



## Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan

### FROM THE EDITOR

*Natural disasters, a nuclear emergency, political upheaval – the world has witnessed so many tragic events and heard so many calls for help lately that it can become difficult to maintain an adequate level of compassion. Afghanistan is slipping back in the news. But the needs of Afghanistan's women have not changed, and their situation is getting worse. This SAWAN reports on proposed and planned changes in the law that will impact severely on women's lives. But it also shows the other side of Afghanistan, the side where women determine their destiny themselves and escape oppression and poverty despite all odds. These women need our assistance, and we should not abandon them. Our donation stream is not flowing as it used to. Please help us to make it strong again.*

SAWA's transition to state-based associations has been smooth but still requires minor adjustments. You can help us in the process by deciding where you want to concentrate your support. If you want to contribute to the funding of RAWA's Hewad High School you should direct your donations to SAWA (NSW). If your donations are for OPAWC's Vocational Training Centre in Kabul they should go to SAWA (SA). Bank account details are on pages 3 and 4.

Matthias Tomczak

### International Women's Day in Kabul

Every year the 8th of March is a special day around the world. International Women's Day has been celebrated since 1911. Originally called International Working Women's Day, it is today observed as a day of resistance of women against all forms of oppression.

In Afghanistan RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, has marked International Women's Day with a huge event for many years. In front of an audience of over 1500 it spoke out against the oppression of women in Afghan society and showed the way forward to liberation. Rising attacks from fundamentalists forced RAWA to cancel the event in 2009.

In 2010 OPAWC, the Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities, took up the tradition and organized again a public event. It was attended by over 1600 guests including representatives from several government ministries.

SAWA (SA) secretary Barbara James sent a Message of Solidarity for OPAWC:

### SAWA OBJECTIVES

- Raise funds to assist in development and relief projects for Afghan women and children,
- Increase community awareness of the needs of Afghan women and children;
- Encourage women, men and young people to join SAWA-Australia state associations;
- Set up SAWA/RAWA support groups; and
- Encourage cooperation among SAWA-Australia state associations through participation in national SAWA network forums.



OPAWC director Latifa Ahmady addresses the event

*"On this day, International Women's Day 2011, SAWA-Australia (SA) sends you its heartfelt message of solidarity and support.*

*OPAWC has been serving the suffering women of Afghanistan for the past 12 years, helping them to develop their potential and stand up for their rights. SAWA-Australia (SA) deplores the deterioration of women's lives in Afghanistan due to inequality in the law and in access to education.*

*We admire OPAWC for its struggle to improve the lives of Afghan women and children through education, income generation and healthcare.*

*This brave organization is promoting women to participate in the process of the reconstruction of a peaceful Afghanistan.*

*We at SAWA-Australia (SA) are proud to support such a dedicated organization and wish it continued success."*



Some of the guests who attended the event

Within days SAWA (SA) received an email from Latifa, the Director of OPAWC's Vocational Training Centre:

*Dearest Barbara and other supporters, thank you so much for your efforts and for your kind message. OPAWC is also proud to have supporters like you, we are struggling to achieve our goals, that is why we accept every risk, in this function we will have some supporters from Italy and Japan – hope we could have you as well, one thing we want to convey that we and you are struggling for the same issue, no matter if you are here with us or not, but you will be always in our hearts, in the hearts of the suffering women who you are supporting. Please pass our Solidarity Message to our supporters as well on IWD. Best Wishes, Latifa*

### International Women's Day at Hewad High School

The 8<sup>th</sup> of March was an important day at Hewad High School, not only for the girls but for the boys as well. Together they celebrated International Women's Day with songs, speeches and a theatre play. The photo of Meena, RAWA's founder who was assassinated in 1987, adorned the speaker's rostrum, and various RAWA posters could be seen. Hewad High School raises not only girls to become liberated women, but through its co-educational teaching practice it also raises the boys' awareness of women's rights and aspirations so that as husbands and fathers they will join their wives and daughters in creating a new Afghanistan.

The celebration was attended by families and friends. They were impressed by the self-assured manner of the students who spoke or acted in the play.



*A student addresses the assembled parents and friends*



*A scene from the theatre play*

### New proposed laws: a dangerous step backwards

In February the international press reported that the Afghan parliament was about to enact a law to regulate women's shelters. These shelters are a last resort for women who want to escape domestic violence or have to find a safe refuge to avoid forced marriage. They offer protection from persecution and open the door to education.

The new law enables the government to take over existing shelters and place them under the authority of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Following a public outcry from NGOs that run women's shelters President Karzai declared that only shelters believed to have low standards will be placed under government care.

Some 1500 NGOs operate in Afghanistan. Many run women's shelters. It is well known that many private individuals have set up their own "NGO" to siphon off foreign donor money into their own pockets, and it is quite conceivable that the legitimacy of some women's shelters is dubious, to say the least. The new law may thus be seen to address a real problem. But its regulations will apply to all shelters, whether they are taken over by the government or remain under NGO control, and they are designed to deprive women of their freedom: To join a women's shelter the woman has to be accompanied by a male relative; she has to be handed back to the family if the family demands it; while in the shelter she has to undergo monthly medical checks "to monitor her sexual activity". Which perpetrator of domestic violence would be prepared to accompany his wife to a shelter?

At the time of writing the law has been stalled and is officially under review. But we have seen the same happening to the infamous Shia family law – it was kept "under review" for a few months until public vigilance had waned and was then gazetted without much international protest.

There are other indications that Afghan society is going backwards under the current government which enjoys the support of the occupying foreign forces. On 14 April Radio Free Europe carried a news story about a proposed law to regulate weddings. Afghan weddings are traditionally a most elaborate affair, and many a bridegroom's family goes into lifelong debt to finance it. So when the Justice Ministry says that it wants to limit the cost of weddings by restricting the number of guests to 300 and spending no more than about \$5 per person this sounds like a justifiable aim. After all, RAWA and OPAWC also try to educate people that more modest weddings are more appropriate for poor families. But the new proposed law also includes the establishment of committees to monitor weddings to ensure that women dress "modestly" and that male and female guests attend the wedding in separate rooms. The proposed policing committees would include representatives of the Religious Affairs Ministry and enforce Shari'a-compliant dress.

One may well have reason to ask how far Afghanistan has gone back on its road, and how close such laws will bring it back to standards that operated under the Taliban.

*Matthias Tomczak*





**Convener:** Matthias Tomczak **Secretary:** Barbara James **Treasurer:** Christine Tomczak  
**Committee:** Carmel Chiu-Sutcliffe, Libby Drew, Kath Jones, Ruth Redfern.  
**Newsletter editor:** Matthias Tomczak **Public Officer:** Ruth Redfern **Auditor:** Bob Shahinger

### Sweetest Embrace in Aldinga

In summer, at the Aldinga Arts-Eco Village, we like to watch movies in our amphitheatre. In January, SAWA accepted to lend us one of their movies: 'The Sweetest Embrace', and in the evening of the 26th, some twenty of us snuggled on and in our blankets as a gully wind freshened the air.

The film follows the return to their country, of two young Afghan men living in Canada, Soorgul and Amir, and their search for their families. The name of the film refers to a poem said at the beginning about 'the sweetest embrace... that of a mother and her child'... Indeed, the most poignant moment of the movie is the reunion of Soorgul with his parents. Unfortunately, Amir's search doesn't meet with the same success.

During their journey we understand the omnipresent dangers of war and discover the simplicity of life yet the hospitality of the people. We were moved by the beauty of the film, the sincerity of Soorgul and Amir, their deep feelings for their family, the simple and direct relationship between them and the people they meet. We thank SAWA for letting us share the movie and we are pleased to offer them a contribution to the work with the women of Afghanistan.

### A visit to Kabul

It had been a cold and wet winter's day in Kabul and the traffic had been chaos. So I was an hour late to meet Latifa, director of OPAWC's Vocational Training Centre in Kabul. She greeted me with such enthusiasm and passion that immediately my heart began to warm and then dance with hers. The possibilities of what women can achieve; the strength to resist the fundamentalists of all colors; the wonder of achieving real change with your own hands and heart. Just half an hour with Latifa and I could believe that the world could, one day, be OK.

A few days later I met with the education coordinator (I forget her name – how embarrassing!), who showed me around the Vocational Training Program. As we sludged through the mud of the streets, dodging the frozen puddles alongside women in burkas and men with their sideways glances I knew that this wasn't the centre of progressive Afghanistan. We slipped inside a non-descript gate and into a house that was literally teaming with women. Suddenly I knew I was somewhere different. The burkas could come off, and the head scarves slipped back, indicating this was a place where it was safe to reveal oneself. The rooms were packed with women – young and old, Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek – all united in their desire to learn. One group was practicing Dari; another mathematics. In another building were women learning embroidery, tailoring, sewing, and using sewing machines. Tears welled in my eyes as I told them that I bring love and prayers from many people in Australia who think of them often, and want to encourage them in their struggle for peace and justice.



Jessica with some of the teachers

Afghanistan will live in peace, and freedom for all.

Jessica Morrison, Victoria University and WILPF

As I left I put my headscarf firmly back on and braved the streets again. These women are working, often without the support of their families or communities, for a real place in their world. Their courage dwarfs mine. Their feminism is far more grounded and real. They are laying foundations for a time when

### BHP-Billiton matched giving, a reminder

We reported a year ago that SAWA is accredited with the BHP-Billiton Matched Giving program. Under the program BHP matches every dollar donated by a BHP employee. SAWA received a donation from a BHP employee in Port Hedland last year, but we would like to make other BHP employees aware of this opportunity to double their donations. So if anyone knows someone who works for BHP please tell them! If they organize a fundraising event for SAWA, BHP will even match the total of donations received.

### SAWA events in Perth and Adelaide

The Perth group invites all to an *Afternoon with Samira Nabizadah* **Sunday 29 May 2 – 4 pm** in the Freemantle Arts Centre, North Wing room 15. 21 year old Samira will talk about her experience as a refugee coming to Australia when she was 11 and reflect on visiting her home country.

SAWA-Australia (SA) will show the documentary *The Sweetest Embrace* during refugee week on **Tuesday 21 June 7.30 pm**, North Adelaide Community Centre Tynte Street.

Several SAWA members wrote emails to the Australian ambassador to Afghanistan to raise their concern over the proposed regulation of women's refugees and received a diplomatic response. SAWA (SA) secretary Barbara James was interviewed about the proposed law on *The Wire*, a national current affairs program for community radio. The interview prompted the journalist to take Afghanistan up again two weeks later, and interviewed Barbara again to inform listeners about the rising number of self-burnings.



**Convener:** Dawn Atkinson **Assistant Convener:** Shirley Allen

**Treasurer:** Carolyn Allen

**Committee:** Maryellen Galbally, Margaret Hetherton, June Lunsmann, Herma Sieper, Helen Toner.

## International Women's Day Centenary

This important milestone was recognised by SAWA (NSW) in several ways.

We had an information and bag stall in Martin Place, Sydney, to greet marchers on their arrival from Sydney Town Hall. There was considerable interest and we sold \$360 worth of SAWA bags.

SAWA (NSW) was honoured to receive and accept an invitation from the Governor-General of Australia and Mr Michael Bryce to attend a reception to mark the Centenary of International Women's Day at Government House Canberra. The NSW Convener, Dawn Atkinson, attended and reported "to have SAWA represented at such an occasion is a recognition of the work of all SAWA members and supporters. It was an opportunity to encourage the interest of many like-minded women."

On 10<sup>th</sup> March, a number of SAWA members attended a talk at the University of Technology, Sydney, by Nasima Rahmani, who was a Peace Scholar at UTS before returning to Afghanistan to work in ActionAid's project providing paralegal training and community education on violence against women.

The reality of life in Kabul was brought closer to us by the distress Nasima expressed in telling us of the recent death of a close friend and colleague – her husband and children also died – in a suicide bomb attack in a supermarket. Her name was Hamida Barmaki, a lecturer in the Law Faculty in Kabul. In Nasima's interview on Radio National's *The Law Report* she described Hamida as "a very committed human rights activist and women's rights activist and ...one of the eight commissioners for the ...Independent Human Rights Commission in Afghanistan and she got killed for nothing."

Nasima recognised the improvements for women that followed the fall of the Taliban, but made clear how much more needed to be achieved and how difficult it is because of the lack of government support and the strength of traditional practices in the provinces.

Her work involves not only paralegal training for suitable women, but literacy education and help for women to generate a livelihood through such things as a gardening program, and education programs for men as well as women in the right to be protected against violence.

On Radio National's *The Law Report* Nasima Rahmani spoke at greater length about her work as Manager of the Women's Rights Program with ActionAid Afghanistan. This is a country in which a United Nations survey found that 87% of women experience violence. It's a country where most women are illiterate, that is, only about 12% read and write and many girls marry by the time they are 16. In the paralegal program she runs, Nasima trains women from a broad range of occupations such as teachers, engineers, doctors, NGO workers and even journalists, about human rights and women's rights. Included in their training is an understanding of the legal system in Afghanistan, how to give psychological support to a woman who has been a victim of violence and skills in mediation so that cases do not have to be referred to the courts.

A Message from SAWA – Australia (NSW) was sent to all at Hewad High School: "As we come together today to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of International Women's Day we acknowledge the dedication of all RAWA members and supporters who, for more than three decades, have continued to seek equal rights for women and equality and justice for all Afghan people."

*On this day we honour the women of RAWA and their supporters as these are dedicated people who know that for Afghanistan to succeed the people must be educated.*

*We remember the mothers, daughters, the sisters and the grandmothers, both past and present who have struggled and continue to struggle to provide a secular education to the children and women of Afghanistan. Literacy, education, is a basic human right and SAWA-Australia (NSW) are proud to sponsor Hewad High School.*

*We offer our warmest wishes and deepest respect to the students, staff and parents of Hewad High School.*

*As you come together today at Hewad High School know that SAWA-Australia (NSW) members and supporters stand beside you and have you in their thoughts.*

*With very best wishes from each of us."*

## Women's shelters

A letter was sent to the Australian Ambassador in Kabul and other foreign Ambassadors, expressing SAWA-NSW's grave concerns over new regulations proposed by the Afghan government which could threaten the protection of women from domestic violence, contrary to the intention of setting up these shelters.

Replies were received from the Australian and U.S. Ambassadors which suggested some amendments to the regulations were being considered, but at this stage we do not know the outcome. The very fact of the shelters coming under government control raises concern for us as we have been told by Afghan women visiting here that the government has not been supportive of anti-violence measures.

## Fundraising for Hewad High School

We have been in contact with Hewad High School supporters in Japan who appear to be safe but the catastrophe in Japan has meant that they have not been able to raise their annual US\$6,000 support nor visit the school as planned. In accepting that their priorities lay with their family, friends and the people of Japan, SAWA-NSW must raise that extra US\$6,000.

If you do hold a fund raiser for Hewad High School our preferred option of deposit is by direct deposit to

SAWA-AUSTRALIA (NSW) Inc,  
BSB 633 000, Account No. 141 397 471

(Enter "Donation" in the description field and your name in the "Remitter" field.)

Cheques or money orders can be posted to

SAWA-Australia (NSW) Inc., P.O. Box 1741 Rozelle NSW 2039

Companies and other commercial bodies can make donations to SAWA-Australia (NSW) Inc. and offset them against their tax liability under the heading "good corporate citizen". Unfortunately this option is not available for individuals.

In Sydney's inner west a dinner with silent auctions has been planned for **Wednesday 18th May** 6.30 for 7 pm, Finola's Restaurant, Balmain Bowling Club, 156 Darling Street, Balmain; for bookings see the event page on SAWA's website. SAWA-NSW member and artist Sandra Burton will donate 10 percent of the proceeds from her exhibition in May to SAWA-NSW's support for Hewad High School.