FROM THE EDITOR

This sad but beautiful painting presents a beacon of hope. We must continue to believe that one day the women of Afghanistan will be able to turn around, take up books again and regain their human rights.

Until that time, SAWA will continue to strive to sustain the determination of the women we support. You can read more about our recent activities and other news on the following pages, including:

- A new Director for OPAWC;
- The amazing fundraising success of many friends and supporters around Australia;
- SAWA’s submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Government’s engagement in Afghanistan;
- The safe arrival of Mursal and family in Adelaide;
- Ongoing efforts to obtain Visas for 14 former VTC staff members;
- The natural beauty of Afghanistan.

We will continue to update you via E-news as further information from Afghanistan and the Australian Government comes to hand.

Margaret Gadd, Editor

GOOD NEWS: A NEW DIRECTOR for OPAWC

- See Page 2 for recent emails from OPAWC.
  A new Director has been appointed. This is an encouraging sign for the operation of future OPAWC projects in Kabul and other provinces.

SAWA has been overwhelmed with the generosity of so many people around Australia who have contributed to our organisation in recent weeks.

A HUGE THANK YOU to each and every one who has offered support or financial assistance for the women and families impacted by the tragic situation in Afghanistan.

Here are JUST A FEW examples of some of the super fundraising efforts that have taken place.

Riverbend Books in Bulimba (Qld) held a Bookchat evening with former Governor-General, Dame Quentin Bryce and Laura Sweeney, and raised over $2000 for SAWA in tickets and book sales.

Dame Quentin, a regular customer at Riverbend, has visited Afghanistan and spoke of her experiences with the women she met there. It was a wonderful evening, enjoyed by everyone who attended – and greatly appreciated by SAWA.

Visit Riverbend Books at 193 Oxford St., Bulimba Qld or online: www.riverbendbooks.com.au

Dame Quentin Bryce speaking at the Bookchat

REMINDER
The AGM of SAWA-Australia (SA) Inc. is to be held on
Tuesday 23 November at 7pm
at Rumi Palace Restaurant,
303 Prospect Rd, Blair Athol

You are also welcome to join SAWA friends for an Afghan banquet dinner at 6.15pm.
$40 for dinner, tea & soft drinks.
Pay on the night, but RSVP is essential.
Email: sawacommittee@gmail.com
(BYO wine if you wish – no corkage fee)
More fund-raising news …..

Run for Afghanistan:
Jess, Sophie and Alex, three friends in Melbourne, decided to run 5-6 kilometres a day during lockdown to stay active. Their aim was to run 450km in a month and raise $1000. Jess said: “It was a real challenge because we definitely aren’t runners!” However, they surpassed their own goals, eventually running 480km and raising a huge $3531 from friends and family – all of which they donated to SAWA.

Thank you Jess, Sophie & Alex!

Children’s author, Jane Jolly, hosted a dinner in Strathalbyn, SA, which raised a wonderful $1535.
Thank you so much, Jane!
(For information about Jane’s books which celebrate diversity and sustainability, see www.janejolly.com)

A Cake Sale ….
The students at Bellevue Heights Primary school in Adelaide’s southern suburbs organised a successful cake sale at school and donated $283 to SAWA. It was a lovely surprise to receive an email from the Students’ Representative Council. Well done and thank you to everyone at Bellevue Heights!

Mursal is safe in Adelaide
It was wonderful to greet Mursal and her family when they arrived recently in Adelaide. Mursal, was the former Director of OPAWC, and a women’s rights activist in Afghanistan.

Mursal, her husband and small daughter experienced a long and dangerous journey via Pakistan to obtain a flight to Australia. They are now settled in temporary accommodation, supported by AMES Australia. SAWA will continue to help in every way we can as they adjust to their new life in Australia.

See more photos of Mursal and her family on Page 4

News from OPAWC: A new Director

It’s always good to receive news from our friends in Afghanistan, but particularly so at present. The following emails demonstrate the determination and courage being shown in the face of danger from the Taliban.

10 October 2021
Dear Friends at SAWA,
As you are aware our previous Executive Director left us due to family issues, and our team was in the process of hiring a new Director. We have finally been able to choose a new Director. Her name is Miss Parwana and she is a very well-informed woman. She has worked to support the Afghan women in Afghanistan for many years and has great experience in supporting and empowering women. In this critical situation, she is willing to stay here in Afghanistan and help as many women as she can. She is very keen to help women in need and is looking forward to expanding OPAWC’s work.

Best regards,
OPAWC Team

A few days later, SAWA received an email from Parwana herself, outlining future plans.

20 October 2021
Dear SAWA
The situation here is grim, and life for the people, especially women, is getting harder by the day. The Taliban government has announced that no organisation is allowed to have any project for women until further notice, thus for now we are focusing on children.

Under the projects for children, we might be able to have some activities for women too. In this week we will have a meeting to plan for our future activities. I will update you if there is any change. By then we hope that the Taliban might also share their final decision with us in regard to projects for women.

From Parwana Bahadur

The Senate Inquiry into Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

SAWA-Australia (SA) Inc. responded to an invitation from the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee to present a submission regarding the Australian Government’s engagement in Afghanistan. The Senate Committee will provide an Interim Report by the end of November, and a Final Report in the first parliamentary sitting week in February 2022.

See SAWA’s submission (Submission No 14) on the Senate Committee’s website: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Reports/Afghanistanengagement/Submissions
While SAWA prefers to remain apolitical, we found it difficult not to be critical of the Government’s early closure of the Embassy in Kabul, and its lack of planning for the evacuation of Afghan citizens who had either supported Australian troops and diplomatic staff, or who faced danger from the Taliban, including women and supporters of women’s education and rights.

We look forward to an opportunity to speak to the Senate Committee, and to receiving the Final Report.

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**The beauty of Afghanistan**

With so many distressing stories coming out of Afghanistan in the international news at present, it’s worth taking time to focus on the beauty of the country for a short time instead.

Despite decades of war, Afghanistan remains a country full of natural beauty and the homeland of proud, brave and resourceful people. We trust that the mountains, lakes, rivers and beautiful mosques may help to sustain those who are now living under the Taliban regime – and provide memories for those who are starting a new life in another country.

**The Taliban cannot take away the mountains and the flowers.**
A picnic with the SAWA Committee

The SAWA Committee recently enjoyed a lovely day out with Mursal, Ammanazar and little Awen. With perfect weather, a huge spread of shared food – and even a koala in a nearby tree! – we all enjoyed getting to know our newest family. Mursal has agreed to join the SAWA Committee following the AGM, and will bring the same commitment, generosity and knowledge to SAWA that we came to know and respect when she was at OPAWC.

Committee members and families with Mursal & Awen (centre front) and Ammanazar (4th from left in back row).

Since their arrival in Adelaide, Mursal and her husband have been busy with the formalities of settling in to their new country, but they’ve also found time for some fun and sightseeing with their new SAWA friends. On an earlier outing, it was a delight to see the family enjoying time with the animals at the Gorge Wildlife Park in the Adelaide Hills, and to share their wonder as they met wallabies, kangaroos and koalas for the first time.

Visa Applications

We continue to hope that we will soon be welcoming more Afghan families to Australia. Fourteen applications for Special Humanitarian Visas have been lodged with the Department of Immigration (part of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). All are former staff members of OPAWC, and all fear retribution from the Taliban for their commitment to women’s rights and education.

Since submitting the multitude of required forms, we have been unable to find out how these applications are progressing. However, we have lobbied politicians of all parties asking for assistance. Supportive letters of acknowledgement have been received from Senators Penny Wong and Marielle Smith (ALP-SA), Steve Georgiadis MP (ALP-SA), Senator Simon Birmingham (Lib-SA), Andrew Wallace MP (Lib-Qld) Head of the Afghan-Australian Parliamentary Friendship Group and Senator Rex Patrick (Ind-SA). These MPs have forwarded our letters, and list of names of the 14 applicants, to the Minister for Immigration, Alex Hawke.

We accept that the Department is processing many thousands of similar applications, so it may be some time before we hear any news.

Christmas is coming

We wish all SAWA members and supporters a truly Happy Christmas after what has been a harrowing year in so many ways. May 2022 bring you good health, good fortune, family reunions and maybe travels far and wide.

We know that you will remember the women of Afghanistan as we enter an Australian New Year. Let’s all share their hopes for a safe future.

Updates from Gali’s Blog: Gali Weiss (ed. “Making Marks”) has been writing a blog with updates from her friends in Afghanistan, and news from international sources. Many of the stories are extremely grim, but the ‘Flight to Safety’ reflects the joy of the students and teachers of the Afghanistan Institute of Music as they boarded a flight to Qatar in early October. See Gali’s blog at: https://galiweiss.wixsite.com/making-marks-book/blog

Need a last-minute gift idea? SAWA shopping bags. Visit the online shop at www.sawa-australia.org
UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT SITUATION OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

A recent statement of the Indigo Foundation, with a long experience of fostering education and training women teachers in Afghanistan can be echoed by SAWA.

“All of us .... are profoundly saddened by the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan. We are greatly concerned about the immediate and long-term impacts of the Taliban taking power – particularly what that may mean for the rights and freedoms of women and girls.”

In the Doha talks with the USA, well before the Taliban walked virtually unopposed into Kabul in August 2021, some promises were made about allowing girls’ education. However, few commentators are reassured by this. There is a stream of reports about girls now being excluded from school and university, and many women in administrative and other public occupations have been dismissed. There are no women in the Taliban Government and many educated women are among those who have fled Afghanistan including OPAWC’s Former Director, Mursal who is, thankfully, now safe in Adelaide with her husband and child.

Apart from the Taliban’s insistence that they mean to rule by Sharia Law, the tragic chaos in Afghanistan, with bombings of Shia gatherings by ISIS groups, the turmoil caused by the collapse of the banking system, the stopping of critical foreign aid and the breakdown of normal distribution systems for essentials such as food, indicates that Afghans are in a perilous situation. It is difficult to predict what will happen.

We should not, however, jump to the premature conclusion that all is lost for women. Many of the current young generation of Afghan girls have experienced education. We know also that the women and girls who have passed through SAWA funded OPAWC projects, have experienced an enhanced sense of skill and self-reliance.

It also seems clear that many Afghans must have believed that an end to civil war made not opposing the Taliban takeover reasonable – how else could the Taliban have walked almost unopposed into Kabul? In the past we have had a consistent message from the Afghan women who visited us in Australia over the years, that they wanted foreign troops to leave Afghanistan. These included RAWA leaders travelling under the assumed names to avoid potential assassination: Tahmeena Faryal in 2003, Amena in 2005, Mariam in 2006, Schaila in 2007 Shazia in 2009 and Malalai Joya, who visited Australia in 2007, in 2009 for the launch of her memoir, Raising My Voice, and again in 2011. She was elected to the first Parliament, but was expelled in 2007 for calling out many of her fellow MPs as warlords and criminals who should be charged with war crimes. She has had many attempts on her life and travels in Afghanistan wearing the burqa and with bodyguards. She also advocated the end of foreign troops and is reported as stating:

“What will happen after the withdrawal of troops? Everyone fears for their own future. In the short term, the situation will not improve, that is clear. In the long term, however, it is in the interest of the Afghans that the Western troops leave. No democracy arises from a military occupation.”

[From Malalai Joya/Facebook.]

In our trying to understand how SAWA can best help the situation in Afghanistan we must wait for OPAWC’s advice. Currently we believe that most of the organising Committee of OPAWC have tried to escape Afghanistan but that there is a new leader. Her name is Parwana Bahadur. She is reputedly very well-informed and has great experience in supporting and empowering women. She is willing to stay in Afghanistan and hopefully to expand OPAWC’s work when this becomes possible.

AFGHAN REFUGEES RECENTLY ARRIVED

Several Committee Members have been in touch with organisations helping Afghans arriving in Sydney, in particular with the Asylum Seekers Centre www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au Tel:(02) 9078 1900 and Settlement Services International www.ssi.org.au Tel (02) 8799 6700. These are but two of the many groups trying to help.

FUNDRAISING

We are holding $22,700 raised to fund our Nangarhar project. Your committee has decided that we should preserve these funds for the purpose for which they were raised, or some similar project for Afghan women and girls in future.

However, we hope to continue our other project packing birthing kits for which we will raise funds with a street stall.

BIRTHING KIT ASSEMBLY March 7 2022, 10.00am

Further details will be available closer to the time but, as in past years, we hope to meet at the Leichhardt Rowing Club, 62 Glover St, Lilyfield NSW 2040.

AGM 2021

The date will be decided after we have an annual report and budget from OPAWC but will be held as required by the end of the year.

Photo from an earlier Birthing Kit Day and again we thank Jenny Temperlin of Jenny Temperlin Photography for her generosity taking and giving SAWA the photos.