



FROM THE EDITOR

Our thoughts and wishes go to all SAWA members and supporters during these unprecedented times. We trust that you and your families remain safe and well despite the challenges we've all faced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Without doubt, COVID-19 has had a devastating impact across the whole world – but the impact has been far from equal. The pandemic has, yet again, painfully exposed the huge social and economic disparities that exist between different parts of the world.

Against a backdrop of ongoing conflict, poverty and injustice, the situation for people in Afghanistan has been catastrophic.

A fragile health care system, border closures and export restrictions have also had a dire impact, pushing food prices upwards and raising fears that millions may experience famine.

I feel sure that everyone involved with SAWA is thinking more than ever of the women we support, and their families, at this extremely challenging time.

Margaret Gadd

**THE FACE MASKS
PROJECT**

We are delighted to advise that the GoFundMe campaign set up by SAWA in recent weeks has already achieved nearly \$5000 and is continuing to grow,

thanks to the wonderful generosity of SAWA supporters and friends.



During March and April, emails from Mursal (Director of OPAWC) told us of the increasing threat of COVID-19 and the closure of the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul. Students and staff were then being advised to stay at home.

So it was a great pleasure to learn, in early May, that the women and teachers at the Centre had decided to use their skills and equipment to sew face masks for the street vendors, bus drivers and casual workers who had no choice but to go into the streets to earn a few daily pennies - or face starvation at home.

With 50 sewing machines and 50 women in production, the women decided to make 200,000 masks. However, to achieve this goal, they needed additional funding for fabric, ear loops, packaging and logistics such as transport.

The GoFundMe campaign set up by SAWA is helping to meet these needs. Donations can be made (and progress followed) at:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/face-mask-for-afghan-worker-by-afghan-women>

**PLEASE SHARE
THIS WEBLINK
WITH YOUR
FRIENDS WHO
MAY LIKE TO
SUPPORT THIS
CAMPAIGN.**



The political situation in Afghanistan - agreement at a time of crisis

Viewers of a recent Foreign Correspondent episode on ABC TV will have observed the fear held by Afghan women about the possible return to power of the Taliban.

These fears may have been heightened with the signing of a peace agreement between United States officials and Taliban representatives in Doha on February 29 this year.

In an article reproduced by Al-Jazeera, journalist *Sultan Barakat* outlined the fragile steps towards a peace agreement, against the overwhelming backdrop of both the Afghan presidential election dispute and the coronavirus.



Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in Doha, February 2020 (Acknowledgement: Ibrahim al Oman / Reuters)

“On February 29, 2020, United States officials shook hands with Taliban representatives in Doha. While witnesses were inspired by the political will for peace, many also recognised the inevitable difficulties in implementing the agreement. No-one, however, could have anticipated the two crises which would simultaneously threaten to derail the entire Afghan peace process - the Afghan presidential election dispute and the COVID-19 pandemic. “

“The country has been gridlocked by a political crisis, with President Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah stuck in a dispute over the results of the September 28 presidential election. Both leaders have held separate presidential inauguration ceremonies threatening to split the country.

‘Amid the crisis, on March 23, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, issued a damning statement, expressing the US disappointment by the failure of the Afghan leadership to reach an agreement. Considering this “to pose a direct threat to US national interests”. Pompeo announced a reduction of US spending in Afghanistan by \$1bn this year and \$1bn in 2021. This move is intended to put pressure on Ghani and Abdullah to put aside their differences and form a unity government”.

“Yet if this strategy proves ineffective, there is a real risk of a collapse of political order in Kabul, as the Afghan state is deeply dependent on foreign aid which accounts for 40 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

“The crisis could be compounded by an early withdrawal of US and NATO troops. Given fears of a major outbreak of COVID-19 in the country, Western allies may decide to pull their troops out ahead of the schedule set by the US-Taliban agreement.

“The rapid scaling down of the foreign military presence in Afghanistan could precipitate a major security vacuum and encourage the Taliban to break the agreement and escalate their military campaign again.

“The coronavirus outbreak could also affect efforts to push forward intra-Afghan talks by foreign mediators. Face-to-face negotiations will likely cease as they bring risks to all those involved.

(NOTE: Views expressed by journalists, activists and others are reproduced in SAWAN for information only. SAWA remains non-political)



Peace with the Taliban? Let us all hope it will not be at the expense of Afghan women.

Peace in Afghanistan? Another view

Political activist, women's rights advocate, and former parliamentarian, **Malalai Joya**, who lives under protection after attacking Taliban and traffickers, commented following the Peace Agreement: "This peace is only for Trump. There will be no peace in Afghanistan



as long as power remains in the hands of criminals".

(References:
Osservatoria Afghanistan
9 March 2020 and
Wikipedia.)

Hope, love and peace? Is it possible?

Amid the complex history of Afghanistan and the current spectre of coronavirus, it is difficult to find positive news coming from this country. But a recent book by an Australian writer provides a glimmer of light and hope for the young people of this country.



The Kabul Peace House by Mark Isaacs tells the true story of a community devoted to peace and non-violence. It portrays a group of young men and women who join a charismatic leader to build a peaceful, inter-ethnic coexistence – a microcosm of what a new Afghanistan could look like.

Isaacs, a refugee advocate, takes us inside this remarkable community, where day-to-day life involves risk and danger. He lives alongside these courageous young people and reveals their personal stories of trauma and loss, their setbacks and struggles, and their small steps in making the world a better place.

An uplifting story of struggle, bravery and

optimism, *The Kabul Peace House* shows us a portrait of modern Afghanistan and reminds us that even in the most challenging circumstances, hope, love and peace can flourish.

Welfare of Children in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the number of children who will need humanitarian assistance in 2020 has increased by 40% compared to last year, according to Save the Children International. This means that 1.5 million more children will need support to survive.

During 2020, the organization states, another 3.1 million people, more than half of whom are minors, will need humanitarian assistance in a country where, in the last two years, security has worsened significantly and the number of killed and maimed children has reached a record.

According to the United Nations, in the first nine months of 2019, children accounted for 77% of civilian victims of explosive weapons. This daily mortal risk has a profound impact on the mental health of the little ones who often witness acts of extreme violence and face traumatic injuries that often have very serious repercussions on their lives.



Editor's note:

SAWA is happy to receive submissions from members on matters relevant to Afghanistan and Afghan women, and we will endeavour to publish your stories or links to other news sources when possible. Email: sawacommittee@gmail.com



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

Committee news

The SAWA-SA Committee has met only once, via Zoom, since February on account of Covid-19 restrictions. However, we have continued to communicate by phone and email and will be ready to move forward as soon as restrictions are completely lifted.

All plans for fund-raising events have had to be temporarily put on hold until safer times arise. These plans include:

- A musical event with special guest, Ed Ayers from ABC Classic FM.
- Further screenings of "The Judge"
- Presentations to Zonta and Soroptomist groups in Adelaide

Funds sent to VTC

AUD \$42,000 was sent to the Vocational Training Centre, c/- OPAWC in January. We plan to send more later in the year. While many staff and students are currently working from home in Kabul, the need for funding is even more acute – particularly for the Face Masks project

SAWA Website: www.sawa-australia.org

This time of enforced isolation has allowed us to focus on important administrative matters such as updating the website and the database of members and supporters.

Some upgrading has occurred, but the website was built using an older version of Joomla. Web managers with expertise in Joomla seem to be few and far between! However, Michele Dunn from SAWA-NSW has offered to help. We are now in the process of getting passwords and logins and are very grateful for Michele's assistance.

The Art Project – Gali Weiss

SAWA recently received a letter from artist, Gali Weiss, advising us of her latest project, for which she is seeking grant funding.

Gali was involved with the publication of "Two Trees", along with students of the Vocational Training Centre. She has since been documenting the collaborative process that went into the creation of this book. Her latest book has been designed, but is awaiting printing and publication.

With a grant application to the Australia Council being unsuccessful, Gali has now started her own fundraising campaign to cover the costs associated with printing and publication. She says, "I'm using the Australian Cultural Fund platform to raise the funds, as it is specifically geared to art projects, and donations are tax deductible".

The project page can be found at:

<https://australianculturalfund.org.au/projects/making-marks/>

Gali recognises that this is not an easy time to fundraise for such a project, but she believes it is important to document the collaborative project with the VTC, and to promote it through a publication.

The eventual aim is to sell the art works to a public institution.



Gali Weiss shows a copy of "Two Trees" to Malalai Joya during Joya's speaking tour in September 2011



NEWS FROM OUR PROJECT IN NANGARHAR PROVINCE

On 3rd April 2020 we had disturbing news from Mursal at OPAWC headquarters in Afghanistan while she also sends best wishes to all the friends of SAWA and the hope that we are safe and protected from Corona Virus. Along with other services from March 19, 2020, the Afghan government closed all schools, universities, education and vocational centres, courses, wedding halls, and sports complexes. So, our ECC in Nangarhar province was also closed, at least for three weeks. However, the funding we have already sent will last till September 30, 2020 so whenever it resumes, they will be funded until then and staff can be kept in the interim. Even more significantly Mursal highlighted the spread of COVID-19 and the extreme difficulties both the government and the people of Afghanistan have in preventing its spread. Below is a direct quote from her e-mail: "The situation in Afghanistan is getting worst as the numbers of victims of COVID-19 are increasing day by day. The government has announced a quarantine in Kabul, Herat and Nimroz and Nangarhar cities however the authorities are not taking this issue serious and the people are still moving around freely like before. Though the government has announced that the people should stay at home but has not taken the necessary and essential actions to support the daily workers and thus they have no choice but to come out and look for jobs. If the government ever announced a complete lockdown, there will be more deaths from hunger than COVID-19. From one side the government should take the COVID-19 seriously and from the other side it should also take effective measures to support the poor and needy section of the society. From our side we would like to support the people if we get the required fund."

FURTHER BACKGROUND ON THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN.

A recent report from the Lancet April 2nd 2020 prints a bleak picture of Afghanistan's resources to manage a COVID-19 crisis. The information below comes from that study.

1. There is a great shortage of skilled health workers in Afghanistan. While WHO estimates that it requires 33.8 such people per 10,000 people, there are only 9.4 skilled health professionals, and 1.9 physicians, per 10,000 individuals in Afghanistan with only 0.6 per 10,000 in rural areas.
2. Low rates of literacy (31.74% in Afghanistan) make it difficult to inform people of imperative public health, sanitation, hygiene practices and more efficient infection prevention strategies.
3. Extreme poverty means people feel compelled to put working before safety.

4. The health system is also very undeveloped. In the whole of Afghanistan there are only 991 beds in isolation centres. Only 50 tests of COVID-19 can be done per day by the one laboratory, costing US\$1600 per diagnostic kit.

5. The displacement of so many people in Afghanistan by years of conflict and the recent return of many from Iran where COVID-19 is rampant have added to difficulty.
DOI:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30124-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30124-8)

BIRTHING KIT ASSEMBLY DAY

Our annual birthing kit assembly day was held at the Leichhardt Rowing Club on March 2nd. It was fortunate that we were able to pack 800 birthing kits before the coronavirus emergency. Over 60 volunteers spent an enjoyable morning with a special morning tea provided by Bronwyn Monro, and her helper, Yvonne Fernando. Our grateful thanks to them. Our thanks also to those who donated to cover the cost of \$3,000 for 600 of the kits.

SAWA NSW COMMITTEE'S PLANS

Your Committee has been able to meet on Zoom. At its meeting on 14th April it was clear that we could not organise any fundraising functions until the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Since the Nangarhar project is funded until September this year, we decided that if normal fundraising is not possible SAWA supporters may be happy to donate part of what they might have spent coming to a lunch or dinner. We will not make that appeal until later in the year when the situation becomes clearer.

Below a collage of the happenings at the Birthing Kit Assembly day courtesy Margaret Bailey

