FROM THE EDITOR ....

The SAWA-SA Committee had a delightful video-chat with Mursal, Director of the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul, during a recent planning session. We are sure you will be as interested as we were to learn more about this remarkable young woman and the work that she and her colleagues are doing at OPAWC. See Mursal’s profile below.

As well as explaining more about how OPAWC is managed, Mursal gave us an update on the impact of Covid-19. The positive news is that the Face Masks project, supported by SAWA, continues to provide protection and hope for many of the country’s poorest people. See an update of the Face Masks project on the next page.

Thank you everyone for your ongoing support for the women and girls of Afghanistan.

Margaret Gadd

Mursal, Director OPAWC

MURSAL’S STORY

My name is Mursal Rahimi. I was born in a refugee camp in Pakistan when my parents had escaped war and devastation, but life as a refugee was not calm. With the collapse of the Taliban regime, my family returned to our hometown in Takhar Province, northeast of Afghanistan, finding their house destroyed. Therefore, they had to start everything from scratch. At that time, I continued at my school in Takhar and then my father decided to bring me to AFCECO orphanage in Kabul because he was an educated person and wanted for me, and my sisters and brothers, a good quality education. This was impossible in my original province.

Therefore, I graduated from Afshar high school and then, fortunately, I benefited from the SAWA sponsorship program and this is the reason I got a good quality university education and studied (BBA) at Dunya University, one of the famous universities in Kabul.

I have never taken English classes, because I hadn’t had this opportunity, but when I was at school, I wished to speak English so I started reading kids’ books and improved my English. So in that way I started and successfully completed my study at university in English.

Scarcity surrounded me and forced me to search for a gleam of hope in my shattered homeland. In 2011, I made and led the Students and Youths Committee (SYC). We defined rights for students and youths and created awareness courses among students at schools and universities. In addition, we helped each other in every difficulty.

SAWA-Australia

www.sawa-australia.org
After university graduation (2017) I decided to start working to organise and promote Afghan women’s capabilities (OPWAC). I prefer my work here to other places because my goals and desire are to help and support women, girls, and the poor and needy people in this difficult and bad situation in Afghanistan.

I want to achieve a lot for the women of this organisation due to my hard work, such as: helping the organisation grow to support more needy women and girls, improving the self-sufficiency of women who learn things here, raising the level of education of women and girls, and improving the economic situation and economic independence of women.

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**UPDATE ON THE FACE MASK PROJECT**

**An email from Afghanistan: 2 July 2020**

“We ramped up the facemask production and started distributing to hundreds of roadside vendors and casual workers daily across Kabul city.

We are so grateful to SAWA-Australia, SAWA (NSW) and CISDA* for supporting us to make this happen.

As I mentioned before, most of the people in Kabul live on casual labour and jobs that are particularly vulnerable to lockdowns and social distancing measures, such as working in markets and selling goods in shops and on the street. They face stark choices between staying home starving to death or venturing outside to find work, risking infection.

**Providing facemasks for these workers minimizes the risk of infection for them as well as for the entire community” Mursal**

* CISDA is an Italian organisation - Coordinamento Italiano Sostegno Donne Afghane.

**YOU CAN STILL HELP via GoFundMe!**

SAWA-Australia is enabling OPAWC to make the masks and distribute them. SAWA-NSW sent US$5000 in early June and another US$5000 in mid-July.

SAWA-SA has sent AUS$5000 raised through the GoFundMe site and will send more soon. To date, AUS$6,500 has been raised through GoFundMe via the generosity of members, supporters and friends.

You can still donate. Go to:  

**STOP PRESS:** Gali Weiss’ new book. “Making Marks” is a beautiful collaboration between Australian artists and some of the women at the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul. The book is available for sale online now. All proceeds will go to OPAWC in Afghanistan. More information in the November issue of SAWAN.  
WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN

The fear of a return to Taliban rule is ever-present, and the women of Afghanistan know well what that could mean for their rights and well-being. An article by Heather Barr, of Human Rights Watch outlines the risks and opportunities for the future depending on the outcome of the fragile peace talks between the Taliban and the US Government.

This is a moment of both fear and hope for Afghan women — and an urgent time for the world to support their hard-won rights. The February 29 deal between the US and the Taliban could pave the way for a peace that Afghans desperately seek. But there are huge risks for women’s rights in this process.

Women have suffered deeply during Afghanistan’s 40 years of war, and they desperately long for peace. They have also fought ferociously for equality in the years since the fall of the Taliban government and have made great progress. Today there are women ministers, governors, judges, police and soldiers, and Afghanistan’s parliament has a higher percentage of women than the US Congress.

But Afghan women’s rights activists have faced resistance from the Afghan government — and lack of support from international donors — as they fought for their rightful place at the negotiating table for peace talks. This exclusion, combined with the Taliban’s relentless discrimination against women and girls, increases fears that women’s rights could easily be a casualty of this process.

The US-Taliban deal is focused on foreign troop withdrawal and preventing Taliban support for international terrorism attacks. Women’s rights were not included in the February 29 deal. Zalmay Khalilzad, the lead US envoy to the talks, repeatedly said that women’s rights — and other issues relating to human rights, political structures and power sharing — should be resolved through the subsequent intra-Afghan talks. This has been a source of frustration to activists.

The Taliban remain deeply misogynistic. Their 1996 to 2001 regime was notorious for denying women and girls access to education, employment, freedom of movement and health care, and subjecting them to violence including public lashing or execution by stoning. Taliban rhetoric and conduct has moderated somewhat in subsequent years, with some Taliban commanders permitting girls to attend primary schools, typically in response to community pressure. But the Taliban also continue to carry out violent attacks against girls’ schools and block women and girls from exercising many of their basic rights. They remain deeply opposed to gender equality.

The Afghan government has been an unreliable supporter — and sometimes even an enemy — of women’s rights. The administrations of both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani have frequently brushed aside women’s rights. Both have mostly rebuffed activists’ demands for women to be granted full
participation in the peace process, as provided under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Foreign donors have been more willing to engage in photo ops and grant agreements than to expend political capital to press for Afghan women to be in the room, at the table, during negotiations.

Several years ago it was common to hear Afghan feminists argue that there should be no negotiations with the Taliban — a group that refused to recognise women’s humanity. Today those calls are all but gone. Even the staunchest women’s rights activists have mostly accepted that there is no path to peace in Afghanistan but through negotiations with the Taliban.

But protecting women’s rights needs to be one of the key objectives of this process, and for that to happen, women need to be at the negotiating table. Governments increasingly recognise that the role of women in the peace process is not just an afterthought but critical to sustainable and implementable peace accords. The Afghan government and all its international partners need to back Afghan women, who are in the fight of their lives.

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

Malalai Joya talks to students in Rome

VATICAN CITY (RNS)

In a school in downtown Rome, the “bravest woman in Afghanistan” spoke to students about her faith, the Trump administration and the difficult legacy of four decades of war in her home country.

Political activist and women’s rights advocate, Malalai Joya, navigated the crowds of teenagers, making her way to the improvised classroom where she was scheduled to speak. For her, she explained, the resistance started with young people, whether they were in one of her underground schools for girls in Afghanistan, in the halls of this Italian high school or elsewhere in the world.

Since 2007 Joya has been forced to change homes many times. In Afghanistan, Joya’s identity is protected by wearing the body-concealing burqua, leaving only her eyes visible to others. Veil-free before the students, she explained how what she considers to be “a symbol of the oppression of women” in her country, has actually become her “lifeline”.

“A reason to use the burqa was for my protection, because it covers my entire identity. But it’s not because we believe in burqa. Most women today, not just activists, use the burqa because it makes us safe.”

Joya dreams for a future of secularism in Afghanistan, she said, defying a system where talk of secularism can easily win you the label of “communist” or “infidel”.

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
PLANNING TO MEET FUTURE NEEDS

The SAWA-Australia (SA) Committee has embarked upon the preparation of a Strategic Plan to guide the organisation’s activities in coming years. While SAWA-Australia’s key objective is to raise funds to support current projects in Afghanistan, we recognise that we have other important responsibilities to ensure continued good governance and organisational growth.

During the Planning Day, we were delighted to be able to speak directly with Mursal via a video call on WhatsApp. With a mixture of English, Dari and Farsi languages amongst our group, we learned much of value about the management of OPAWC and the priorities of the women at the Vocational Training Centre.

Here are some of the Q & A we discussed with Mursal:

Board of Directors/Management of VTC?
- Committee = 3 members. Mursal is the Director, mostly based in Kabul but sometimes travels elsewhere.
- Board = 5 members who meet every 2 months. All Board members are women.

What are the priorities for the VTC?
Women and girls are keen to start more literacy and tailoring classes. Young people are also asking for English and computing training to improve employment prospects.

What is the general situation for women now?
The situation for women is not good, despite what the Government says. Many women experience violence.

Can girls go to school now?
There are many schools in Kabul and some other provinces where the situation is good/normal. In other places, schools have been closed or burned by the Taliban. Traditional Afghan thinking is to not allow girls to go to school, so many girls only learn household work and then get married.

How are women supported in the event of domestic violence?
The Government Ministry established to support women is not trusted. There is also corruption and exploitation in many organisations. Some NGOs do provide genuine support, but they work only in the larger cities.

Do you have domestic/sexual violence training?
Women at the VTC have requested First Aid training.

How is power supplied to the VTC?
The VTC has its own generator to cope with frequent power outages. A wood heater is used in winter and fans in summer. The budget for power comes from SAWA.

SAWA Website: www.sawa-australia.org
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 1.1 physicians, per 10,000 individuals in Afghanistan with only 0.6 per 10,000 in rural areas.

2. Low rates of literacy (31.7% 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.

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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