FROM THE EDITOR

The recent announcement of a re-opening of schools for girls, followed by a swift change of plan the next day, is clear evidence of tensions within the Taliban’s own ranks and the low value they continue to place on education for women and girls. It also highlights the gigantic tasks that still lie ahead in the continuing struggle for justice and equality. Despite assurances from the new regime that their policies would be more moderate in future, nothing has changed yet in relation to the rights of women and girls.

Afghan women who spoke at the recent ‘All About Women’ festival in Sydney emphasised that change within their country must be led by Afghan people themselves, and stressed that western authorities must stop looking at Afghanistan through a ‘deficit lens’. SAWA also advocates this approach. We continue to recognise the strength of Afghan women and seek to support them in ways that they request.

See SAWA member Barbara James’ article on Page 1 for a summary of messages from the Conference.

Margaret Gadd (Editor).

The Future for Women in Afghanistan.

(Special thanks to Barbara James, SAWA member in Sydney, who submitted this article)

On March 13, I was fortunate to attend a panel discussion close to my heart: ‘The Future for Women in Afghanistan’, as part of the All About Women festival, held at the Sydney Opera House.

With a plethora of other worthy, fascinating and thought-provoking sessions on offer, I thought that this one about Afghan women would be scantily attended. How wrong I was! The studio was packed with around 400 people, all eager to hear what life is like for women and girls in Afghanistan now.

In introducing the first session, host Diana Sayed, CEO of the Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights, and a fierce campaigner and advocate, described the current situation as “gender apartheid” by the Taliban, where women are “reduced to shadows”.

Dana also spoke about some difficult and uncomfortable questions: “Who are the most deserving refugees?” Are they white, European, English speaking? And how easy is it for “compassion fatigue” to set in after a conflict has gained a lot of media attention?

The first panellist to speak was Zarlasht Sarwari, a researcher looking at what it means to be from Afghanistan and now living in a diaspora community in Australia.

She spoke of how the positive image of Afghanistan gets lost when for so long the country has been “framed with deficit”. In truth, Afghanistan is worthy of celebration. It has not always been downtrodden by wars. Zarlasht made a plea that any positive change in Afghanistan must be Afghan led, that Afghan women are strong. They don’t want things done for them; they want others to “get out of their way”.

The next speaker was Mariam Veiszadeh, CEO
of Media Diversity Australia, founder of the Islamophobia Register Australia, and one of the women at the forefront of advocating for Australia to increase its humanitarian intake.

Mariam spoke of the fact that while women in Afghanistan are educated and resourceful now, minority voices don’t get long to air on media.

Najeeba Wazafadost is the founder and executive director of Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, working to propose solutions for a more effective and sustainable refugee policy. She addressed the following questions:

**How did we get here?** In 2001 after 9/11, the call was “We need to save Afghan women!” “Afghanistan is a lawless place.” But in the west it has been forgotten, or little known, that it was the U.S that funded the Taliban. We have also forgotten Pakistan’s influence.

**What can we do? Who should we help?** We need to support the locals, become allies, stop looking at the country and its refugees through a deficit lens. Hold politicians to account. Provide safe houses for orphans and a decent humanitarian intake. Remove the limbo of Temporary Protection Visas.

Finally, our attention was directed to “Voices in the Cage”, a collection of poems by 25 female poets in Afghanistan published for International Women’s Day 2022 by Red Room Poetry. The women featured are thankful that poetry provides an opportunity to speak, to raise their voices and share their situations at a time when there is a return to the hard line of gender segregation of the 1990s.

This highly recommended project can be viewed at: https://redroompoetry.org/projects/voices-in-the-cage/ Barbara James, Sydney.

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**MARK ISAACS (AUTHOR) VISITS ADELAIDE**

SAWA was delighted to welcome Mark Isaacs, on 31 March 2022 to speak about his book “The Kabul Peace House” (2017).

This event, which raised over $600 in donations and sales, was held in partnership with Amnesty International and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

Committee member, Fahranaz Haidari, opened the evening with a powerful and moving speech about the impact of the Taliban takeover on the Afghan diaspora already resident in Australia. Speaking from her own family’s experience, Naz described the emotional anguish and grief that followed the news of 15 August 2021, and which still affects so many as they struggle to support loved ones now living under Taliban control.

Mark spoke of the vision, the reality and the challenges of establishing a Peace House in Afghanistan during the decade preceding the recent Taliban resurgence – a community he learned about and participated in when he visited Afghanistan. Led by a charismatic peace activist, Insaan, the House brought together young people from different ethnic groups, ages and genders, who learned to overcome challenges, from within and outside, as they began to live in peaceful coexistence and embrace the values of trust and shared humanity. The Peace House earned the respect of the local community through undertaking projects such as educating street children and distributing welfare assistance.

Sadly, as Mark recounted, the Peace House (and the book) have been taken over by recent events. The young people involved have had to hide or escape from Kabul. But Mark has maintained contact with his Afghan friends and remains optimistic that Taliban oppression cannot last for ever. The model established by the Peace House remains a symbol of hope for the future.

**FUNDRAISING NEWS:**

**The 3 Amigos** are a group of friendly cyclists who have been pedalling for a number of charities. Thanks Amigos for your donation of $350 to SAWA!!

Thank you to **Zonta (Torrens)** for a recent donation of $1000.

**In the Steps of the Cameleers:** Author and researcher, Pamela Rajkowski, will be presenting a talk in Adelaide on 26 June about the history and contributions of the Afghan Cameleers who came to Australia from 1860. Proceeds to SAWA.

Bookings at https://www.trybooking.com/BYWLS

Read more about Mark on his website, where copies of his books are also for sale https://markjisaacs.com/the-author/
Senate Committee Report highlights serious concerns with visa processing

The Senate Committee examining Australia’s engagement with Afghanistan handed down its Final Report in April. The Committee found that the Department of Home Affairs must urgently improve its visa processing and communication with Afghan nationals seeking refuge in Australia.

The report comes some six months after its interim findings laid bare many flaws in Australia’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, and raised concerns over communication failures and short-sighted planning in the hurried evacuation mission from Kabul in August 2021.

The number of people evacuated during the initial rescue mission to Kabul was 4,158, but at the time of the Report’s release the total figure to have reached Australia now sits at about 6,500 people. Of the 6,043 emergency visas issued at the time of the evacuation, 1,398 expired before visa-holders could get out of Afghanistan. That is, some of those “deemed worthy of evacuation” have now lost the ability to travel to Australia and face “lengthy wait times” for an alternative visa pathway.

The Committee recognised the overwhelming demand for the humanitarian program, which has seen applications from around 144,000 Afghan nationals. However, only 1,000 humanitarian visas have been granted to Afghan applicants since July 2021.

Concerns from Afghan nationals and others have been raised over the pace of the program in delivering safety for those at risk of persecution.

Among the Report’s recommendations are calls for the Department to:

- respond to the uncertainty facing those with links to Australia in navigating the complexities of the visa system.
- urgently send acknowledgements to all visa applicants from Afghanistan to assist with “ongoing processing and communication.”

The committee also calls for the Australian government to enhance its settlement planning for the ongoing intake of Afghan refugees.

The Budget announcement of an additional 16,500 humanitarian places for Afghan nationals over the next four years, outside of the existing humanitarian intake, was acknowledged by the Senate Committee, along with the announcement that Australia will provide $100 million in funding for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan from 2021 to 2024.

The Report recognises the challenge faced by the Department of Home Affairs in responding to twin humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine. In response, the Committee said: “Home Affairs should urgently increase its processing capacity and resourcing so as to effectively deal with both crises with the urgency required”.


A good news story: Soccer in Australia

Joey Lynch  The Guardian  5 Feb 2022

Since fleeing their home and finding sanctuary in Australia, Afghan women are taking their battle for equality onto the soccer field.

In February, 18 Afghan footballers and one referee took to the field in Melbourne, training under the banner of their nation’s women’s team for the first time since being forced to flee their homeland in August 2021.

As female footballers they were a target in Afghanistan, and their safety could not be assured when the Taliban seized control. Along with 75 other players, relatives and team officials, the women sat on the floor of a crowded plane as it left Kabul.

The Afghan players hope to mount a case to return to international football by pressuring FIFA, soccer’s governing body, and governments around the world, to ensure that the principles of gender equality are upheld as the Taliban attempts to ban women from playing sport in Afghanistan.

Former Socceroos captain and human rights campaigner, Craig Foster, who played a key role in securing the fleeing Afghan footballers’ sanctuary in Australia, said it was imperative that the side be allowed, when they were ready, to represent their nation.

Foster said: “The players have made it very clear that they consider themselves the Afghan women’s national team. And though they’re in exile, they should have the right to continue that”.

NOWRUZ: Persian New Year

Nowruz — which means “new day”— is **a holiday which marks the arrival of spring and the first day of the year in Iran**. Nowruz has been celebrated in Iran and the Persian diaspora, including Afghanistan, for more than 3,000 years. This year it was celebrated on 15 March.

Members of the SAWA Committee in Adelaide enjoyed a wonderful traditional Persian dinner at the home of our Treasurer, Carol Shamsabadi, and her husband, Shaheen.

We learned about the Haft-seen table which is set up in the home and decorated with seven items, including:

- **Somagh (sumac):** symbolizes the colour of sunrise.
- **Serkeh (vinegar):** symbolizes age and patience.
- **Senjed (dried fruit from lotus tree):** symbolizes love.
- **Samanoo (sweet pudding):** symbolizes affluence.
- **Sabzeh (sprouts):** symbolizes rebirth.
- **Sib (apple):** symbolizes health and beauty
- **Seer (garlic)**

In the Steps of the Cameleers

On Sunday 26th June, 2022, SAWA Australia SA Inc invites you to a presentation by Pamela Rajkowski, discussing the Cameleers who came to Australia from 1860. This event will be held at Minor Works Community Centre, 22 Stamford Court, Adelaide.

Thousands of Afghan, Pakistani and Turkish cameleers played an imperative role in shaping the Australian outback. And their influence is still here today - from the Camel Cup and date palms in Alice Springs, cemeteries in Broken Hill and mosques in Adelaide to the Ghan that runs through the middle of the country.

Pamela will have copies of her books available for sale, with a generous donation for SAWA.

Book soon before this event is sold out [https://www.trybooking.com/BYWLS](https://www.trybooking.com/BYWLS)

An Afghanistan Lost

Committee members recently visited a photographic exhibition in Adelaide as part of the Fringe Festival.

Photographer **Muzafar Ali** smuggled his beautiful photos out of his country when he was forced to leave. The photos depict everyday life in Afghanistan and represent what has been lost … the hopes and aspirations of everyday people.
OUR PROJECT AFTER THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER
AUGUST 2021

Recently we were relieved to receive a report from our project formally covering the annual budget period up to September 2021, but also indicating how they have managed following the Taliban takeover.

The report describes the project in these terms:
“The aim of this project is to establish a learning centre in Khewa district to help Afghan girls and women learn market skills. Most of these girls are adults who could not attend schools yet they wanted to work for their families and become self-dependent. The students are all women aged 15 to 45 and most of them are local people from adjacent villages, however, a large number of these women are also internally displaced people who have settled in this area. Khewa district shares borders with many unsafe districts and a large population have moved to this area over the years.”

With the Taliban takeover the project closed for two months. When it reopened it was judged unsafe to continue open teaching of English and computer skills. Instead, to avoid attention, the 50 students who were enrolled were offered classes in small groups and at variable times.

The area of the project which was able to reopen more obviously after two months was the tailoring and sewing program for 60 women and girls in two classes using 10 sewing machines. For these students half are also offered a small literacy program in Dari or Pashto languages. Two classes of 15 students meet for about 2 hours per session. The expectation is that by the end of program, they will have learned reading and writing, basic calculations in mathematics and the basics of social studies.

STUDENT PROFILES

To illustrate the outcomes of the programs three “success stories” were included in the report. Photos and full names were omitted to avoid individual identification in dangerous times.

**Gull mina:** This 19 years old girl had just finished her schooling. She was very keen to work and earn money for the family. She participated in our English and computer program and, as very intelligent and smart girl, she succeeded very well. A week before the Taliban took over the country, she went to the city with her father and took a test to work in a company as a record manager. Unfortunately, with the Taliban takeover and she could not be employed. She hopes that in the future if the situation changes, she will get another chance of employment.

**Sabza Gull:** This 35 years old woman belongs to a poor family. She never had the chance to study, but very much wanted to read and write. She had studied the Quran and knew the alphabet a little, but when she started learning in our literacy center, “her skills in reading and writing went sky-high”. She is now able to read and write and is very grateful to the donor who gave her the chance to become literate. She says that now “even if the Taliban do not allow girls to go to school, I can teach my daughters to read and write which is better than nothing.”

**Basmina:** This 25 years old girl likes to make clothes. Before joining the class, she sewed for her infant sisters and brothers making them clothes from second hand garments. She was not confident enough to make clothes for older people. After attending the center, she gained the confidence to do this. She now says that she is looking forward to have her own clothes making shop, but if it was not possible, at least she can make clothing for herself and her family which will greatly help them financially.

**TRANSFER OF FUNDS TO THE PROJECT**

From SAWA South Australia we received information on how funds can be sent to OPAWC in Kabul, the auspice of our project, through a private intermediary source. However, we have not yet been able to ascertain how funds can be sent from Kabul to Khewa. Your Committee has decided to wait until this can be cleared up before sending more funds.

**PLANNED FUNDRAISING FUNCTION**

Tuesday June 28, Lunch at Bamiyan Afghan Restaurant 12.00 for 12.30pm
Level 1/147-149 Great North Road, Five Dock NSW 2046.
Further details will be circulated by e-mail.