treatment at VA facilities nationwide.

The following anecdotes illustrate just a few of the VA's institutional failures to deliver proper health care to women veterans:

- One Iraq veteran who checked herself into inpatient psychiatric care during a particularly bad PTSD episode, was forced to share a bathroom with male veterans, including a peeping tom. When she told her nurse she felt uncomfortable eating her meals with male veterans, the nurse threatened that she would not be fed at all.
- An Afghanistan veteran - a single mother - who was raped in theater by a fellow servicemember, cannot bear to enter a VA facility out of sheer terror of re-triggering the

trauma from her assault. Like many other women veterans, she pays for counseling out of pocket so as not to subject herself to further trauma.

- One veteran recently received her annual pap smear with a male gynecologist who did not enforce the requirement to have a female staff member present during the examination. When this veteran mentioned to the gynecologist that she had experienced MST, he left the room and barked down the hall, “We've got another one!”

Many of these examples illustrate a larger point: that the VA requires an enormous cultural shift recognizing the sacrifices and specific needs of women veterans.

**Recommendations to bridge the gaps in care for women veterans:**

1. Require that the VA remedy the shortage of female physicians, female mental health providers and MST counselors at VA hospitals nationwide. Also require that the VA provide the option of female-only counseling groups for female combat veterans, and female- as well as male-only counseling groups for female and male survivors of MST.
2. Require the VA to implement a program to train, educate, and certify all staff, including administrative and medical, in Federal Equal Opportunity regulations and MST, to reduce a discriminatory and unwelcoming atmosphere toward women veterans.
3. Require the VA to increase accessibility of fee-based care for veterans (both male and female) who have been diagnosed with Military Sexual Trauma.
4. Require day-care facilities for veterans who are parents, as well as more flexible evening hours for working veterans, at every VA hospital.