

SAWA – AUSTRALIA (NSW) INC.

CONVENOR'S REPORT TO AGM 15th DECEMBER 2021

At our AGM in October last year, Shirley Allen commented that it had been a very unusual year but I think this year unfortunately has been even more unusual.

We have all been saddened by the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan. Since 2001, Afghanistan had made impressive progress in widening access to education for adolescent girls and in 2020 record numbers had registered to take Afghanistan's higher education exam. The Taliban has now banned these girls from access to education and, while they state that this ban is temporary, a similar ban had been placed when they took power in 1996 and that ban was never reversed.

We delayed the AGM until now as we were endeavouring to find out what was happening to the centre we support in Nangahar province. We had sent \$US10,000 to the Organisation of Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC) in mid-April and we received confirmation and thanks for its safe arrival. The next annual budget would normally have begun in October.

Mursal, the former director of OPAWC, resigned at the beginning of the year and, whilst SAWA SA had some contact with the acting director, we in NSW had had no response to our emails since May. A new director has now been appointed but once again there was no response to our email. Recently I spoke by phone to Mursal who had managed to come to Australia as a refugee and is now living in Adelaide. She made contact with OPAWC and Shirley and I were able to take part in a Zoom meeting with the new director Parwana Bahadur and members of SAWA SA. Apart from the obvious security issues, we have now been told that there was a problem at one stage with their internet service.

Parwana painted a dire picture of life in Kabul with people living in fear, homelessness and increasing shortages of food - and of course the ongoing pandemic. Whilst they still have funds in the bank, they can only withdraw a small amount once a week and this entails waiting for hours. They are hoping to use these funds to try to buy basic needs for homeless families who had fled to Kabul from the provinces. She also said that, if other countries recognise the

Taliban as the legitimate government, and they are given access to overseas funding, she fears that the Taliban will be even more radical and cruel.

In regards to the vocational centre in Kabul supported by SAWA SA, for the moment their plan is for teachers to go to children's homes and teach in small neighbourhood groups.

In response to a question about the vocational centre we support, Parwana indicated that it was still open and had about 110 adults attending. She said that the COVID situation was not as dire in the provinces but that, while Nangahar province was usually a more peaceful area, at the moment there are security issues with both the Taliban and ISIS in the region. Also, as there is less media scrutiny in the provinces, the Taliban has more power. Unfortunately the Zoom connection dropped out before we could clarify if they still had funds available and if it is possible for OPAWC in Kabul to transfer money to them. We are also unsure whether they are operating in small groups from private homes or at the centre. I am following this up by email.

At the moment we are unable to send funds as the avenues to do so as suggested by OPAWC are not legal for us in Australia. We and our colleagues in South Australia are investigating possible ways of doing this.

With the lengthy lockdown this year and other restrictions due to COVID, our fundraising activities have been very limited and we are very grateful for some significant donations from members and supporters.

We were unable to hold our normal Christmas stall in December 2020 and the birthing kit stall in February this year. However we did hold a stall at Rozelle Collectors Market on Saturday 1 May where we sold SAWA bags, Bronwyn Monro's ever popular jams and bric a brac. We raised \$671, which included some donations from other stall holders who were interested in our fundraising project.

Our birthing kit packing day at Leichhardt Rowing Club in March was also cancelled due to COVID restrictions at the club. We do however plan to hold one next March. Even though we cannot use funds in the bank for this purpose as our constitution says that the objects of the association are to "raise funds to assist in education, development and relief projects for Afghan women and children", we know that our members enjoy getting together for this activity

and we normally hold a street stall in February to help raise funds for the kits, have a raffle and request donations on the day.

We have made a booking for a street stall outside Woolworths in Balmain on 12 February 2022 and plan to have another stall at Rozelle Collectors Market – date yet to be decided.

We held a very enjoyable lunch at Bamiyan Restaurant in Five Dock. We were concerned that many of our members may have been reluctant to attend due to health concerns so were very pleased to have 72 attendees. We made a profit of over \$4,000 which included some donations by members who were unable to attend and a beautiful quilt to auction, as well as a raffle on the day.

Our guest speaker was Maryam Popal Zahid, the founder of the 3,000 strong Afghan Women on the Move. This organisation aims to create a safe platform for women as survivors of war and trauma to participate in arts and cultural programs, outside of religious and political influences. She was in high demand by media organisations following the Taliban takeover and we were able to refer a number of journalists to her for comment.

Unfortunately the second COVID lockdown and subsequent restrictions prevented us from holding any more fundraising events this year. The SAWA committee continued to meet monthly, either in person or by Zoom during lockdown. We sent emails to all members and supporters advising them of developments in Afghanistan and suggesting organisations they may wish to assist.

The two state associations continue to work well together with regular emails and phone calls. The South Australian group produce the SAWAN newsletter (with one page contributed by NSW) and they maintain the GiveNow online fundraiser and forward donations received on behalf of NSW to us quarterly. One of their members speaks Dari (one of the official languages of Afghanistan) and Mursal has now joined their committee and I am sure her input will be of great assistance to both the South Australian and NSW associations.

The SAWA SA website has been updated using WordPress but we are still experiencing some issues with the links to the NSW site and we are continuing discussions with the firm in Adelaide who did this update. Michele Dunn has continued her work on updating our site and we are very grateful for this help.

This has been my first year as convenor and I am grateful for the support of all committee members, especially the outgoing convenor Shirley Allen who has been on hand to answer all my questions. Bronwyn Monro has also continued her support with her jams, marmalades and sauces which are always popular fundraisers.