FROM THE EDITOR
The SAWA Committee extends greetings and good wishes to all our members and supporters for 2023. However, with the Taliban still exercising their brutal repression of women, this year is shaping up to be another extremely difficult and heart-breaking one in Afghanistan.

Since the Taliban closed the Vocational Training Centre in December, the staff have been working tirelessly to support the students in every way they can. See the latest news from our colleagues in Kabul on this page. SAWA has committed to continuing our support. Equally distressing is the news that the project supported by SAWA-NSW in Nangarhar Province has also been closed by the Taliban. See Page 4.

Fundraising in these times continues to be vital. SAWA values every membership renewal and every donation. And we are especially delighted to share news of the wonderful support offered by the Chippin’ Away Foundation for the next 3 years. Read more below.

Your feedback and news is always welcome! Please let us know of any events or relevant news wherever you are. Email: editor@SAWA-australia.org

Margaret Gadd, Editor

LATEST NEWS FROM THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE in KABUL
The VTC remained closed for nearly a month after the Taliban entered the building on Saturday 24 December. After lengthy interviews with staff, the Taliban demanded that Sara, the Program Manager, report to the police every week.

The closure caused great distress amongst staff and students, but these brave women decided to persevere despite the danger and difficulty.

Sara has been keeping SAWA up-to-date with news via a secure communication link.

THE CHIPPIN’ AWAY FOUNDATION
Based in South Australia, the Chippin’ Away Foundation funds projects and charitable organisations with the ultimate aim of improving the lives of people around the world.

Chippin’ Away focuses primarily on women and children in South East Asia, across a range of social and health issues. Support is also provided to a number of organisations in Australia, mainly those working with refugees and migrants.

SAWA was approached by Chippin Away Foundation late last year with the truly wonderful offer to provide funding to help us support the Vocational Training Centre over the next 3 years. We are thrilled to be involved with this Foundation and look forward to our new partnership.

NOTE: Chippin’ Away does not accept donations from the public nor unsolicited requests for funding.

Children’s classes: More recent news from Sara has been much brighter. The police have now given permission for the Centre to re-open with classes for young children. Happily, these classes commenced without delay.

English classes are being held for young girls up to 6th Grade, with four classes of 1 hour being taught each day. All classes have approximately 27 students.

There are 2 Maths and Dari (language) classes each day, with 22 students in each.

The Taliban still visit frequently to monitor what is happening at the Centre. Continued ….
Support for the older women: Sara has reported that the staff are continuing to support former VTC students as much as possible.

ANNUAL REPORT 2021/2022

The Annual General Meeting of SAWA-Australia (SA) was held on 15 November 2022 at Rumi Palace Restaurant. Before the meeting, members and guests enjoyed another delicious Afghan feast prepared by our friends at Rumi Palace.

The Annual Report details the many activities undertaken by SAWA over the past 12-18 months, including fundraising, visa applications, lobbying and advocacy, communication via SAWAN and E-news, and support for the Vocational Training Centre.

A few highlights from the Report include:

- Since the Taliban returned in September 2021, the situation in Afghanistan changed rapidly.
- The Vocational Training Centre was closed for a short time, but managed to re-open by December operating with a low profile.
- Transfer of funds proved difficult with the collapse of the banking system, but SAWA found a safe way to send money through Etemad Financial Services who have continued to provide excellent service.
- Covid-19 hampered fundraising but two successful events were held in 2022. News reports of the changing situation in Afghanistan also resulted in a larger amount of donations to SAWA.

As well as continuing to support the VTC, SAWA sent funds for emergency relief to families identified by the Centre.

The Full Report, and the Financial Report, can be read on SAWA’s website: www.sawa-australia.org

NEW HOPE / OMID NOW: Latest news

The project that Gali Weiss, Barbara Kameniar and Mursal Rahimi established late last year grows stronger each month. This project funds scholarships to enable Afghan women to continue their tertiary studies at Universities outside Afghanistan. SAWA, as the auspicing body for New Hope, receives a monthly progress report detailing activities, achievements and finances. Here is the latest news:

- Three students, supported by New Hope, are now studying at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh.
- Examination results and/or general updates on their studies have been received from other students in India, Turkey, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.
- Letters of Offer from Melbourne University, Trinity College and Hawthorn-Melbourne have been sent to four prospective students.

And speaking of scholarships …

SAWA received a lovely surprise recently with an email and photo from Pashtana, a scholarship recipient in 2013/14 when SAWA was supporting students from the AFCECO orphanage in Kabul.

In her email, Pashtana said: The reason for sharing this photo was to thank the entire SAWA committee for their generous support of me and my orphanage friends. Because of SAWA’s support, I graduated from my favourite faculty of management. And through my education skill I was able to run AFCECO Management for 5 years. Without SAWA support, I couldn’t achieve my dream.

Long-term SAWA members may remember students Shazia, Zubada and Pashtana in this photo.
NEWS STORIES FROM AFGHANISTAN

There is very little positive news from Afghanistan in the media, but the following articles contain glimmers of hope for women’s rights, along with some distressing predictions for the wider population.

Male students, professors walk out of Afghan universities to protest ban on female students. By Tracey Shelton  ABC: 30 Dec 2022

Male students and professors in Afghanistan have joined calls to allow women to return to classrooms after the Taliban administration banned them from universities and from working for non-governmental organisations.

Male students have been walking out of exams, and many professors have quit their posts over the most recent bans.

Many international aid groups are ceasing vital work in Afghanistan, a country ravaged by decades of war, drought and poverty. A ban on female nurses and midwives will severely restrict medical services and lead to increased child mortality rates.

Two-thirds of the Afghan population need aid to survive. 20 million people face acute hunger and 97 per cent of Afghans live in poverty, according to UN figures.

Experts say that increasing restrictions could lead to internal rebellion against the Taliban. The recent pronouncements on women’s education and work were made by individual ministries, while other more moderate elements of the administration remained silent.

Speaking to the ABC, soon after the decision was made by the Higher Education Ministry, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen, said he was not yet aware of the details behind the move. He continued:

"Education is the legitimate demand of our people and needs a solution. It could never be a permanent decision. Please understand what an unfathomable loss it is to deny Afghan girls university education."

Taliban working on guidelines for women NGO workers  Al Jazeera 25 January 2023

The humanitarian community is speaking with Taliban officials to try and gain further exemptions and written guidelines to allow some female aid workers to operate in Afghanistan, despite a ban on women NGO staff.

Martin Griffiths, the UN UnderSecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, told reporters: "I have been told by a number of Taliban leaders that the Taliban, as an administration, is working on guidelines which will provide more clarity about the role and possibility and hopefully the freedom of women to work in humanitarian work."

During discussions with Taliban authorities in Kabul over the last few days, Griffiths said his message had been: "If you can't help us rescind the ban, give us the exemptions to allow women to operate."

He also said that he hoped more humanitarian sectors would be reopened for women workers. "I think it’s really important that we keep the light shining on the process to lead to those guidelines."

Afghanistan confronts one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, aid agencies say, with more than half of its 38 million population facing hunger and nearly four million children suffering from malnutrition.

According to the UN, 28 million people are in need of aid, including six million on the brink of famine.

SAWA continues to monitor world news for updates on the situation in Afghanistan.
SAWA-SA Committee 2022-2023

The AGM held in November confirmed the return of all Committee members who nominated to stand for re-election. Sadly though, we farewelled Fahranaz Haidari, Ruth Russell and Ruth Redfern, who retired for work or health reasons. Certificates of appreciation were sent to all three for the valuable contributions they all made in previous years.

Current Committee members:
LtoR : Carol, Julie, Maureen, Jill, Margaret

Other Committee members not able to be at the AGM, are:
Mursal Nazari & Marie Christodulaki (Vic)

Fundraising: Pre-schoolers have FUN!

It was a delight to receive photos from the children of Reynella South Preschool wearing their special tie-dyed T-shirts on “Bubble Day”. A wonderful donation of $250 for the women and children of Afghanistan came with the photos.

Preschool teacher ( & SAWA Committee member), Jill Brooking, explained that the money was raised by families who bought T-shirts for their children to decorate in a tie-dye session. Profits from T-shirt sales were donated to SAWA.

A big thank you to the staff and families of Reynella South!!!

VISA APPLICATIONS

Despite news last year that additional staff had been engaged by the Government to clear the backlog of Humanitarian Visa applications, we have heard nothing further about the status of the applications lodged by SAWA on behalf of 19 former OPAWC staff members.

SAWA continues to engage with MPs whenever possible to advocate on behalf of our Afghan colleagues. It was greatly appreciated recently to receive a positive response from Federal Labor MP, Hon. Steve Georganas, who is following up an urgent plea for assistance from one applicant in Kabul who has received death threats from the Taliban. We will report on any progress received.

SEND GREETINGS TO THE CHILDREN IN AFGHANISTAN

With children’s classes in full swing at the Centre, we again invite you to ask your children, grandchildren – or a whole class of Australian school children – to draw a picture of themselves to send to the children involved in classes at the Vocational Training Centre. Perhaps your children might like to include something in their drawing to depict Australia? A kangaroo? Koala? A day at the beach? It would be exciting for the Afghan children to receive greetings from children in Australia. Drawings should be posted to: SAWA, PO Box 44, Dernancourt. SA 5075.

The SAWA Committee will make up a small parcel to send to Sara at the VTC.
OUR PROJECT and NEWS FROM AFGHANISTAN:

People in Afghanistan are suffering greatly since the Taliban takeover. Aid agencies have predicted that 28.3 million people will need humanitarian assistance in 2023, with 6 million of those already perilously close to famine. Food prices have sky-rocketed. Many families are borrowing from neighbours and many are increasingly in debt. This is in a background of an extremely bad winter with freezing temperatures and difficulty affording heating, especially for women and children without male protectors.

Against this background we are full of admiration for Sara, Program Manager of OPAWC who is managing without the Director, Ms Parwana, who is mainly in Pakistan because of her serious health problems. Sara recently mentioned that “Every morning I travel for an hour and a half by city buses to get to the office. There are days when I wait for hours for buses to come. Every day I wake up at five in the morning and leave the house at seven o'clock. It's not easy for a girl to walk this long way every day, but it's incredibly rewarding for me.”

In a Zoom meeting at the end of January we heard that the Nangarhar Centre was closed by the Taliban not long after they made repeated raids on the OPAWC Centre in Kabul. However, since then the Taliban have allowed children’s classes at the Centre.

RECENT EVENTS

Dinner at Zaitoune Restaurant Mezza and Grill in Putney, serving Syrian and Lebanese food on 30 November was very enjoyable. Participants praised the quality and variety of the menu. The event added $3000 for our funds.

The speaker, Zaki Haidari, again brought home to us how difficult life is in Afghanistan and how difficult is the refugee experience. Zaki came to Australia alone in 2012 aged 17. He has struggled to gain recognition as a refugee, and to access education. Zaki at dinner

Zaki is Amnesty International’s Refugee Rights Campaigner, and is an Ambassador for the Refugee Service and Casework Service. He was recognised as an Australian Human Rights Commission Human Rights Hero in 2022, and International Student of the Year in 2015.

DONATIONS

The generosity of SAWA’s members remains a major source for the funds we are able to send to Afghanistan. In the 2022 financial year, we sent $14,925 with a similar amount earlier this financial year. When direct donations last year amounted to $14,230 it can be appreciated how important this direct giving is to SAWA. This year we were particularly grateful for two donations of $500, and for $700 from the sale of Xmas puddings donated to us by Ruth Shatford from her annual pudding-making project.

COMING EVENTS

Stall at Woolworths Balmain on February 11th

The focus will be on raising funds to pay for birthing kit items as well as publicising SAWA. Any donations of food to sell would be appreciated.

Birthing Kit Packing day – Monday 6th March

9.30 for 10.00am start at the Leichhardt Rowing Club, Glover Street, Lilyfield. We hope to have 600 kits to pack. This is always a pleasant social gathering with morning tea beside the harbour, and the added reassurance that the work will make a difference to the survival rate of mothers and babies in situations which would otherwise lead to an unhygienic birth.

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