Quarterly Newsletter of the Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan

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From the Editor

The times are getting more and more difficult for the women of Afghanistan. Charities are attacked by terrorists moving from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and terminate their activities in the country. OPAWC is struggling and has to reduce its projects. Although some funds are still coming in from Europe, SAWA’s support is now the major contribution to OPAWC’s financial base. This is a challenge for us to do even more, so that the poor women of Afghanistan are not left alone in their struggle for their rights to free themselves from the shackles of an oppressive society.

Matthias Tomczak

OPAWC director Latifa Ahmady retires

Latifa Ahmady retired from her position as director of OPAWC in October 2016 but continued to work in a supervisory role for the new administration until May 2017. We had already noticed a change in the administration when we received emails from Hajira Zaman, who now looks after OPAWC’s projects, but were only formally notified of Latifa’s departure in November.

Latifa worked for OPAWC for 12 years, acting as an administrator from 2005 until 2009, when she was appointed OPAWC director. The seven years during which she served as director saw OPAWC grow from a small outfit with just a handful of teachers and few students to an organisation with literacy centres in several cities and a clinic in Farah province. Her safe hand with all projects and good relations with supporters have made our work for OPAWC easy and efficient, and we are deeply grateful for the way in which she answered every request for information immediately in great detail.

OPAWC has a policy to rotate administrative positions every two years to avoid cronyism and other malpractice, and Latifa’s nine year stay as director has been something of an exception. But it did OPAWC well, since Latifa’s professionalism and reliability is hard to match. Latifa now looks after her four young children and her husband, who needs regular medical attention in a hospital in India. She says that her goals to support women and serve humanity remain with her, and she hopes to find a less demanding job that allows her to continue to work for her goals.

We thank Latifa for all she has done to make our relationship with OPAWC work well and allow us to help the women of Afghanistan over all these years. We wish her and her family the very best for her new life and will certainly keep our friendship up into the future.

New fundraising movie to be produced

You may remember that two years ago the producers of Frame by Frame, the award-winning documentary about four Afghan press photographers who chronicle the lives of Afghans in their country, generously gave us a copy of their movie at a very low price and allowed us to use it for fundraising. We raised over AU$7,000 through screenings in Perth, Hobart, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Murwillumbah, Montmorency and Kerang.

Now a new documentary is in the making! Among the people involved in its production is associate producer Farzana Wahidi, whose life and courageous work was already profiled in Frame by Frame. Another familiar name is Baktash Ahadi, the translator of Frame by Frame. The movie’s website describes its story:

On a summer night in Kabul 19-year old Gulnaz was bound, gagged, and raped on the kitchen floor by her uncle. Afraid of retribution for this shameful act, she kept silent. But when her belly began to swell with a child, her secret was discovered, and she was thrown into prison for adultery. Disowned by her family who would kill her for the shame of her dishonour, she gave birth to her rapist’s daughter on the prison floor.

Gulnaz’ story ignited a media firestorm, and she became the face of female oppression within this conservative country. Represented by American lawyer Kim Motley, her case went all the way to President Karzai, who bowed to international pressure and granted her an unprecedented pardon.

But after she was freed from prison, she languished in a women’s shelter, unable to leave because none of her male relatives would claim her. She faced a terrible choice:
Featuring exclusive access and never before seen footage from inside Afghanistan’s prisons, *In-Justice* takes you behind the headlines and the shocking statistics to investigate these two personal stories of hope and indomitable courage.

Oscar-nominated producer Sam French has generously promised to give SAWA (SA) a copy of his new production, so SAWA (SA) will again have a fundraising movie to bring to cities and towns around Australia. But it requires your help:

*In-Justice* is financed through crowdfunding and still requires much support before it can be finalised. You can help the movie project by donating to it at [http://www.injusticefilm.com/](http://www.injusticefilm.com/).

Please note that the movie project is based in the USA and all donations are in US dollars. A donation of $150, for example, will incur a debit of about AU$200 on your credit card. There is also no tax deductible option for Australia (only for the USA). But it will give SAWA (SA) a powerful instrument to raise funds for the women of Afghanistan, so please watch the trailers and support the project generously.

**President Ashraf Ghani apologizes**

In December Afghanistan’s president Ashraf Ghani responded to claims that some of his government officials have links to ISIS by saying that people should either provide proof or wear head scarves.

If he should wear head scarves” is equivalent of saying “they are not worth more than a woman, so don't bother.” It is a common saying that reflects the misogynist society and is clearly demeaning to women.

Ghani’s remark caused a wave of protest and complaints from women parliamentarians and the general public. They caused the president to issue a formal apology, in which he said: “It was a prevalent dialect and a common saying which is never aimed to offend the highly valuable place of women in the country. Yet, if that interpretation has hurt the feelings of women in our country, the President extends his apology.”

Common sayings reflect the history and attitudes of people. It is hard to see how “go wear a head scarf” cannot be an expression of judgment of the women’s role in society. As such it offends, whether it is aimed to do so nor not. Well, at least the president apologized.

**HAWCA fights violence against women**

In 2016 and 2017 a member of an Italian women shelter, the *Casa delle donne per non subire violenza* (Women Shelter for Not Suffering Violence) of Bologna, conducted a range of interviews with women in Kabul and Herat about their experience with family violence.

The interviews were facilitated by HAWCA, the Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan. HAWCA has worked with OPAWC in the past, offering workshops and training sessions about women's rights in OPAWC centres.

Although SAWA does not have the means to support HAWCA financially, we regard its work as extremely important and consider HAWCA a sister organisation to OPAWC. The following is an excerpt from the report on the interviews.

In the last years a number of policies and plans, including the Gender Strategy of Afghanistan National Development Strategy (2008-2013) and the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) 2007-2017 have been adopted to promote Afghan women’s rights. However, improvements have been often plagued with contradictions. The new law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) – which represents itself an important accomplishment for Afghan women – was approved in 2009 as a presidential decree, but has not achieved yet a Parliamentary ratification, a condition that strongly undermines its strength.

As it was once stated by the Afghan coordinator of research activities, “In Afghanistan everyone knows what is violence against women”. The existence of the problem at a society level and its consequences on women and girls’ lives is rarely denied. The perceptions of the problem in one's own area, however, are a different matter. More than one male representative of men committees or Shuras in both researched areas affirmed that no case of violence against women has ever happened in his community. Considering the high prevalence of gender-based violence in the country this perception of the problem seems a clear denial. Either a true belief completely disconnected with the reality of women lives; or a a possible attempt to avoid negative representations of the community and consequent Shura responsibilities.

HAWCA community work and women support in cases of violence has mostly been reported as valuable. Many qualified witnesses asked for more numerous and more stable interventions especially with regards to women legal and psychological support. Awareness raising courses for both men and women, literacy and training courses to improve women capacities for work have often been considered as key interventions to make the situation better. Some interviewees highlight the importance that HAWCA reach women who live outside the cities, to give them information about the resources available.
Belated Christmas wishes

The students of OPAWC’s Literacy Centre in Kabul sent us their best wishes for Christmas and the New Year. It is now February but it would be a pity not to send them on to you.

Hajira Zaman, the new director of OPAWC, says: " On behalf of the OPAWC family, we all wish you a Merry Christmas and very happy New Year. Send our wishes to all our friends."

Donations after movie screening in Adelaide

On 8 November a group of friends and supporters came together at the Unitarian Meeting House in Adelaide to watch The Patience Stone. The audience was moved by the movie, a powerful story about the suffering, dreams and desires of a young woman married to an older man who is in a vegetative state after a shooting, and donated over $500.

The movie is available for other groups. Contact the convener at convener@sawa-australia.org for details.

Zarmina’s art project takes shape

As most readers will know, AFCECO student Zarmina studied sculpture at Kabul University and hopes to become an artist. We decided to assist her in her aspirations and ran a crowdfunding drive last April to engage her in the production of two works to represent the friendship between the women of Australia and Afghanistan. The plan is to have two sculptures, one for Kabul and one for Adelaide, of an Afghan and an Australian woman sharing water.

A month ago we sent Zarmina two solar powered pumps for the project, and during the last weeks Zarmina was busy purchasing other materials for the sculptures. It is a big project for her, and she hopes to get help from her university teacher. Unfortunately the teacher was busy and could not come to the university to direct her how to get started, so Zarmina is working out the project herself.

Finding freedom, a poem by Wadia Samadi

I wake up every morning scheming my escape
But what about my children?
Who will believe me?
Who will give me a home?
Years go by and I am still waiting
When will this end?
My makeup does not cover my bruised face
My smile does not hide my haggard visage
Yet, no one comes to help
They say: it will get better
They say: don’t talk about it
They say: this was my fate
They say: a woman must tolerate
Don’t air your dirty laundry, they say.
When will this end?
Once again, he drags my body to the floor
He chokes me and I beg him not to kill me
Once again, he demands my silence
Once again, he tells me I don’t deserve to live
I have had enough
I will not be silent
I will live
I will find freedom
This will end today.

SAWA (SA) is now on Twitter

In an effort to connect more to the younger generation who follows world events more on social media than everywhere else, SAWA (SA) now has a Twitter presence with the hash tag #sawaafghanistan. We’ll use our Twitter page to broadcast news about Afghanistan not usually reported by Australian news outlets. We need many followers, so please follow us on https://twitter.com/SAWA_Australia and ask your friends, daughters and sons to follow us as well.
RECENT EVENTS

12th Annual Lunch 15th November 2017

This was held at the Apprentice Restaurant, of TAFE in Ultimo. We received many compliments on the quality of this event which was a very successful occasion despite the last-minute absence of the Guest Speaker Najeeba Wazefadost. She was to talk to us of her experiences as an Afghan child refugee and boat arrival, who now, as a university graduate in Medical Science, has won numerous awards, including finalist for the Young Human Rights Medal in 2010 and the UTS Human Rights Award in 2012.

STALL: 2 December outside Woolworths. We sold SAWA ecosilk shopping bags, pre-loved jewellery and Bronwyn Monro’s by-now famous wild plum jam. With the help of a raffle - a hamper of wine and chocolates - the stall raised $500 – a very good result given the poor weather.

COMING EVENTS

STALL: 10 February outside Woolworths Balmain 8am-1.00pm.
The aim of the stall is to publicise our Birthing Kit day, raise awareness of SAWA. and money for the kits.

BIRTHING KIT ASSEMBLY: Monday March 5th 2018 Leichhardt Rowing Club, Glover St, Leichhardt: 9.30 for 10.00. Morning tea provided. RSVP for catering reasons. Please contact Shirley Allen info.nsw@sawa-australia.org or phone 9818 5319
As before each kit costs $3 and we are seeking donations to cover the cost of 1,000 kits.

FUTURE PLANNING: A film evening and Afghan dinner or lunch are in the planning stage and details will be notified by e-mail.

OUR AFGHAN PROJECT

English and Computer Centre for Afghan Women, Qalatak Village, Khewa District, Nangarhar Province.

We were very pleased to hear from Hajira Zaman, the new OPAWC Coordinator, in January that the classes are active and the students are coming regularly to the centre. The photo below is one of those sent by Hajira and she promises more photographs with stories of the women attending as soon as she can get these translated into English.

Communication with the Centre is not easy. Apart from the language difficulties, Qalatak village where the classes are is fairly remote. There has also been a spate of terrorist activity in the district of Khewa and in Nangarhar Province, which must cause anxiety and influence mobility.

As recently as Australia Day this year, 61 NGOs condemned what they described as “the atrocious attack” on NGO offices in Jalalabad (Nangarhar) on Wednesday 24 January when at least 7 people were killed and more than 31 were injured, including five children.

Eight people were killed and a further 15 injured, including children, in a late November attack in Nangarhar for which the Islamic State group claimed responsibility. Both ISIS and the Taliban are said to be active in Nangarhar province. Afghan forces supported by US Air strikes have been active in the last four months. They claim to have killed both ISIS and Taliban but even this defensive activity must add to local fears.

Our support for the better education of women in this difficult area and OPAWC’s aim to improve their health awareness and possible employment opportunities is certainly worth working for.

Ref: Various sources-AFP, ANI, Pajhwok (Afghan News Service).

Below is an interesting photo taken at the lunch at the Apprentice Restaurant. It depicts the mishmash of buildings around the University of Technology but shows the great ambience inside. Thanks to Maryellen Galbally.