



Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan

Articles have been accepted in good faith, if you have any queries please contact the editor

## FROM THE CONVENER

*Eight years ago foreign troops arrived in Afghanistan to depose the Taliban government, pledging to free women from oppression and violence. Hamid Karzai, the new president, was greeted with great hopes and expectations. Today the situation of women is more desperate than ever. More and more women set themselves alight to escape from a life of misery. These self-immolations are not restricted to the few provinces where the Taliban pose a threat; they occur in provinces governed, with Karzai's blessing, by fundamentalist misogynist warlords. If progress of a society can be measured by progress in women's lives Afghanistan is clearly going backwards.*

*SAWA's objective is to improve the situation of the women of Afghanistan. If eight years of foreign occupation could not result in a better life for Afghanistan's women, one may well question the value of foreign troops in the country. Inside and outside Afghanistan voices are beginning to be heard that demand the removal of all foreign troops. Afghanistan's women have not benefited from the presence of foreign troops. As long as Australia, along with the other occupying forces, clings to its support for Karzai's government of warlords and drug barons, the situation of the women of Afghanistan can only get worse.*

*Matthias Tomczak*

### RAWA member Shazia speaks in Australia

In May and June RAWA member Shazia visited Australia to bring us face to face with the situation in her country. Shazia's impassioned plea for help for Afghan women and war widows – 50,000 in Kabul alone – was heard in Adelaide, Hobart, Melbourne, Castlemaine, Newcastle, Sydney, Brisbane and Lismore. SAWA committee member Grace McCaughey writes:

"Crucial to Afghanistan's future is the education of both boys and girls, as currently only 10% of Afghan girls are able to attend school, mainly in the large cities. In some provinces, girls are going to small underground RAWA and other schools. Many schools have been destroyed, and the children are frightened of

being molested, having acid thrown in their faces or being raped on their way to school. Shazia said that circumstances for women and children are worse now than when the Taliban were defeated by the US in 1991. They treat women as property, to be used as wished and violated when they want.



*Shazia speaks to supporters in Melbourne*

Shazia issued a message to Australians that all outside forces must be withdrawn from Afghanistan, saying the best act we can do is to email this message to Australian politicians. "Overseas governments are supporting the warlord dominated Afghan government. The occupation is leading to increasing alienation of the people from any democratic possibility," she said. "A civil war would be less destructive than what we have now. Democracy would evolve from a civil war through the people. Nobody can impose democracy on another country".

Shazia praised SAWA's work and urged us all to continue and increase our efforts to give the women of Afghanistan the opportunity of a better life despite the deteriorating situation."

Reports from local groups on Shazia's tour start on page 2.

### Handicraft production at the Training Centre

The end of 2008 marked the completion of the first literacy course at the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul. From its establishment in March 2008 the purpose of the centre has always been to give women the training to support a family. But

SAWA-Australia P.O. Box 90, Flinders University PO, Bedford Park SA 5042      [www.sawa-australia.org](http://www.sawa-australia.org)      [info@sawa-australia.org](mailto:info@sawa-australia.org)

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## SAWA OBJECTIVES

- Raise funds to assist in development and relief projects for Afghan women and children;
- increase community awareness of the forgotten needs of Afghan women;
- encourage women, men and young people to join SAWA-Australia ;
- set up SAWA/RAWA support groups throughout Australia.

**Convener:** Matthias Tomczak

**Secretary:** Barbara James

**Treasurer:** Olga Eningk

**Membership Officer:** Helen Fletcher

**Committee:** Dawn Atkinson, Grace McCaughey, Ruth Redfern

**Newsletter Editor:** Matthias Tomczak

**Public Officer:** Ruth Redfern

**Auditor:** Bob Shahinger

SAWA did not raise sufficient funds to get the planned handicraft training going in 2008 and had to advise the Centre that the situation was unlikely to change in 2009.

To address the urgent need for handicraft training the Centre had to take up a loan to buy the first sewing machines. However, as a result of Shazia's tour SAWA's donation income increased, and last month we could not only send the funds to support handicraft training for the current year but also the funds that allow the Centre to repay the loan. Meanwhile, the sewing machines have been busy for months:



### Situation of women and girls deteriorates

After several years of progress, girls' education in Afghanistan has been set back by recent attacks on schools that have frightened parents into keeping their daughters at home, a UN official said on Wednesday. Daniel Toole, South Asia Director for UNICEF, said families are becoming fearful about educating their daughters, despite an enormous appetite for them to learn.

"What we are starting to see is that families are indeed afraid to send their girls to school," he told Reuters, little more than a week after two mystery gas attacks at schools just north of Kabul put nearly 150 students in hospital.

"The combination of anti-government elements attacking schools, fear of gas and whatever that is now circulating, certainly means that parents will be more leery about sending their children to school, particularly their girls." Girls' education was probably worse now than a year ago, he said, reversing a trend of improvements over the last few years.

In the first four months of this year, UNICEF recorded 73 incidents involving schools, including burnings, explosions, threats and attacks, which left 27 people dead. This compared to 53 incidents for the same period in 2008 that resulted in three deaths, and 65 cases the previous year with 10 dead.

"We have had attacks on villages, on schools by both anti-government elements as well as by coalition forces and international troops that have hit civilians," Toole said.

"Gigantic efforts" are still required to cut Afghanistan's low rate of child survival and the high rate of women dying in child birth -- both among the most extreme in the world, he said.

Afghanistan has the world's third-highest mortality rate for children, with 257 of 1,000 dying before they turn five, according to UNICEF figures. It also has the world's second-highest maternal mortality rate with around one in eight women dying because of childbirth with most cases preventable, according to UN figures.

*Reuters and AFP, 20 May 2009*

### The Voice of the Voiceless

*A report on Shazia's presentation at the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, University of South Australia, by Jodi Knoop, Member of Zonta Club of Adelaide Flinders*

Here is where a picture of Shazia Shakib would be, if we were able to show her face. But as a spokesperson for RAWA Shazia is traveling under a pseudonym and no photos are allowed. With the assistance of Zonta International District 23 Area 2, Shazia was undertaking a speaking tour of Australia and I was lucky enough to be able to attend her fully booked presentation at the Hawke Centre on 28 May.

Shazia bravely spoke publicly about her role in RAWA and its commitment to improving the status of women in Afghanistan. We were given a brief history of RAWA, and it was sobering to hear that Meena, the founding leader of RAWA, was assassinated in 1987 by the Afghanistan branch of the KGB for daring to lead an association that was founded to give voice to the silenced women of Afghanistan.

RAWA has established schools with hostels for refugee boys and girls and conducts literacy and vocational training courses for women. It also distributes publications to Afghan women about social and political awareness in regard to their rights and potential. How similar to what we do as Zontians, but in such a different situation. I couldn't help but wonder how much I would do as a Zontian if my life were at risk for just being a member.

Shazia gave a presentation on the plight of women in Afghanistan, and talked about girls as young as 6 being forced into marriage, subjected to domestic violence and brutalities such as acid attacks for any sign of self determination or asserting basic human rights. We were told of the use of rape as a weapon against women and young girls and the powerlessness of these women to receive any judicial or legal help.

While Shazia spoke about subjects that are confronting and saddening, it was very uplifting to hear her speak so passionately about RAWA's determination to 'bring the change' that will see a democratic regime in Afghanistan with equal rights for all women.

While we may take for granted as Zontians being able to freely participate and be members of an organization that works to advance the status of women, members of RAWA do not enjoy the same freedoms. Shazia and her colleagues live every day with the knowledge that they are under threat for providing basics like secondary education for young girls, publishing journals and humanitarian services. I was motivated to find out more and found the RAWA website very informative. Since hearing Shazia speak I have a new appreciation of how vital it is to ensure that as a Zontian, I take every opportunity to speak up for all women who are forced to be silent but perhaps more importantly, support organizations such as RAWA so that Shazia and women like her can continue to improve their own circumstances.

### Local groups report on Shazia's visit

Shazia's talk at the *University of Tasmania* (UTAS) was facilitated very ably by Terese Henning from *UTAS* and attended by

approximately 70 people. There was excellent support provided by Terese, Brendan Gogarty and others in the Law School. Ian Newman from the *Peace Coalition* had organised the event. \$621 were raised.

The lunch organised by Kay Binet, President of the Hobart group of the *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)*, was attended by approximately 45 people, including members of the Afghani community. \$470 was raised, and \$600 worth of crafts were sold.

*Yabbo Thompson*

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Over 90 people heard Shazia speak in Castlemaine. Thanks to Gloria Melzer and Karina de Wolf plus all those great cooks including Jamala Hashimi for the excellent lunch. \$2067 were raised, and \$800 worth of Afghan crafts were sold. Some larger donations added another \$2000, totalling \$4867. Another grand result from the ever generous people of Castlemaine.

*Grace McCaughey*

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SAWA in Sydney appreciates the support of many including Dr. Bronwyn Winter who made herself available to be facilitator at Shazia's first Sydney event. Bronwyn has met with RAWA women in Peshawar and visited one of their refuges, and has written about RAWA.

The contribution of Dr Nina Burrige and colleagues, from both UTS Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre and UTS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, made the three hour seminar "Women in Islam: building their own futures" an outstanding success. Shazia was joined on the panel by other Afghan women including a BA law graduate from Kabul University who is currently at UTS doing her MA in law as a UNIFEM Peace Scholarship recipient and a Ph.D. candidate in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Sydney University, researching women's movements in the Middle East. The capacity audience included Afghan students from a state secondary girls' school as well as students from a private girls' school.

Shazia's evening event in Balmain again had 'standing room only' audience that was greatly moved by her talk. SAWA members and supporters thank the Mayor of Leichhardt as well as individual councillors and council staff for the support given towards a successful evening.

We banked \$1,165 following Shazia's events in Sydney.

Malalai Joya had two major events in Sydney for the launch of her book *Raising My Voice*. Each event was attended by approximately 500 people.

The support, inclusion and generosity extended to the local SAWA volunteers was outstanding. There are many to thank; Tracey Cheetham, Publicity Manager of Pan Macmillan Australia, Barbara Horgan and staff of Shearers Bookshop, Palace Cinema Management and staff, Judy Benson organiser of Dymocks/Sydney Morning Herald Literary Lunch and Stephen Lewis General Manager of Four Seasons Hotel and his outstanding staff.

The lunch raffle raised \$3,350 for the Vocational Training Centre for Women. Sincere thanks to all others who gave so much of their time and energy.

*Dawn Atkinson*

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After a very successful national speaking tour, Shazia was able to meet with Adelaide supporters at a Farewell Party in a relatively informal setting. On Thursday 18 June at the Eastwood Community Centre, Shazia presented her final talk to those who missed out on hearing her at the beginning of the tour at the Hawke Centre. SAWA Secretary, Barbara James presented Shazia with a gift to symbolize our gratitude and warm wishes for her future. Barbara later reported back to RAWA that "We were deeply impressed by Shazia; her level of professionalism, her breadth of knowledge, her English skills, her maturity and willingness to work hard were outstanding".

The evening was made successful through generous donations and even more enjoyable by the excellent array of food supplied by members and guests, amid a background of Afghan and other world music.

*Barbara James*

### ***Bleeding Afghanistan, a book by Sonali Kolhatkar and James Ingalls***

The authors of *Bleeding Afghanistan* are the organizers of *Afghan Women's Mission*, the RAWA support association in the USA. The following text is from the publisher's promotion:

In the years following 9/11, US policy in Afghanistan has received little scrutiny, either from the media or the public. Despite official claims of democracy and women's freedom, Afghanistan has yet to emerge from the ashes of decades-long war. Through in-depth research and detailed historical context, Sonali Kolhatkar and James Ingalls report on the injustice of US policies in Afghanistan historically and in the post 9-11 era. Drawing from declassified government documents and on-the-ground interviews with Afghan activists, journalists, lawyers, refugees, and students, the book examines the connections between US training and arming of Mujahadeen commanders and the subversion of Afghan democracy, to the sad state of warlordism, women's oppression, and poverty today.

"Bleeding Afghanistan is without a doubt the most realistic and sincere reflection of the ongoing tragedy in my ill-fated Afghanistan, covering every aspect of life under the US domination and its fundamentalist criminals and warlord hirelings." – Malalai Joya

### ***Raising my Voice, a book by Malalai Joya***

Malalai Joya is the youngest and most famous female MP in Afghanistan, whose bravery and vision have won her an international following. Born during the Russian invasion and spending her youth in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan, Malalai Joya returned to Afghanistan in her teenage years. There she worked as a women's rights activist, running underground classes for girls in defiance of the ruling Taliban, risking torture and execution if she'd been caught.

After the fall of the Taliban, Malalai was elected as one of the few women, to represent her province at the constitutional Grand Assembly. Here she made world headlines in December 2003 when she dared to speak out against the crimes of the warlords who now form part of the Afghan parliament.

Her public denunciation made her a popular figure among the people in Afghanistan but resulted in several attempts to assassinate her, and for the last five years she'd lived under constant threat, moving from safe house to safe house. It never stopped her speaking out, and on the back of her courage she was elected to Afghanistan's new parliament.

*Raising my Voice* is Malalai Joya's extraordinary story. Like the woman herself, it is outspoken, passionate and fearless, giving us a rare woman's perspective on a country and a conflict that affects us all. *From the book cover*

### A thank you to our supporters

Many organizations and individuals gave SAWA generous support during Shazia's tour. The Zonta groups of Mornington Peninsula, the Riverland, Port Lincoln, Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu Peninsula and Noarlunga contributed to Shazia's air fare; major contributions came from the Zonta groups of Adelaide Flinders and Queenborough, Tasmania.

The Victorian and Queensland branches of the Australian Education Union gave generously, and in Newcastle the NSW branch organized an outstanding collection. A major donation came from the Multi-Faith Centre of Griffiths University.

Earlier in the year SAWA received a generous donation from the Unitarian Church of Adelaide, and the Soroptimists raised funds for SAWA as part of the "Mad May Day" Chinese banquet.

A science adviser to an Atlas of the Sea published by Weldon Owen generously donated his honorarium of \$8,500 to SAWA. We thank Weldon Owen that, on hearing about his intention, the company added another \$500, lifting his donation to \$9,000.

### "Around the World in 60 Minutes"

The lilting sounds of the Green Oak Players Recorder Group filled the St Ignatius Church Hall on Sunday July 5. Over 100 people came to hear musical pieces from many different countries beautifully played on recorders of all shapes and sizes. The highlight of the afternoon was unarguably SAWA Committee member Ruth Redfern's performance on the castanets; she even received an encore!

SAWA thanks everyone who came for their generosity and would like to report that over \$1,000 was raised. All proceeds go to the Vocational Training Centre for war widows in Kabul.

*Barbara James*

### SAWA starts local groups in all states

Shazia's tour and Joya's book launch brought many new members to SAWA, and there is great interest in setting up local SAWA groups. This will expand SAWA's ongoing fundraising activities beyond Adelaide, Sydney and Castlemaine to Hobart, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Lismore. When this SAWAN goes out all local groups will have been established; contact

details are posted on the SAWA website and will be detailed in the next SAWAN. So look out for a SAWA group in your area and become part of SAWA's activities!

### SAWA now on Facebook

SAWA is now a "Cause" on the social networking site FACEBOOK and our membership is growing at amazing speed. Popular with an ever-increasing number of people of all ages, but particularly with young people, FACEBOOK is another way to connect with friends and family from all around the world. For SAWA it is a dynamic method of spreading the message and raising awareness about the reality of life today for Afghan women and children. Tell your family and friends about SAWA's Cause on FACEBOOK and invite them to join:

<http://apps.facebook.com/causes/26108>

*Barbara James*

### Bits and pieces from the media

#### **Obama on the sprinkling of elections**

No country is going to create wealth if its leaders exploit the economy to enrich themselves, or if police can be bought off by drug traffickers. No person wants to live in a society where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery. That is not democracy, that is tyranny, even if occasionally you sprinkle an election in there, and now is the time for that style of governance to end.

*From a speech given in Ghana on 11 July 2009, unfortunately talking to Africans and not addressing Afghan politicians.*

#### **Rory Stewart on the use of Afghanistan's state budget**

US generals have spoken openly about wanting a combined Afghan army-police-security apparatus of 450,000 soldiers. Such a force would cost \$2 or \$3 billion a year to maintain; the annual revenue of the Afghan government is just \$600 million.

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#### **Patrick Coburn on financing the enemy**

Afghan truckers carrying supplies for US or NATO forces have to pay local security companies for protection or bribe their way through. Not all the gunmen on the road are Taliban: some local commanders and bandits act independently, though probably under license from the Taliban. One western aid official in Kabul told me that a 100-truck convoy travelling from Pakistan to the Dutch base in Oruzgan province paid \$750,000 for safe passage.

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To become a member of SAWA subscribe to the SAWAN at <http://sawa-australia.org/joinus.htm> or write to SAWA's PO Box.

Send a message to [membership@sawa-australia.org](mailto:membership@sawa-australia.org) if you wish to receive the SAWAN by email rather than ordinary mail.

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