

THE SAWAN

SAWA-Australia
SUPPORT ASSOCIATION FOR THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 2. April 2004

Published by SAWA-Australia Inc Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan.
Articles have been accepted in good faith. Direct queries to the authors



SAWA Committee



Convener: Grace McCaughey
Assistant Convener: Onnie Wilson
Secretary: Ruth Barkla
Assistant Sec: Deborah Jacob
Treasurer: Paul Connell
Committee: Rima Truchanas, Isobel Morley, Kirsten Beggs
Public Officer: Helen Watters
Auditor: Barry Hocking

SAWA OBJECTIVES

1. Raise funds for Afghan women and children
2. Increase community awareness of the forgotten needs of Afghan women
3. Encourage women, men and young people to join SAWA-Australia
4. Set up SAWA branches throughout Australia

SAWA-Australia Inc.

No. A0045483R

Following a very successful public meeting to adopt the Constitution and elect office-bearers, the new public officer Helen Watters submitted the application for Incorporation to the Department of Consumer Affairs and I am happy to report that SAWA is now an official Incorporated Association. This is the first step along the road to tax deductibility, where donations over \$2 can be deducted from your tax.

The new team of volunteer committee members have shown a great deal of commitment and dedication. This augurs well for the next year of SAWA's operations.

Special thanks were expressed to Councillor Elizabeth Eager who conducted the election of office-bearers.

With some exciting events coming up during the visit of Mariam Rawi, this is a good time for SAWA to publicise her presence. There are thousands of people out there willing to help. If we can only let them know about us we will do well for the women and children of Afghanistan.

We have had an excellent response to the first newsletter. SAWA now has contact people in almost every state and Canberra in the ACT. Once these are publicised here and on the web page- www.sawa-australia.org hopefully more local people will become involved and be aware of the desperate plight of Afghan women and children.

Grace McCaughey Convener

MARIAM RAWI

Mariam Rawi is a member of the Cultural Committee of RAWA and active in the areas of publishing magazines and booklets as well as organizing functions and rallies. Mariam contributes to women's knowledge and awareness about the fundamentalism which is a fatal danger to the very existence of Afghanistan. She is also in direct contact with many Afghan women and travels inside Afghanistan collecting reports for RAWA's publications. Mariam has accumulated a wide breadth of knowledge about the situation of women in Afghanistan. She is the mother of one child. Mariam has represented RAWA in Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, South Africa, Japan, Switzerland, Brazil, Holland, Greece and Pakistan.

Mariam's Itinerary

MELBOURNE

Wed April 14th, 5-7 pm

Mariam will present the opening night address of the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights/ Deakin University conference: 'Community Development Human Rights and the Grassroots' (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/cchr>)

Hotel 'Y', 489 Elizabeth Street
MELBOURNE. \$15. Contact:
Anne O'Keefe (03) 5227 2113

Tues April 20th, 8.30 -10.00 am

A delicious fundraising breakfast of tasty muffins and great coffee. An opportunity to hear and talk with Mariam.

Trades Hall, 54 Victoria Street
CARLTON. \$15. Contact:
Ellen Kleimaker's office 9659 3575

Thurs April 22, 10 am

The prestigious Mornington Peninsula Annual Human Rights Oration will be presented by Mariam Rawi
Toorak College, Old Mornington Rd
MT ELIZA
Booking essential
Contact: Theresa Johnson 5986 0123

Wed May 5, 7 pm

Film fundraiser with Mariam introducing the film 'Osama' Siddiq Barmak's moving Afghan film of one girl's life story under the Taliban, acclaimed at the 2003 Melbourne International Film Festival. A stunning story. Cinema Nova, 380 Lygon St., CARLTON
Bookings: Onnie 9822 8858

Thurs May 6, 6.30 for 7.30 pm

Buffet fundraising dinner.
Join Mariam for a wine and Sri Lankan dinner in a cosy restaurant with the best company. 'SIGIRI' 338 High St. NORTHCOTE. \$40/\$25.
Bookings: Onnie (03) 9822 8858

BENDIGO & CASTLEMAINE

Fri April 23, 3 pm

Afternoon tea with Mariam
Guest of the Women's Network at Latrobe University, Bendigo Campus Edwards Rd., BENDIGO. Contact Dr Katherine Legge (03)5444 1000

Sat April 24, 7.30 -10 pm

Concert evening with a presentation by Mariam.
Campbells Creek Community Centre Elizabeth St., Campbells Creek, Near CASTLEMAINE. \$15/10
Contact Isobel 5473 4130

CANBERRA

Thurs April 29, 6-8 pm

Mariam speaks to Canberra women
Reception Room ACT Legislative Assembly CANBERRA
Contact Deb Foskey 0413 223 585

TOWNSVILLE

Fri April 30th

Coalition for a Feminist Agenda
Public meeting with Mariam
TOWNSVILLE
Contact Chantal: (07) 4760 8309
For general inquiries concerning Mariam's visit to Australia contact: Onnie (03) 9822 8858
mok@connexus.net.au
ALL proceeds of fundraising events go to RAWA projects.

News from Afghanistan

By 29th March, 1,605,303 Afghans had registered to vote in the elections to be held in September.. This is 16% of the 2001 population: 26,813,057. 1,149,491 men and 455,812 women, which is 72 % men and 28 % women. Projected 2050 population:67,224,578.

Interesting Web Pages

www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm
(Afghanistan statistics)
<http://www.developmentgateway.org>

LETTER FROM SYDNEY

“ Dear Grace, This is amazingly fantastic progress!! The newsletter looks so great. Please keep in touch and I am happy to be a Sydney contact. Jane Cheshier”

SAWA FUNDRAISING

Many thanks to those individuals, groups and schools who have raised funds. Castlemaine raised \$1029 from In This World, with 173 attending.

Two films: MOLLY and MABARAK about Afghans at Young in NSW, and OSAMA about a young Afghan woman in Afghanistan are currently doing the rounds of Australia. Both these provide good fundraising opportunities for SAWA members. See the web page for information on how to organise a film fundraiser.

Message from Tahmeena

March 2004

“I am busy with my studies these days. I am preparing this whole year for next year's university exam. I hope everything is going well with Mariam's visit. I am thinking about you all and hope to see you again at some point. Maybe you will decide to come visit us in Afghanistan?”

Please give my greetings to other friends over there”.

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Did you know it was the Afghan nao roze (new year) on March 21?

Perhaps we can celebrate in 2005.

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SAWA CONTACTS

Melbourne. Onnie Wilson
(03) 9822 8858.
mok@connexus.com.au
Lismore. Ruth (02) 66218505
rainforestinfo@ozemail.com.au
Sydney. Jane Cheshier 0415 713 567
Perth. Nadia R. xpressit@inet.net.au
Castlemaine. Grace McCaughey
(03) 5476 2457 info@sawa-australia.org
Mildura. Robyn Smythe
(03) 5023 3774 maverick3@inet.net.au
Bendigo. Katherine Legge
(03) 5441 6680
cannonlegge@impulse.net.au
Moorooduc. Sue Christopherson
(03) 5979 4590 christop@hotkey.net.au

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MILDURA NURSE WORKED IN AFGHANISTAN

Thank you for inviting me to contribute to the second edition of The Sawan and congratulations to all involved in forming an Australian group to support the women of Afghanistan.

I would like to tell you about my six month mission to Afghanistan where I worked as a midwife for the humanitarian aid organization Medicins Sans Frontieres, also known as MSF or Doctors Without Borders.

Medicines Sans Frontieres is the world's largest independent medical relief organization and offers assistance to populations in distress, to victims of natural or man made disasters and to victims of armed conflict, without discrimination and irrespective of race, religion, creed or political affiliation. MSF relies solely on medical people volunteering their time to help people in distress.

I knew little about Afghanistan and had a month to do Internet searches and read as much as I could. I wondered whether going to a strict Islamic country was the right choice for me, as from what I was reading, the plight of women was appalling. This reading did nothing to prepare me for the shocking realities of how women are treated in Afghanistan.

A recent WHO report reveals that, in the year of 2001, a women living in Afghanistan has a one in six chance of

dying from pregnancy over her lifetime; in Australia it is a one in 5800 chance. Many reasons contribute to these appalling statistics, but clearly Afghanistan's health system is in a state of near total disrepair.

My job in Afghanistan was to go to the village of Kooklam in the northwest province of Kushk-e-Khona and give antenatal and postnatal care to women who had never ever had access to any medical care.

There were many cultural barriers for me to overcome before I could open my clinic. The major one was would the men let their women attend the clinic? Afghan women are hidden and segregated and even when allowed out of their homes are covered from head to toe with the all encompassing burqua. This form of dress makes them faceless, unidentifiable and powerless. A woman is not allowed out of her home without a male member of the family accompanying her. For Afghan women a primary obligation is to uphold family honour by conforming to acceptable behavioural norms. Although rules governing female behaviour vary from group to group, Afghan society is consistent with its innate belief in male superiority, giving the men the prerogative to determine the do's and the don'ts for women. Few challenge this for fear of horrible reprisals eg severe beatings or the male taking another wife. They are denied medical treatment by this lack of freedom to move outside their homes.

One hurdle for me to overcome was the powerful religious leader of the village known as the Mullah. We were a threat to the Mullah's income, power base and credibility because when Afghans become ill they pay large sums of money to the mullahs in return for prayers that were offered as a supposed cure. So it was with great sensitivity that we proceeded with the Reproductive Health Clinic. The Mullah would not liaise with me because I was female but he would talk to Jonathon, the English doctor supporting the Basic Health Unit in Kooklam. We had to be culturally sensitive as we tried hard to explain the benefits of my care to the women and babies of Kushk.

It took 2 months of meetings and negotiations with the mullahs and village elders to allow me to open the clinic but finally, after many frustrating weeks, my Reproductive Health clinic was opened.

My antenatal care consisted of: giving women multivitamins and iron tablets, and detecting any complications that may require transferring to the Herat hospital (if the husbands would allow a transfer).

Nearly 100% of women birthed on their dirt floors at home which would have contributed to the high number of babies dying from neonatal tetanus, and maternal infections. I gave out clean birthing kits that contained a piece of soap for the mother and attending women to wash their hands and feet, a large clean piece of plastic for the mother to squat and birth onto, clean string to tie the umbilical cord, and a sterile blade to cut the cord with.

Breastfeeding education played a major role in my antenatal education because the women would not breastfeed for the first 3 days, thinking the precious colostrum and early milk was 'no good'. Consequently babies were only fed water or green tea for the first 3 days of their lives. Many women have lost the art of breastfeeding and many babies died because of their mothers' ignorance of breastfeeding. To bottle feed was almost a guarantee that the baby would die because of poor or non existing sterilizing techniques.

I can say that I was able to turn this tradition around quite easily by likening the colostrum and early milk to multivitamins and antibiotics. Many women came back to me for their postnatal checkups and very proudly told me they had used their clean birthing kit AND that they breastfed their baby straight after birth.

Contraception was a very contentious issue. Many deaths occurred because girls became pregnant too young, or too many women had too many pregnancies. Women requested contraception but most husbands would not allow it. They were not so much concerned for their wives health, but saw many children as a sign of their virility and manhood. After all,

if their wife died he could simply take another one.

Did I have any regrets about my trip to Afghanistan? Definitely not.

I wanted to transfer many women in labour because of complications but if the husbands wouldn't let them go to the city they would return to their houses and die. These scenarios infuriated and saddened me, but there was one word I had to go with. Pragmatism. I soon learnt that I could only do what Afghan culture and Islamic rule allowed me to do. Many times I was frustrated I could not do more but I was humbled on my last day in the clinic when some women came to say goodbye.

They didn't thank me for the antenatal care I had given them, nor did they thank me for the socks I had bought them, nor did they thank me for staying up all night with them as they laboured with their babies, but they thanked me for caring about them. No one cares about the Afghan women but they knew I did. One woman said, "no one listens to us but you did". Another lady said she knew I cared about her because quote "you even wrote things down about me". She was referring to when I would write in her antenatal notes. This had a profound effect on me as at times I thought I had only band aided their problems or had even given them false hope. However, if they were grateful to me for just listening to them, hearing their stories and showing I cared and loved them, then my 6 months of being away from my safe and comfortable lifestyle was worth it. It was a small sacrifice.

Robyn Smythe, Mildura

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AUSTRALIAN NEWS

SAWA congratulates three students from Warialda High School NSW who won three of the four prizes in the Afghan Embassy Grand Art and Literature Competition (GALC) 2003. Kylie Miller 13 "My Afghanistan". A poem. Sara Marle 13. What Future Afghanistan. An essay Rachel Conway 14. A Future for Afghanistan. Short Story. SAWA has received permission from the students, parents and school to publish them on the SAWA web page.

www.sawa-australia.org
www.warialda-h.schools.nsw.edu.au/

Amnesty International asks international community to uphold its human rights responsibilities. March 26, 2004

Extracts from the AI letter:
 "Afghanistan is facing a critical moment in its ongoing reconstruction efforts and its future will remain unchanged unless the international community takes human rights issues seriously, said Amnesty International in a letter sent today to the countries participating in a forthcoming international conference on reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan., it is extremely worrying that progress is being limited to the capital while human rights remain far from realized for Afghans living in other provinces."

In the letter, Amnesty International urges the international community to take action on the issues of security, violence against women and prison conditions. These were among the areas in which the organization recorded some of the gravest human rights violations during its last visit to the country in February 2004.

....."Violations of the rights of women and girls, including physical abuse, underage marriage, exchange of girls to settle feuds were widely reported to Amnesty International during the recent visit."

....."Human rights violations are likely to continue as long as people reasonably suspected of being responsible for gross human rights violations are allowed to escape criminal responsibility and to hold positions of authority," Amnesty International stressed.

See: www.amnesty.org

On 2nd April, the second annual Chicago International Documentary Festival opened with the international premiere of "MARINA: AFGHANISTAN SHOUJO NO KANASHIMI WO TORU" (2003). Director Naofumi Nakamura of NHK-Japan Broadcasting Corporation captures the life of Marina Golbahari, heroine of Siddiq Barmak's OSAMA. www.scoop.co.nz

Contributions are welcome for the July 6 Newsletter
Closing date is June 16 2004

HOW TO SUPPORT SAWA

SAWA-Australia offers you this opportunity to give support. There are various means of doing this. Those wishing to subscribe or send donations, and who use Internet Banking, may transfer funds directly and at no cost, to the SAWA account:

Account Name: SAWA-Australia
Bendigo Bank Castlemaine
Branch BSB: 633-000
Acc. No: 120800610

Please confirm your e-contribution by emailing info@sawa-australia.org with details. We will send a receipt.

Or send cheques to:

SAWA-Australia
Po Box 1008 Castlemaine
Victoria Australia 3450

TO MAKE A BEQUEST

You may decide to leave something in your will to SAWA-Australia. It is a wonderful opportunity to make a lasting gift to people in need, as well as to an organization you would like to support

To ensure your wishes are respected, a solicitor will help you with the correct wording to make a bequest to SAWA-Australia in your will. We can assure you that your contribution will be used wisely and where it will do the most good. Please complete the form below and send to SAWA-Australia

I wish to make a bequest to SAWA.

Name:.....
 Address.....
PC.....
 Phone.....
 Email.....

The women, boys and girls of Afghanistan and in Pakistan refugee camps will appreciate your support

ALL funds will go to RAWA projects. Administration comes from member Subscriptions.

ACTION TEAMS can be made up of a group of friends, family or colleagues, a class, a school, a cubs/girl guide/boy scout group, or a community group, to raise funds.

- \$2000 pays for a doctor's salary for a year to provide healthcare to women
- \$1000 will buy a computer, printer, and stabilizer for an NGO office or computer course
- \$600 pays for a teacher's salary / a year
- \$300 pays for student chair for a classroom
- \$150 pays for classroom chalk boards for a school
- \$60 supplies notebooks, pencils, and pencil sharpeners for 300 students

REMINDER

Annual subscriptions, due on the 1st January each year, go towards administration, fundraising and the wider promotion of SAWA.

Please do not forget to join soon. We need your support to continue the extremely important work of SAWA.

Cut out or copy:

Name:.....

Organisation:

Address:.....

P.Code.....Phone:().....

Email:

Web page:.....

I support the objectives of SAWA

Signed:.....

Dated:.....

(circle as appropriate):

- Organisations: \$100
- Foundation Subscription \$ 50
- Individual \$ 20
- Concession \$ 10
- Student \$ 5
- School \$ 10
- Donation \$..

...

TOTAL \$.....