



FROM THE EDITOR

The SAWA Committee extends greetings and good wishes to all our members and supporters for 2022. But with Covid still so active in the community, democracy weakening in many countries around the world and the Taliban entrenched in power, this year is shaping up to be another very difficult one.

The situation in Afghanistan is, of course, extremely dire with predictions of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. We have all read and seen the distressing news reports which are emerging on a daily basis. We can only wait to see how the UN and governments around the world respond - and whether promised international aid will reach the people who are most in need.

SAWA is continuing to provide as much support as possible to the staff and students of OPAWC who are continuing to work creatively – and at risk. Read more below about how OPAWC is operating today, and how we are sending funds.

Also in this issue you can read:

- ***Australian Government's increase in allocation of visas to Afghan refugees;***
- ***A summary of the VTC Annual Report;***
- ***Stories of the bravery of women activists.***

Margaret Gadd, Editor

[On a personal note, I wish to thank our new Committee member, Marie Christodoulaki, for her wonderful assistance in compiling this SAWAN, while I am recuperating from an accident. I have had much time to reflect on how a similar accident would impact a woman in Afghanistan - a stark reminder of the difference between privilege and poverty.]

Australia allocates additional places for Afghan nationals **Source: SBS News 23 January, 2022**

The Australian government has announced it will provide at least 15,000 places for Afghan nationals through its humanitarian and family visa program over the next four years. The announcement came just hours after the release of [a parliamentary report that laid bare the flaws in Australia's withdrawal from Afghanistan*](#) detailing how communication failures and short-sighted planning contributed to Afghans in need being left behind.

- To read the interim report handed down by the Senate Committee, go to: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Recently_Tabled_Reports (21 January 2022)

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke said the "increased allocation" includes 10,000 places for Afghan nationals within Australia's existing humanitarian visa program and at least 5,000 visas within the family stream.

The Department of Home Affairs has received more than 32,500 applications for the humanitarian program, on behalf of more than 145,000 individuals. Mr Hawke said "The Government will continue to monitor processing numbers and reserves the right to increase the program in future years."

Advocacy groups and Christian leaders have criticised the announcement, claiming that without any additional increase, Australia is not acknowledging the increasing and escalating humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

NOTE: See SAWA update on Page 4.

NEWS FROM PARWANA, Director of OPAWC



Parwana Bahadur began working at OPAWC last year, as the new Director. Her most recent email provides information about her background and the knowledge and experience she brings to OPAWC.

Thank you for the offer to use my detail in your newsletter. Back in 1996 when the Taliban had control of the country my family went to Pakistan and started living there. We lived in one of the refugee camps in Peshawar and life was very hard. I started as a teacher for the children and later got involved in activities that provided support and capacity-building programs for women. Since then, I have worked with many organisations to support women, most of my work has been voluntary since for me the most important thing was to help and support as many women and girls as possible. Living among the refugees for years gave me the experience to know what kinds of problems the women are facing, including problems relating to pregnancy, lack of proper nutrition, inaccessibility to education, denial of most basic women rights, etc. I started working with OPAWC because I believe that my aim and their aim is the same which is to make women self-dependent, empower them and make them free from all forms of violence, to give them a chance to be recognized as human beings, to empower them to decide on their own and to participate in decision makings. I hope I can contribute

to OPAWC's works and make life better for many women.

Unfortunately, I cannot share a photograph with you due to security issues that face all Afghan women.



From Parwana (January 2022)

Sending money to Afghanistan



With the collapse of the banking and finance sectors in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the issue of how to send money securely has been foremost on SAWA's agenda.

Equally important has been the matter of sending it in a way that our partners in OPAWC can access it safely.

At present it is only possible for people in Afghanistan to withdraw between \$100-\$300 at a time (in the local currency) if the bank has money available. Withdrawing money necessitates hours of queuing, often without success, and then making a safe journey home with any funds obtained.

The Hawala system, a traditional system by which money is transferred through money lenders, is operating again in Afghan markets and being used increasingly by families and some NGOs to send money. Cryptocurrency trading is also surfacing – with risks. These systems are not supported by Australian banks and have therefore not been considered by SAWA.

Clearly it has not yet been feasible to send our usual annual funding of at least \$US50,000 to support the Vocational Training Centre. However, last year's funds fortunately provided a surplus which has been used by OPAWC, since August, to cover costs and provide emergency assistance to those women most in need.

Following a phone call and several emails with Parwana (Director) and Muhammaduddin (Finance Officer), **a secure method for sending funds has now been established that both SAWA and OPAWC feel confident in.** Money is sent from SAWA's bank account to an overseas organisation that does business in Afghanistan. Funds are then transferred by the company to the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul for a low fee.

After successfully sending an initial amount of \$5000 to test the system, we have decided to continue to send money this way in instalments in 2022, instead of the usual lump sum at the beginning of the year. This decision will continue to be reviewed if/when circumstances change in Afghanistan. We will post updates if required.

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is calling for pressure on the Australian Government to help those fleeing from the Taliban. Read more and add your voice: <https://action.asrc.org.au/afghanistan>

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE VTC ANNUAL REPORT January – November 2021

The Full Report, including some student stories, can be read on SAWA's website: www.sawa-australia.org

2021 was a challenging year for OPAWC with the threat of COVID-19, high inflation including the costs of basic food and



medical supplies, together with the increasing insecurity and violence posed by the Taliban. OPAWC continued to provide welfare assistance to those most at risk – generally women and children in need – from funds at hand. Eighty women were assisted with basic supplies. These difficulties meant the centre had to limit their activities and was not able to reach the target 350 women in 2021.

With the takeover by the Taliban in August, fears escalated with regard to the training and education of women. However, the VTC was able to continue operating by delivering classes in places where there are no men, including at times in private homes. Staff of the VTC also introduced activities for children so that women could still access the Centre by bringing their children. While no special events were held in 2021, the following programs were run successfully.

Tailoring: Until August, a master tailor provided tailoring lessons to women and girls, with a total of 144 women and girls participating during 2021.

Production Workshop:

The Workshop continued to provide a safe environment enabling women to work and create clothes to be sold in the market.



Literacy Program: In 2021, 50 women and girls participated in the literacy program.

English and Computer Class: The English course had a total of 60 students, mainly younger girls. 53 students participated in computing classes which focused on Microsoft Office programs and how to navigate the Internet, also applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp.



FUNDRAISING NEWS and ADVOCACY

Long-time member, Yabbo Thompson, emailed recently with news of a successful film night in Melbourne. Yabbo said:

We had a good turnout for the film "Secret Marathon". I spoke before and after, so of course promoted SAWA. I had letters ready for people to sign to Prime Minister Morrison and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Marise Payne, asking them to increase the number of Afghans accepted here, and to give permanent visas to those already in Australia.



Left to Right: Gol Anvari, Ameneh Gholami, Birgit Kruse, Zahra Anvari

THE BRAVERY OF AFGHAN WOMEN

1. Taliban pepper-spray women's rights protesters in Kabul *The Guardian 12 Jan 2022*



On Sunday 16 January, around 20 women gathered in front of Kabul University calling for Afghan women's rights to work and education. They chanted "equality and justice" and carried banners that read "women's rights, human rights". The protest was disrupted by Taliban fighters who arrived in a number of vehicles spraying the protesters with pepper spray and confiscating a mobile phone from a bystander filming the demonstration.

This is now a common scene – both the flurry of protests in Kabul and across Afghanistan to defend women's human rights, and the violent response from the Taliban, with reports of women being beaten with electric batons, kidnapped, receiving threatening phone calls, and the detainment and torture of reporters who cover the protests. Last October, the Taliban banned all demonstrations that do not have official approval, adding the requirement that slogans at the protests also be approved by the group first. They are working to dismantle women's groups through creating fear, and while the number of female activists on the streets is decreasing, they are still showing up bravely to have their voices heard.

2. Afghan female MPs fight on from parliament in exile in Greece *The Guardian*

21 November 2021

Through a joint effort between a number of organisations, 28 Afghan women MPs, from both prominent and poorer families, older stateswomen and those just beginning their political careers, were reunited in a rundown migrant centre in Athens.

These women, who until recently made up 40% of Afghanistan's female MPs, are refugees in exile, many having escaped under horrific circumstances. Well turned-out and arriving with a flurry of greetings and embraces, there was a sense of urgency at the first meeting last November. They may hold different perspectives, but all share the pain of exile and the experience of escaping from the Taliban. They are determined to fight for the women left behind.

Shagufa Noorzai came up with the idea for a parallel parliament in exile. Noorzai, 22, the youngest member of parliament before the Afghan government fell, says she wants the women left in Afghanistan to know they have not been forgotten. A teacher before becoming a legislator, Noorzai focused her work in office on improving the financial status of women and setting up a foundation to support homeless children and widows in her native Helmand province.

While these 28 women wait to see if they will be granted asylum in places such as Canada, the US and Britain, they are using their extensive networks and connections, holding virtual sessions with US Congress members, UN Security council officials, and Aid organisations to make their voices heard. They are asking that no government in the world recognise the Taliban as legitimate; for the assets frozen by the US government to be unfrozen so that government salaries, doctors and university teachers can be paid; and for women's human rights to be recognised once again. These women have clear, strategic ideas about how to address the humanitarian crisis, the cash crisis, and security for their country. These are the voices the international community must start listening to if they want to be effective actors in the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan. "Women are half of society, so we are very important. You can't hide us" says Noorzai. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2022/jan/17/afghan-female-mps-fighting-for-their-country-from-exile-podcast>

Afghan women MPs in exile in Greece





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Partner NGOs: **OPAWC** (Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities), **AFCECO** (Afghan Child Education and Care Organization)

Annual General Meeting 2020-21

The AGM of SAWA-Australia (SA) Inc. was held on Tuesday 23 November 2021, following a traditional Afghan meal at Rumi Palace Restaurant.

While technically the Annual Report 20/21 need only record details to July 2021, additional information was provided this year as an addendum, since the turn of events in Afghanistan in August. This included news from the VTC in September, when prospects for the future were unknown.....

August 2021: *"This situation is very painful for all of us and no one knows the future of Afghanistan. We would love to start our centre soon but it seems that the Taliban will not allow women to attend school and the vocational centre. But we at OPWAC have not lost hope and we have plans to re-open our centre when the situation gets better, but we may change the way we do things. For now, we give some activities to the students to work at home because they are free to focus on their homework."*

It is so good to know that the situation has improved since then. The full Annual Report and Financial Report can be viewed on the website: www.sawa-australia.org

New Committee Members in South Australia

We were delighted to welcome new Committee members, **Jill Brooking** (SA) and **Marie Christodulaki** (Vic) who nominated at the AGM.

Jill has already taken up responsibility for the SAWA merchandise, and successfully sold over \$600 worth of books, bags and other items in the lead-up to Christmas! Marie's skills in editing, writing and research are highly valued and will continue to be drawn upon as we move forward.



Pictured at Rumi Palace:

Front Row: Maureen Arnott

Left to Right back row: Mursal Rahimi, Julie Irwin, Carol Shamsabadi, Jill Brooking, Margaret Gadd.

Other Committee Members not in photo: Ruth Russell,, Farahanaz Haidari, Marie Christodulaki.

Update on Visa Applications (from Page 1)

Since the Government announced an increase in the number of places to be allocated for Afghan nationals, SAWA has received letters of acknowledgement in relation to all 14 applications we submitted last September for former OPAWC staff.

These applicants now have an official File Number which is a step forward in the process of assessment and approval. There is, of course, no guarantee that all applications will be successful, but we continue to hope that they will reach Australia at some time.

While waiting, their situation in Afghanistan continues to worsen. For example, an email from one of the women we are assisting with a visa application tells us: *"As our lives were in danger we had to leave the country. We fled to Pakistan in November and are now living in a small room with our two children. My baby son was born in Islamabad 8 days after we fled. It is now 3 months that we are in Pakistan and we have spent all the money we had. We don't know what to do. We don't have anyone except you to help us."* This situation is typical – and heartbreaking.

Settlement in Australia changes lives – an update from Mursal and her family:

It has been a joy to share the steps that Mursal and her family are taking to settle into their new country. They are now living in the city, near to public transport, schools and the famous Adelaide



Central Market.

Little Awen had her 4th

birthday recently and has started kindergarten. Here are some photos of her first day.



Photos reproduced with Mursal's permission.

Adelaide Fringe Festival

Festival time is fast approaching in Adelaide.

Afghanistan is not Funny is a play by Henry Naylor at **Holden Street Theatre**. Various dates February & March. Bookings @ adelaidefringe.com.au OR 1300 621 25



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Convenor: Robyn Longhurst **Assistant Convenor:** Margaret Hetherton **Secretary:** Shirley Allen

Treasurer: Margaret Bailey **Committee:** June Lunsman, Jenny Matkevich, Denise Fahey, Carolyn Allen, Deanna Fekete **Public Officer:** Deanna Fekete.

www.nsw.sawa-australia.org; Facebook *Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan SAWA -NSW.*

THE NSW PROJECT

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 we have not had direct news of our project, the English and Computer Centre of Khewa, in Nangarhar Province. We have heard that many members of the central committee have fled or gone into hiding, however OPAWC is still functioning. The new Director, Parwana Bahadur, is determined to continue helping women and girls. She has let us know that the Khewa Centre is continuing although we have no details on how it is managing.

The general situation in Afghanistan is catastrophic. The ABC's program, The Drum reported this month on 7th February on the very insecure food situation for the vast majority and with half the population - i.e. 20 million people in real danger of starvation. The ABC Foreign Correspondent program on February 10th also gave some insight on this situation, on the thinking of Taliban and varying views of Afghan people about the takeover. There is urgent need to increase humanitarian aid on a very large scale. The situation seems to be worse in Kabul where the population swelled during the period of US occupation, and was further impacted during the Taliban offensive, by people fleeing there in the tragically erroneous belief that the Taliban would not be able to take the capital. It is reported that food is available in Kabul markets but people do not have the cash to buy it.

It is possible that the situation is less dire in the rural and relatively isolated Khewa district. We certainly hope so. A U tube video of 2020 shows the Khewa district as a sparsely settled, fertile rural area stocked with goats, cows and poultry. Many rice fields are shown, together with olive groves and orchard trees. [#villagelifeofAfghanistan](#) [#KhewaDistrict](#) [#Afghanistan](#).

THE NSW COMMITTEE and FUNDRAISING

As the photograph shows we have continued to meet in a Covid safe way. Deanna Fekete, the Public Officer, was elected to the committee at the AGM on 15th December but was unable to join the group for the January meeting at which this photo was taken.

On 9th February two committee members did a PowerPoint presentation to a group from Balmain Probus who were very interested to hear about SAWA and the current situation of women in Afghanistan. We thank them for their interest and donations of over \$140 to SAWA.

The banking system in Afghanistan has largely broken down. However, OPAWC has devised way in which money can be sent via a Malaysian trading company charging them only 1.5% of the funds transferred. South Australia are discussing with OPAWC the best way to use this system and NSW will be guided by that result.



EVENTS

- Stall on Saturday February 12, 9.00 am to 1.00pm was held to raise the funds for birthing kits this year. It also created an awareness of SAWA.
- Birthing Kit Assembly Morning Monday March 7 at the usual location, Leichhardt Rowing Club, 175. Glover Street, Leichhardt, 9.30 for 10.00am to 12.30 pm. Again, we are most grateful to the Rowing Club for donating the venue.

To RSVP or for more information contact Robyn Longhurst Tel: 0450 247 488 or e-mail us at info.nsw@sawa-australia.org. As before Bronwyn Monro has kindly offered to provide one of her delicious morning teas. As each kit now costs \$5 so we are seeking funds to cover cost of 500 kits.

- Shopping bags are still available. For \$12 you can be an ambassador for SAWA-NSW or pass on a great gift. The bags are lightweight, machine washable, extremely strong and commodious (hold 15Kgs), and fold to a tiny bundle (4x9cm). Orders by email: shopping.nsw@sawa-australia.org with colour selection, address for posting and payment method, by Direct Deposit to our account as above or by cheque to PO Box.



- Copies of Making Marks. This is a beautifully photographed collection of handkerchiefs decorated by Australian artists and sent to Kabul to be embroidered with messages from women who learned their art at the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul, funded by SAWA (SA). The book costs \$40 and can be delivered in Sydney, or posted at additional cost elsewhere. More information with samples from the book is on the website of one of the editors, Gali Weiss: www.galiweiss.wixsite.com/making-marks-book.