



### From the Editor

*Who cares about Afghanistan? Most foreign troops are gone (the USA secured an agreement for a permanent troop presence), the news channels of the world have lost interest. Having lost the lucrative connections to occupying forces, the local warlords and politicians now fight over the spoils. The "unity government", set up after the 2014 elections to overcome the rivalry between Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, is dysfunctional. Ex-president Karzai is biding his time. Before the 2014 election he had refused to sign the troop agreement with the USA. People I spoke to during my visit to Kabul two months ago expect him to come back to power, presenting himself as the true patriot against continued foreign military operations, hoping that his corrupt multi-million dollar enrichment of family and friends will be forgotten. According to the Guardian Weekly of 17 July he already tries to undermine the current government with the intention to bring it down.*

*Security deteriorates while the politicians quarrel, and the modest gains for women's rights and safety from violence are eroded. But public protest is growing. The brutal killing of Farkhunda in March, witnessed, photographed and videoed by impassive bystanders, brought thousands to the streets, and women insisted to carry her coffin at her funeral.*

*This is not the time to abandon the women of Afghanistan. Our efforts during the last 10 years have created a centre of education from which women emerge determined and prepared to gain and defend their rights. They will play their part in coming confrontations and need all the help they can get. We can contribute in a small way by continuing our support for the work of OPAWC and AFCECO.*

Matthias Tomczak



*Thousands demand the punishment of Farkhunda's killers at the protest rally organized by the Solidarity Party Hambastaghi*

### Government schools and Taliban control

Every now and then the press reports that moves are afoot to get the Taliban back into the fold and offer them participation in government. Every time warning voices are raised, bemoaning the readiness of the Afghan government to give in to armed pressure. The credulous observer could be lead to believe that so far the government has steadfastly objected to all demands of the Taliban.

Unfortunately nothing can be further from the truth, particularly in the area of education. The following is based on the report "The Battle for the Schools" produced by Antonio Giustozzi and Claudio Franco of the Afghanistan Analysis Network in December 2011, with a brief

update from IRIN, the independent news service formerly working for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, dated 19 January 2015.

Collaboration between government representatives and Taliban officials began as soon as the Taliban realized that their bombing campaign against girls' schools and the killing of teachers and students alienated the people, who wanted to send their children to school.

The first indication of a shift in policy came in 2007, when the Taliban announced that they would open their own schools for boys and later also for girls in provinces under their control, using the text books developed during their "Emirate" in the 1990s.

Initially Education Minister Atmar stressed that the government would not tolerate Taliban schools. "Any place of education controlled by the Taliban will be considered a terrorist training ground," he said. "The Afghan government has full legitimacy to take military activity on these places." At the same time negotiations began with local representatives of the Ministry of Education aimed at accommodating the Taliban curriculum in government schools.

The public perception of the use of negotiations was mixed. A survey carried out in 2008 indicated that a majority (34%) preferred the use of community committees (*shoras*) as the best way to defend schools, as opposed to a minority (21%) who preferred negotiations with the Taliban. But the *shoras* were not armed and often forced to go into negotiations themselves, so the practice of obtaining peace from Taliban attacks through compromise over the curriculum was more widespread than indicated by these figures.

The Ministry of Education initially ignored all Taliban approaches to local ministry representatives, but by 2009 informal deals with the local authorities were satisfactory enough for the Taliban to officially drop their orders to attack schools and teachers and replace them by orders to obey the Taliban's policy on education.

The encroachment of Taliban directives on the state school curriculum reached a new stage in 2010 when under the (still current) Education Minister Farooq Wardak the Department allowed more flexibility on the local level, for example the removal of pages with pictures of the leader of the "Northern Alliance" Ahmad Shah Massoud and Taliban commander Mullah Omar and of certain passages in the history of Afghanistan. Finally, in 2011 the minister declared that the Taliban are "no longer opposing girls' education."



*A guard at the gate, but the Taliban ideology has already entered*

Since then the infiltration of Taliban ideology in state schools has become an accepted fact. Many state schools that had been closed or destroyed in earlier confrontations were reopened from 2010

onward, but while the government paid for the costs, the curriculum was proposed by the Taliban, textbooks were changed accordingly and teachers recommended by the Taliban were hired.

What will the future hold? Differences among the Taliban existed already during the years before 2007. Many of the young Taliban recruits went through schools and even universities, while the commanders of the old guard come from seminaries (madrassas). Initially the educated Taliban did not interfere in affairs of the military, and the Taliban from the madrassas kept out of civil affairs. But there is intense friction between the two sides and very different views on education. The Taliban from the madrassas consider themselves educated, knowledgeable in all four schools of Islamic thought (Sahfii, Hanbali, Maliki and Hanafi, all established between 700 and 900 of our calendar) and look down on school-educated Taliban. As time went on the influence of the madrassas increased, and the seminary Taliban insisted on more control.

*The Battle for the Schools* summarizes the period 2007 – 2011: "The main point worth making about Taleban demands concerning the reopening of state schools is that such demands did not change much between 2007 and 2011: adopt the Taleban curriculum, mujahidin-era textbooks and Taleban-approved religious texts, hire teachers of religious subject approved by the Taleban. The Taleban side did not compromise on any of these points; if accommodation occurred, the [Ministry of Education] side did it."

Moving forward to 2015, the withdrawal of foreign combat troops produced new splinter groups on both sides of the conflict. Different Taliban fronts receive funding from outside, including Pakistan and the Gulf countries, and act independently from a central command. Others have broken away completely and pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). On the opposite side numerous militias and criminal gangs who had previously allied themselves with the government have begun to act independently, to make up for the drying up of the money supply from the USA and NATO.

It all makes it impossible to predict the fate of the state-run school system. But it reinforces the importance of supporting those who, against all odds, offer a secular education, as part of a basic literacy course in the Vocational Training Centre of the Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC) and as part of a girl's or boy's primary and secondary education in the homes of the Afghan Child Education and Care Organization (AFCECO). SAWA-Australia is proud to be part of that effort.

Matthias Tomczak

## Student scholarships bring happiness



For the last 3 years some SAWA supporters have funded university scholarships for students from AFCECO's foster havens to attend tertiary education institutions in Afghanistan. This year the first of the sponsored students completed their education and are now looking for employment. **Shazia and Zubaida** had attended their university law course together and have become close friends. Zubaida has moved out of the foster haven into

an apartment with her brother, who supports her while she is looking for work. Shazia does not have relatives in Kabul and is still staying in the foster haven while waiting to get a job. She wants to bring her ailing mother from Jalalabad to Kabul and look after her but cannot do that without work. In June both had one week of employment, going from door to door to interview people as part of a survey about urban pollution, the only employment during two months.

Finding work in Kabul is very difficult, particularly for women. Even when a job is found working conditions can be harrowing. Many men do not accept women in the workplace, and harassment is widespread. Shazia and Zubaida hope to get a job with one of the many foreign NGOs, where the pay is good and the conditions are tolerable. We wish them both success in their careers.

**Rima and Hajira** are two of the currently sponsored students. Both are enrolled in a dentistry degree and in their first year of study. Their sponsor operates a dental clinic in Australia, and when SAWA (SA) convener Matthias Tomczak announced that he was to visit Kabul again she prepared two packs of dental tools and instruments to take with him. Rima and Hajira were overjoyed to receive this very useful study support. They said that they had just completed their first semester with theoretical topics and were looking forward to their first practical sessions as part of the second semester.



*Rima and Hajira go through their new dental tools. They were on their way to soccer practice and are already in their soccer gear.*

SAWA (SA) thanks all student sponsors who helped to get Shazia and Zubaida to where they are now. Without their support they would not have had the opportunity to study at university; most likely they would have had no other choice but to return to their home villages, get married and disappear in a rural courtyard. For them the sponsorship period is over, but for the sponsors the outcome will last forever: To have changed the lives of two women and allowed them to make full use of their gifts and potential will be remembered.

For Rima and Hajira the sponsorships have just begun. More prospective students are waiting in AFCECO's foster havens for their chance to get a higher education, having completed high school. If you want to give them this chance please consider sponsoring a student. Go to the SAWA (SA) [student sponsorship page](#) and meet the young men and women who are waiting for a sponsor.

## Fundraising movie events around the country

SAWA is currently in correspondence with the producers of *Frame by Frame*, a documentary about the work of Afghan photographers in today's Afghanistan, and planning to show the film in early October in Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne, Hobart and Sydney and possibly other locations. Detailed information will be sent closer to the event. To join the mailing list register by email or mobile number at the SAWA (SA) [contact page](#).



Patron: Penny Wright, previously SA Senator and member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights

## Graduation at the Vocational Training Centre

On 8 May 2015 the Vocational Training Center graduated another 150 women, handing out their merit and completion certificates. More than 400 guests participated, including high ranking members of the government, foreigner supporters, members of the literacy department, heads of women and men *shora* (Afshar District committees), students and their mothers.



*Members of the shora and the government at the function*

In her speech Latifa Ahmady, the Executive Director of OPAWC, spoke about the overall conditions of the country and about women who suffered from violence in different times, especially during the deterioration of women's conditions after the arrival of international forces and their professed commitment towards women during the last 14 years. Ahmady encouraged the women to defend their rights, take action and never lose hope in the face of the current conditions. She invited all women interested in becoming educated or wanting to learn new skills to come to OPAWC centers and promised the women that OPAWC is for them and will support them to stand on their own feet.

There were two marvellous theatre performances, one in the opening of the function, showing illiteracy and darkness overcome by light signifying education and peace and inviting all women to follow the light of education and harmony.

The second theatre performance was based on the fate of Farkhunda, the Muslim woman who went to the mosque to discuss an issue with the mullah, was falsely accused to have burnt a Quran and killed by a mob in the most horrific manner. She was dragged by a car, then burned and thrown into the Kabul River. It took two hours to murder her, the brutality unfolding as hundreds of people and armed policemen watched. The neighbourhood police headquarters was about a five-minute walk from the mosque. Many witnesses shot photos and videos with their smartphones.

In the theatre play the students showed how religious mullahs deceive the illiterate women and all the people in order to exhort money from them and do not refrain from brutality in the name of religion: A girl rises up among the women wanting to help and make the women aware of the mullah's character. She argues with the mullahs, but the mullahs claim that they are acting in accordance with the Quran. When the girl prevails over their arguments through logical words the mullahs call the people, shouting that she burnt the Quran and is a prostitute. The illiterate men then attack the girl brutally, beat her and

burn her alive. A moving poem heard in the background brought the audience to tears, while the flames consumed her body.

The function ended with the distribution of certificates and refreshments.

Matthias Tomczak, convener of SAWA-

Australia (SA), attended the function and addressed the assembly: "I stand here for the more than 300 Australian donors who allow SAWA to support this centre. I am here so that I can see with my own eyes the progress you have made and report to your supporters in Australia that the women of Afghanistan are courageous and determined to take their destiny into their own hands.

When the first literacy classes opened the students were shy and had to collect all their courage to come, but thanks to great teachers they succeeded and gained their certificates. Now the students are not timid and shy any more, they organise their own function, they elect their own committees and are actively involved in the running of the centre. You can all be proud of yourselves and your achievements. On behalf of SAWA I wish you well for the future, and I express my heartfelt thanks to your admirable Principal Adila and your wonderful teachers. Without them our donations would be nothing but a gesture of goodwill. The teachers put them to good use and gave you the education that makes you into the strong women of today."

## SAWA (SA) convener reports on Hamoon Clinic

Farah is currently one of the most dangerous provinces for foreigners, with local warlords, Taliban and ISIS competing about control and fighting each other. It is currently impossible for a foreigner to visit Farah without being attacked, so an online conference with the clinic was arranged, and I could speak with the doctor (gynecologist and child specialist), the operator of the ultrasound, the nurse, the administrator and the laboratory technician.

The clinic receives 80 – 90 patients per day during the summer months; up to 60 of them are treated. It has a very good relationship with the provincial Ministry of Health.

Security is a big issue. The ambulance cannot go to all parts of the province at the moment. But when I asked whether there is a danger that the clinic will be attacked the doctor said that the clinic is safe because it has a very high reputation and is known and supported by all people. Security is only an issue if the ambulance travels into the countryside.

I was taken on a Skype tour around the clinic. OPAWC was fearful that a male operator for the new ultrasound would be an obstacle to its efficient use, but it turned out that the women are not concerned about his presence. Two women were present when the laptop camera entered the room, one on the bed being treated, the other waiting and watching. Both did not show any concern being on camera.

All in all, although I could not go to Farah I got a good overview of the situation and could watch a working, busy health centre.

Matthias Tomczak Kabul, 4 June 2015





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## RAWA, FOUNDER OF HEWAD SCHOOL

In 2017 RAWA, the independent social and political organization of Afghan women fighting for women's human rights and social justice will be 40 years old. This is the organisation through which SAWA –NSW funds the Hewad school. Founded in 1977 by a 21 year old charismatic ex-student activist, Meena Keshwar Kamal, RAWA (The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) began its life promoting women's education. In 1981 it started a bilingual magazine, Payam-e-Zan (Women's Message). RAWA also promoted non-violence and advocacy of a democratic and secular society.

With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, RAWA campaigned against the Soviet forces and the Soviet puppet Government. This was very dangerous territory and RAWA moved its headquarters for safety to Quetta in Pakistan. Over the border from home, RAWA then supported Afghan refugees and established schools, including Hewad, hospitals and handicraft centres for refugee women.

Meena reached out for international support early and in 1981 she visited France for the French Socialist Party Congress. RAWA members continue to raise international support. Indeed it was the visit of RAWA members to Australia, advocating for Afghan women, which first roused enthusiasm for founding our support association –SAWA.

Meena's activities and views, as well as her work against the Russian puppet government and religious fundamentalists, led to her assassination by the KHAD, the Afghan branch of the KGB, on February 4, 1987 at the age of 31. The memory of this exceptional young woman is celebrated by RAWA in special events on this anniversary every year.

In an earlier SAWAN we outlined RAWA's progressive educational values implemented in Hewad. Here it is worth noting that RAWA has gained significant recognition around the world for its work for women's rights and democracy. Its 16 International awards include the sixth Asian Human Rights Award - 2001, the French Republic's Liberty, Equality, Fraternity Human Rights Prize, 2000 SAIS-Novartis International Journalism Award from Johns Hopkins University, and Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition from the U.S. Congress, 2004.

RAWA has recently had to close down some of its projects in Pakistan and some RAWA members have returned to Afghanistan but the Hewad School continues under difficult conditions.



*Guest Speakers: Catherine Sell and Zoe Bell*

## SAWA-NSW's CHRISTMAS IN JULY DINNER AND SILENT AUCTION

Held on July 22nd and attended by over 60 people, the enjoyable evening raised over \$5000. Speakers for the evening were Zoe Bell and Catherine Sell from Settlement Services International (SSI) a not-for-profit organisation providing a range of services for migrants. As case workers in SSI, our young speakers are in contact with asylum seekers fleeing persecution in Afghanistan.

Zoe spoke particularly of the Hazara group of whom 80% are men and the remainder women and children including many unaccompanied minors, - boys mainly living in community detention and attending school. Zoe emphasised her admiration for the resilience and heroic stamina of these young people. She mentioned in particular a young man, here alone, who had lost 17 members of his family. Under the current asylum seeker and refugee regime in Australia family reunion is not possible for anyone who came by boat in recent years so inner resilience is critical. She also mentioned the difficulties of women in this group who are often very isolated and without good opportunities to learn English.

Catherine described the programs undertaken by SSI especially for younger men. With the assistance of Australian volunteers, SSI involves them in activities like bush regeneration, surfing and soccer, all of which build community and help to reduce the immediate stress of isolation, deprivation and fear in their lives.

### DATES FOR DIARY

(See also our webpage [www.sawansw.org.au](http://www.sawansw.org.au))

**In late September or early October**, as we go to press, we are trying to organise a showing of **"Frame by Frame"**, the acclaimed 2013 documentary about the work of Afghan photographers in Afghanistan being promoted by SAWA-SA.

**AGM Tuesday 20 October at the Uniting Church 344 Darling St Balmain 6.30-9.00pm – Speaker to be announced.**

**Other events in the planning are a feature Film Night and a November Lunch.**

*Guests at fundraising Christmas in July dinner.*

