

# THE SAWAN

**SAWA-Australia**

SUPPORT ASSOCIATION FOR THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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## SAWA OBJECTIVES

- \* Raise funds for Afghan women and children;
- \* Increase community awareness of the forgotten needs of Afghan women;
- \* Encourage women, men and young people to join SAWA-Australia;
- \* Set up SAWA/RAWA support groups throughout Australia.

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PLEASE PASS THIS ON TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY

## FROM THE CONVENER

Women in Black (WIB) and Ignite the Flame (Sydney) and Melbourne Zonta have all been very active in promoting SAWA and raising funds since July. A very young supporter from Melbourne Girls Grammar whose letter is published below, is a powerful example of what happens when one person is inspired to act. Tilly raised \$276.30! Several people are donating monthly by direct debit and new members are joining. So thanks to all of you for your continuing support. SAWA values every single membership and donation. As a result, since the July newsletter A\$8,000 has been sent to RAWA, mainly for mobile health clinics and destitute women.

Matthias Tomczak (Adelaide) has copies of "Voice of the Voiceless" and will soon have SAWA t-shirts for those who wish to order them. See contact list or the web page.

Memberships are due for renewal on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005. Please renew and ensure SAWA continues its important work. New members, including Foundation Members (until 30<sup>th</sup> December ONLY) who join now will receive 15 months membership.

I will be travelling throughout Australia for several months from 3<sup>rd</sup> October, so Isobel Morley will take over chairing meetings. The contact person will be Helen Watters 03 5476 2235.

Grace McCaughey

OoOOOooo

## LETTER TO MARIAM

Dear Mariam Rawi, I heard you speak at a conference in Melbourne in April. I think what you are doing about the Afghan people and schools is really great and kind. I am making a donation to RAWA, via SAWA (the Australian branch). I raised this money at my school by telling my class teacher and then she said to talk to the principal of the school.

I thought up how to raise the money by speaking up in front of the junior school about your work. I asked the girls to bring their old toys and we sold them to raise the money. I am 8 years old.

Sincerely from

Tilly Parsons (via Philipa Rothfield, Tilly's mother)

## GREAT EFFORT FROM WiB---SYDNEY

Dawn Atkinson of Balmain reports on the wonderful support given in a recent fundraiser where \$1520 was raised for SAWA.

The competition prize kindly donated by Katharin Hughes of Afghan Interiors in Newtown, raised \$417. Over 50 women attended and Vivienne Porzsolt (WiB-Sydney) gave a presentation on her experiences earlier this year when she participated in the month long International Women's Human Rights March in Palestine and Israel.

Vivienne is a tireless worker for Jews Against the Occupation as well as many other areas of peace and social justice.

WiB-Sydney stand in silent vigil on the first Thursday of each month from 6 – 7pm on the steps of Sydney Town Hall. Their vigil for September focussed on Afghanistan, as their Presidential "elections" were held during then.

Women in Black: [www.womeninblackoz.com](http://www.womeninblackoz.com)

(WiB is SAWA's first Organisation Member.)

ooOOOooo

## THE PLIGHT OF THE AFGHAN WOMAN

A poem by Dr. Zieba Shorish-Shamley

*I remember you...*

when you have no choice, no voice, no rights, no existence  
when you have no laughs, no joy, no freedom, no resistance  
your pain, your agony, your silence, your loneliness  
your anger, your frustration, your cries, your unhappiness

*I remember you...*

when you are abused, attacked, beaten and veiled  
when you are tortured, strangled, choked and almost killed  
you feel numbness, nothingness, lifelessness and tears  
you are a shadow, a ghoset, a creature with many fears

*I remember you...*

when you are in the darkness, stillness of a star-less night  
lift your arms to the sky, with sadness and fright  
and ask the universe with eyes full of tears and pain  
why all these crimes? For what reason? Can anyone explain?

*I remember you...*

when you finally will rise and stand on your feet!  
and say "No! I will not stand for any more defeat!"  
you will break the chains, burn the veil and destroy the walls!  
you will scream with all your might "Damn you all!"

*I remember you...*

when you take the solemn oath that you will struggle, resist  
and fight  
that you will gain your freedom with all your might  
that you will never give up, no matter how heavy the cost  
never again will you be confused, pitiful and lost

*I remember you*

when you gain your rights, reach your goals and hopes  
but the path is hard, full of obstacles, you must learn how to  
cope  
to cope while struggling for your ultimate goal  
a reborn woman, free, independent and whole!!

OoOOOooo

## KABUL UNIVERSITY

An insight into Kabul University which has its campus located in the eastern part of the city in Kote Sangee. It was founded in 1931 and formally established in 1947. It is currently attended by 7,000 students of which 1,700 are women. The school is still recovering from the civil war and Taliban rule.

It is estimated that the University will need US\$64 million to function again on a basic level. In January 2004, the campus boasted only 24 computers and one stethoscope. As part of its recovery programme, Kabul University has established partnerships with four foreign universities, including Purdue.

In the mid-1990's, the university was a battle ground between the fundamentalist Shia Muslim group Hezb-I-Wahdat and supporters of the Afghan President at the time. Trees on the campus still show signs of bullet damage, fences remain crumbled from shells and paths are still obstructed by rocket craters. Many books in the library show damage from bullets. Seven damaged books in particular are preserved behind glass as a reminder of the past.

During the reign of the Taliban, faculty members earned only US\$40 per month.

In the 1960's foreign educated professors populated the campus, exposing the new Afghan generation to topics such as communism, feminism and capitalism. Students influenced during this era include Ahmed Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

The Taliban Regime closed the Uni in 1996.

Kabul University re-opened its doors in 2001.

(Opportunities here for Australian Universities? Ed)

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## MORE VALUES TAUGHT IN RAWA SCHOOLS

### Core Values of Life:

- Encourage a respect for the value of life and implement them in their lives;
- Honesty, decency, simplicity, unity, love, patience, responsibility, happiness, respect, and help for other are the values of life that should be inculcated and practiced routinely by everyone;
- Encourage eagerness in understanding the ideas of others.

### Family Values:

- Encourage respect for one's own family and those of others;
- Promote the understanding that everyone, regardless of where they live (suburb, city or our country) is part of the bigger family that we all belong to;
- Respect the wisdom and dignity of the elders in every family.

### Handicapped:

- Respect all people who have infirmity, whether physical, mental or emotional;
- Promote a good relationship with the handicapped and promote their involvement in society;
- Respect and promote the right of all children to live in harmony.

(Information from RAWA)

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## **“WEDDINGS” – AFGHAN STYLE**

Written by Beck Redden who has spent the past 2.5 years teaching English in Afghanistan

“I went to an Afghan wedding today. These events usually strike fear into the hearts of foreigners, as it tends to turn into a “look at the foreigner” spectacle. I have been to weddings in the past where I have been surrounded by old women bearing large sticks, beating away curious women and children desperate to have a glimpse at me. Alas, today is the wedding of a very dear workmate, so I must attend. I have lived in Herat for 2½ years now, first as an Aust. volunteer, and now working for a German organisation that provides clean drinking water and builds girls’ schools in rural areas. When the Taliban was ousted from Herat, a few brave souls thought they would embrace the chance for a more modern and liberal lifestyle, and held non-segregated weddings. Shortly after this practice was re-started, the new governor and long time warlord Ismail Khan marched into one such wedding with his troops and ordered it to be segregated. Thus, Herat weddings remain segregated with women in one tent and men in the other.

Weddings are a big deal for women in Afghanistan. They are the one chance for social interaction, and even then it is usually only within their family (although extended families here can run to the hundreds). For women in conservative families who aren’t even allowed to the local bazaar to shop for groceries or clothes, weddings are literally the only opportunity get out of their homes. Dressing up is very important. (To buy fancy wedding clothes, the husband or male relative will go to the bazaar, select a variety of materials, shoes, even bras and underwear to bring home, the women will choose what they like and the man will return the rest). Hence the desire to peg out the foreigner. If I had led such a sheltered existence and some alien arrived at a wedding, I’d push and shove to get a glimpse, too.

Today’s wedding was a bit special. Tamim, my friend, has married for love. He met his wife at an English course. For years they fought to be together – he was supposed to marry his cousin. His cousin’s family instigated a smear campaign against his wife, which involved his entire family scrutinising the poor girl to an unbelievable degree – like circling a new car and kicking the tyres. At one point, when it was rumoured she didn’t have a working liver, it seemed to be all over, but Tamim prevailed in the end and their happy day is here. Her family is quite liberal – they let her attend an English course after all! I asked him once if it was worth all the years of trouble, and he told me yes, he loved her. And besides, if I didn’t marry her, no one else would, because other men would know she has talked to Tamim, so she would be like used goods and not suitable for a wife.

The average age for marriage in Herat is late teens or early 20’s. In a refugee camp out of Herat, where people were from the poor rural areas, I did a quick survey of girl’s primary classes (age 6-12) and about 20% of them were already married, and the rest were engaged. I talked to 2 sisters, aged 7 and 12 who were married to 2 brothers, and lived with their mother-in-law in the camp. They said life was hard, but at least their husbands were away in Iran trying to find work. For now. They missed their family, but understood their father needed their dowry (or “bridewealth”) to feed the rest of their family.

The way wedding negotiations usually take place is the prospective husband must approach the girl’s father, or

other male relative and prove his worth. Preferably, it should be someone within the extended family. Occasionally the mother is involved in the discussions, but rarely the bride-to-be. Then the negotiations start about the bride wealth. This can range from \$2000 to \$10,000. (The average wage of a teacher is \$40 month). Hence, for poor families, the practice of marrying their daughters very young to collect the bridewealth is common. The actual legal ceremony is a private affair between the Mullah (religious leader), the husband and the bride’s father. The bride does not attend. Afterwards is the public spectacle, which should show the community how affluent and well-to-do the husband is. Many people go into amazing debt for their weddings. After a good 5 hours of celebrating, the bride and groom appear in the female section. The bride is dressed to the nines, with her face painted white and eyes downcast. During the celebration, she should not look up, and should not smile. Smiling may indicate she is thinking about her wedding night, thus her virtue may be in question! While this is just part of the culture, it can be pretty heartbreaking to see a terrified little 15 year old girl paraded around like a doll, about to be removed from her family to go and live with her husband’s family, praying for all she is worth that her mother-in-law will be kind to her, and she gets along with her husband she has only just met.

Afghanistan *is* changing. In Kabul, non-segregated weddings are becoming more commonplace, more women are working, choosing to have less children, and given more opportunities. In Herat, which has always been a very conservative part of the country, women have access to health care, attend school and university, and can even marry for love if they can persevere long enough. In rural areas, it is a sadder story. However, people here are fighting to overcome poverty, education for girls is becoming more accepted, a civil society is emerging. As long as the unstable peace remains here, the country will progress, because Afghan women are nothing if not resilient and persevering.

**Beck Redden, Herat, Afghanistan**

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**AFGHANISTAN: TRADITIONAL BIRTH ATTENDANT PROGRAMME OPENS!!**

A report from "Aida", a midwife who recently moved to Tibir which is located in the remote north western province of Sar-I-Pul – a very poor area.

"There is no electricity here, no water, no roads – and until June this year, there was also no clinic in Tibir – it was more like a small health post. When a Medecins Sans Frontieres team first entered one of the consultation rooms, they stopped a staff member who was just about to inject a syringe into a baby's tender scalp. It turns out this acting "nurse" was in fact the security guard".

The health care needs in the area were obvious and Medecins Sans Frontieres decided to open a clinic.

"These are the first 3 women to work in the clinic", the deputy governor proudly stated at the official inauguration of the new clinic, referring to the new vaccinator, midwife and health educator. "Their names will be written in golden ink in the history books of Tibir!". Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. One out of every 9 women, between the ages of 15 and 49 dies during pregnancy or delivery. Women also face diseases such as anemia, linked to numerous and closely spaced pregnancies. Due to malnutrition they often give birth to tiny, low weight babies (under 2.5 kg) who have little chance of surviving. Meanwhile many healthy infants and children become the fatal victims of basic, curable diseases. An MSF study found that, in this province, the daily mortality rate of children under 5 is as high as 3.5 per 10,000 (the emergency threshold is 2).

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**"Ignite the Flame"**

Angela Dickie from Ignite the Flame in Sydney arranged an event for 3 organisations: SAWA, Medecins sans Frontieres and Australian Tibetan Society. Angela reports:

"The night went wonderfully well, we had almost 100 people come. Unfortunately a large number of people cancelled at the last minute. Many of the university students were not able to make it due to the event being in the exam period, and we think the cold night may have influenced people as well.

However the night went on with many beautiful performances.

Ustad Saeed Sarshar and Yama Sarshar from Afghanistan began the night performing their traditional Afghani instrumental music. Followed by the young Afghani Hussan who played the well-known Afghani guitar.

Our young Australian band played several of their songs they had written about refugees to show their support and admiration for their hardship and courage. An Afghani refugee spoke about his inspiring experiences and the encouragement he had received from the Australian people and different organisations."

"The second segment of the night began with our young Kenyan refugees showing off their incredible talent with an African song and dance. Lobseng Lungtok Ralo, a Tibetan refugee himself, and also the former President of the Australian Tibetan Society, gave an enlightening speech about the situation in his country and spoke about his own personal story. Tenzing Tsewang from Tibet followed this, he graced the audience with his musical aptitude, moving people to tears with his chanting and traditional Tibetan

flute. It was truly a magical experience. We ended the night with Yama Sarshar playing his tabla (traditional Afghani drums) and the 15 young Afghani men leading the audience in Atun (Afghani dancing). It was truly a night of musical and cultural splendor for everyone involved.

All was gained and nothing was lost even though we didn't quite reach our desired amount of raising \$3000 on the night and didn't really come very close, it was our first fundraising event for Ignite the Flame and was a great learning experience. We raised a lot of awareness about these three very special countries, cultures and charities".

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**HOW TO HELP**

You can contribute enormously to promoting SAWA:

- Pass this newsletter to a friend/neighbour/relative
- Print and/or copy the SAWA leaflet and this newsletter and give to friends, work colleagues, relatives and organisations. Forward it to your address list or through your organisations.
- Encourage others to join SAWA and to check out the award-winning web page:

[www.sawa-australia.org](http://www.sawa-australia.org)

- Invite a few friends and neighbours or members of a group you belong to, over for morning tea/supper.
- Ask your organisations/employers to make a donation
- Run a fundraiser or join SAWA as an organisation member
- Make a bequest in your will to Sawa-Australia

Contact Helen Watters: 03 5476 2235

**OoOOOoo**

**JOIN SAWA HERE:**

Name:.....

Organisation: .....

Address:.....

Post Code..... Phone:( ).....

Email: .....

I support the objectives of SAWA

Signed:.....Date:.....

(circle as appropriate):

Organisations: \$100.00

Foundation Subscription \$50.00

Individual \$20.00

Concession \$10.00

Student \$5.00

School \$10.00

Donation \$.....

**TOTAL** \$.....

(Pay by cheque, via Internet or direct deposit through your bank)

**Afghanistan: Women's Political Party Specialist**

<http://topics.developmentgateway.org/gender/rc/ItemDetail.do~1011818~intcm p=00001>

AFGHANISTAN: WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTY SPECIALIST  
The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) seeks a Women's Political Party Specialist, based in Kabul, to provide assistance to programs for supporting women's political leadership. .20 Sept, 2004