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Parag Khandhar

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BUILDING A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: SPOTLIGHT ON KIRAN AHUJA*

By Parag Khandhar**

Only in her mid-thirties, Ms. Kiran Ahuja, Executive Director of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), has had a long, distinguished public interest career as an attorney, an advocate for immigrant communities, and a mentor and advisor to countless law students and young activists. I caught up with her for a little while to talk about growing up an Indian American woman in the South, the development of her personal racial and political identity, and the evolution of the Women's Movement.

Thank you for speaking with me I have a lot of questions, but I'll try to keep this short. Looking over your career so far, there are so many places I could start! I guess I'll start chronologically. Northerners often assume things about the Deep South. How was your experience growing up in Savannah, Georgia as a young immigrant woman of color, and how formative was it in your path towards social justice and civil rights?

My Northern friends are so amused – that's funny. I think it did play a role because other young immigrants feel a sense of isolation and being the "one of only." What's interesting in the South is that because you have such a predominantly African American population, you're sort of navigating this Black/White dichotomy. I have some very distinct memories of issues between friends who were black or white, and because I was brown, I moved between those groups pretty easily. One incident is so vivid: sitting on the bus in the fifth grade in Louisiana – I've lived in different southern states – some of my black friends and white friends didn't talk to each other, but they were fighting over who I should sit next to.

Also I had a sense of really not appreciating my culture because there's such pressure to assimilate and to try to be like my blond, blue-eyed friends, or change my name. I think this happens with a lot of communities where you are very much a minority, where you have to choose whether you're going to assimilate in the white community or the black community. My sense of belonging was in the black community, going to the black churches, dating African American men. Interestingly enough, I had a lot of support from my mom. She really emboldened me to be who I wanted to be.

It wasn't until I went to Spelman College that I really started to understand that I was a person of color, that I identified with the minority communities in this country, and that I cared about what happens to them. I think where most Indian Americans or other immigrants identify with their community first and then look to the larger community, I had to look at myself as a person of color first to identify with the black community because there really was no progressive Indian or Asian community to be a part of. So then I worked my way

backwards to the Asian American community and the South Asian community.

For a lot of people, they fall into working in a particular community, but your path seems like you've had to confront a lot of these questions as you've grown in the work.

I've been challenged about why I don't work in the South Asian community, and I think I'm the first South Asian Executive Director of a National pan-Asian organization. For me, it's a no-brainer because I was doing stuff that was related to the Asian American community. If I had stayed in the South, that's what I would be doing now.

My parents ran a clinic in an inner city black community, and it was something that wasn't really thought about. It was just, this is our community, where work needs to be done, and we're here. These are our friends and our colleagues.

That's really interesting. When going over the path you've taken, it was striking to me that you chose to go to Spellman College, an historically Black College. Professor Frank Wu, when he was teaching law at Howard University, used to talk about being asked "what is like being the only Asian teaching at that historically black University" to which he'd respond, "if I was the only Asian at Yale or Harvard, a historically white institution, would you ask the same question?" You've already talked about your identity consciousness, but did going to Spellman College continue that path for you or did it present additional challenges or things for you to think about?

It was definitely very influential. I had my own trepidations about going to Spellman – it was my friends who challenged me when I said, "They know I'm not African American." They said, "what's the difference?" I remember getting asked that question all the time, and I agree with Frank Wu: I could be a minority student in a predominantly white institution, particularly in the South, or I could be a minority in a predominantly black college. The experience there was so different. I realized how much of a Eurocentric education I had received and how I hadn't learned anything about the African American or the Asian American communities. I thought this is the problem in our society and why our communities are so divided. We never take that step to learn in an authentic way about other communities and all the treasures, accomplishments, and contributions that they've made. I also had some amazing professors who challenged me and mentored me.

I can't say that I was so politically conscious. I think a part of my choice to be at Spellman was about wanting to be where I felt comfortable and where I felt like I belonged. The politics came later. It was like I wanted to be in a place where I could feel comfortable and call home. Looking back, it was an

amazing experience.

Actually, I was at a Spellman Women of Color conference recently. What was really great was that I was being honored by the Legacy of Leadership award by Spellman alum, and after I gave a little speech, some of the women came up to me and said, “we thought there was a mistake. We didn’t think you’d graduated from Spellman.” I think they told me that I’m probably the only Asian American that’s graduated from that school.

A lot of people become lifetime government employees, but after doing a lot of good work at the Department of Justice, you moved on. Was there anything about the experience that you want to talk about?

I think at the time that I came into DOJ, it was still with that idea that you had to have that civil rights experience and commitment. That’s why people went to DOJ. You still bump up against the slow pace of the Justice Department, with the career attorneys that are there. In the Justice Department you have to be more methodical – making sure you have all your ducks in a row and that you have the evidence you need to make a strong case. While that’s good, I felt like with all the school desegregation cases I was working on, it was a little frustrating because there was only so much I could do. Now you look at re-segregation of the schools and in many ways you felt kind of powerless: from the hopes and dreams of *Brown*, you’re wondering, “how am I helping?”

The NAPAWF community is quite different. So you have to figure out where you want to be, whether it’s inside the system or outside. I realized, for me, that I had to be outside the system where I could be more of an agitator and have more freedom in advocacy.

Can you give me a brief history of NAPAWF?

Initially, during the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) there was a caucus of Asian American activists that came together and asked, “Why does it take us going thousands and thousands of miles away from the U.S. to realize that we’re here, and that we’re doing really great work?” They decided that we needed to have an organization in the U.S. that represented our community and was lead by us.

So there was a founding gathering in L.A. in 1996, where they had over 150 Asian and Pacific Islander activists who came together, and they started strategizing and putting together platforms and committees about what this organization would look like. And well... we just celebrated our ten-year anniversary last year.

The issue of intersectionalities of identity is a hot topic in legal academia right now. As the director of a vibrant organization that sits on the crossroads between the women’s movement, the Asian American movement, and the immigrant rights’ movement, among others, how do issues of intersectionality play out for you and NAPAWF in a real

way?

The intersectionalities piece is something that we definitely embrace. We launched our reproductive justice education campaign with an agenda that includes really taking a look at what it means to be many things: an immigrant woman dealing with reproductive health issues; an immigrant woman in a situation of abuse dealing with reproductive health issues; an immigrant woman who’s been trafficked and is dealing with reproductive health challenges – whether it’s forced abortions or not getting the proper health care.

That’s been a criticism of the women’s movement: you can’t parcel us into one aspect of who we are because all these things intersect, and that comes out in our work. For example, with immigration reform, if you look at low-wage workers, especially in the garment industry or the domestic workers, many of them are immigrant women. Many of them don’t have access to health care or child services, especially many of those who have been here beyond the five years when they can access federal benefits. They are more likely to face abuse and exploitation by their employers.

The work we do really faces that broad, holistic perspective to the lives of Asian immigrant women and what that means.

That is why our Founding Sisters created a multi-issue organization. We’re the only national woman-of-color organization with a progressive stance and a multi-issue focus. It’s so important because you see so many

organizations out there that are only working on immigrant rights or anti-violence work or anti-trafficking. Even though those are very difficult to develop as programs on their own, we’re seeing that there are so many opportunities to bring them together. So our anti-trafficking project director talks about the reproductive health issues of trafficking victims. That’s just one example of how we try to make that real.

There’s been a long ongoing dialog about the women’s movement and whether women of color are still marginalized in the greater movement? In a recent post on Feministing.com, you wrote eloquently about leadership transition and bringing a younger generation of women into leadership of the movement – is there anything that you’d like to add here about NAPAWF and this younger generation of women who are very passionate but sometimes get shut out of leadership?

I feel that NAPAWF has been an essential stepping-stone for a lot of young API women who otherwise would have never been a part of the women’s movement. I think that we’ve given them that space to learn about the issues, to be who they are, and to be in a safe space. A few years ago, the Ford Foundation pulled together all these women’s organizations from around the country and asked, “Is there still a women’s movement?” Or are we just a bunch of organizations working on women’s issues? That’s the ultimate question because women in the movement are asked, “Where are the young people and where are the

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women of color?”

One study that was done by the Center for the Advancement of Women showed that there really is more of a desire by women of color for a movement than there is by white women, which to me suggests that women of color were not a part of the movement in the first place. Also, young people see the issues much more broadly than individuals working in organizations.

I think that NAPAWF is such a good example of this. The Founding Sisters, who are more experienced leaders, have really just stepped aside and given us space. You know, for someone like me, who is in her thirties, to lead the organization and to have everyone working for me be basically thirty and under, is amazing. I really try to be conscientious about putting them out there. It's not about me. I think we have this skewed sense of what it means to be a leader – that you're always doing the talking. Frankly, there's so much more than that to leadership, and you have to make a commitment to be conscientious.

Also with our chapters, the majority of the women are under thirty. They have as part of their political identity their race or ethnicity, but not gender as much. Here's a space where they can learn about the issues, develop their advocacy skills, and feel empowered. We use the term “Fierce Sisters” all the time to negate the stereotypes of Asian women. We are fierce and we are powerful.

Transition has become a really big priority for me, for our organization, and our movement related to developing leadership. We have board members who feel strongly about it as well because we've seen what has happened to the women's movement when it hasn't been a priority. We're still going to face it; there are women's organizations where they still just don't get it – where my staff tells me that they go and still feel marginalized. Now we've had more women of color in foundations who see the need for organizations like NAPAWF, for other women-of-color organizations, for other ethnic-specific organizations because they represent our communities. We can't have others doing that because we know our communities.

As a law student at the University of Georgia, you were very active with public interest student issues – and after working at DOJ for a number of years, you took a position that supported public interest students at WCL. Were there common questions that you would get from students of color interested in exploring public interest careers? Were they similar to what your classmates were confronting at that time? Were there significant differences or other observations you have from that time?

That's a good question. First, I think that WCL is a totally different breed. I used to tell people that they were in such a great position with all these clinics and opportunities for public interest work, where that wasn't the case for me at Georgia. When I was there, I and a few other students put together a

public interest career fair because career services didn't have the capacity. I think now it's more of a mainstay, but at that time it wasn't there for us. We had to create it.

But some of the questions are very similar. It's much harder to find a job – you kind of have to search and go out on your own rather than the on-campus interviews that are ready and there and waiting for you. So it really just takes a lot more effort. You have to learn about the different organizations and how they do their hiring.

The issue of debt, especially coming out of WCL versus coming out of a public university, is a huge issue. Especially when, at WCL, there's a big push around PILRAP, and trying to figure out a way that there can be more support systems in place in a University that really supports public interest. But what are the programs that they have in place to allow students to really take advantage of this opportunity?

You've been doing this work for a good amount of time and you've done some really interesting – and trailblazing – work in a lot of ways. How have you kept your head – and your heart – in this work for so long? How do you keep yourself motivated, and do you have any words for folks who are afraid of burnout or on the brink of burnout?

I've been a burnout victim in the past. A belief in balance and in the fact that you can't be the sacrificial lamb has helped me. I keep saying that to myself: I'm one person and I can only do so much. What sense does it make for me to be helping all of these people while running myself into the ground? Be realistic. Have balance. Keep yourself healthy and productive so that you can actually stand the work. Also, just don't take yourself so seriously. I feel like the stuff gets just so politically charged and people get so worked up. And it's not as if work isn't important. It's just that you have to put it in the larger context of what's going on in your life and you can't become so one-dimensional about work. You have to have an outside life; you have to have other interests because in that sense, it helps to make you a better advocate.

Also I think we should really promote policies and organizations that support that balance. Two things I brought from the government to NAPAWF were having every other Friday off and really generous vacation time. I do feel that there are various organizational cultures where you constantly have to produce, and it's “outcome, outcome, outcome.” There's always got to be something going on at this frenzied kind of pace and that's where the burnout comes. If you want to keep people in, build their skills, and keep the consistency and longevity in the organization, you really have to do certain things. It's also a way of valuing people. It's not just about valuing the pie-in-the-sky ideals of social justice, but you value the very people that are in front of your face who work with you day in and day out, and show up every day.

* * Parag Khandhar is a third-year law student at American University Washington College of Law. Mr. Khandhar is also the Executive Editor of *The Modern American*.

* See Ms. Ahuja's biography on page 87.

¹ Available at <http://feministing.com/archives/007040.html> (last visited Oct. 14, 2007).