



Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan

Articles have been accepted in good faith, if you have any queries please contact the editor



"Nadia's husband, to avenge a dispute he had with her father, cut off her nose and ear while she was sleeping. She has undergone six operations and needs more. "I don't know anything about happiness," 17-year-old Nadia said."

(from The New York Times, photo: Lynsey Addario)

### FROM THE CONVENER

The story of Nadia, and the recent debate about family law, make again painfully obvious what RAWA has said since its inception: that human rights for women and equality before the law cannot be realized under Sharia law. This is why RAWA demands the separation of state and religion and a secular court system. But Afghanistan is an Islamic state, where demanding a secular state contravenes the constitution. As a consequence RAWA cannot operate openly and is constantly threatened by Afghanistan's security police.

RAWA began its work in 1977. Today many other charitable organizations strive to improve the situation of women in Afghanistan. Most operate within an Islamic framework and are on good terms with the government. SAWA does not have the financial means to support all of them and has to make a choice. We chose to support RAWA because we share RAWA's analysis. While we support everyone's freedom of religion we do not believe that complete equality of Afghanistan's women in daily life can be obtained and secured under Islamic law.

Nevertheless, registering with the government as a recognized non-government organization (NGO) can provide opportunities of assistance that are difficult to obtain otherwise. During the last few years new charities appeared in Afghanistan who share RAWA's education policy and social standpoints but refrain from demanding separation of state and religion and could therefore obtain government registration, although in their daily work they

practice tolerance of all religions. One such organization is the Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC), the NGO that was founded by Malalai Joya. Last year saw the creation of another NGO of similar character, the Afghan Child Education and Care Organization (AFCECO).

While we do not have the funds to support many charitable organizations, we will consider requests from NGOs whose work is based on religious tolerance and equality of all human beings. SAWA's major support project, the Vocational Training Centre for Women that was established in Kabul a year ago, is already administered by OPAWC.

We will of course continue to support RAWA projects wherever possible. In Pakistan, where RAWA can operate openly, we support RAWA's Hewad High School.

### RAWA member Shazia comes to Australia

It has been two years since a RAWA member spoke to Australian audiences about the plight of Afghanistan's women. Much has happened since then, but the situation of Afghan women has not improved. In May and June SAWA will bring RAWA member Shazia to Australia. Her tour, which is supported by Zonta District 23 of Area 2 and by the AEU, will be a rare opportunity to obtain first hand information on present-day Afghanistan. Details of the tour are on a flyer inserted into this SAWAN.

This SAWAN includes a brief portrait of AFCECO's work. Should our financial means increase in the future, we may consider assisting AFCECO projects as well.

Matthias Tomczak

### The draft Shia Family Law and women's rights

When President Karzai put his signature under a family law, already approved by both chambers of parliament, for Afghanistan's Shia minority he caused public outcry across the world. Most media focussed on a clause that "a wife is obliged to fulfil

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### SAWA OBJECTIVES

- Raise funds to assist in development and relief projects 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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the sexual desires of her husband", which is tantamount to legalization of marital rape.

The international news agency Reuters obtained a copy of the text. It puts into sharp focus the inherent inequality of women under the law. Forcing a wife to provide sex may produce attention-grabbing headlines. But let us not be too smug about this; twenty years ago official legal opinion in Britain was that "a husband cannot rape his wife unless the parties are separated." Marital rape was only made a criminal act in the UK in 1991.

Abhorrent as the mere idea of marital rape must appear to anyone, it is only one aspect of the inequality of women under Sharia law. According to the Shia Family Law a woman can divorce her husband if he cannot satisfy her in bed; a man can rape his wife. A man can go about his business or pleasure in any way he likes; a woman is not allowed to leave the house unaccompanied except to go to work or to seek education or medical treatment. A woman cannot inherit her husband's wealth when he dies (a provision that already applies to Sunni Muslims under Afghan law).

President Karzai has been under siege on several fronts for some time. Observers believe that his signature under the new law is an attempt to secure votes in the presidential elections, which are set for August. It is questionable whether it will bring him many Shi'ite votes. Most Shi'ites in Afghanistan belong to the Hazara minority. Hazara women have traditionally been in a better position than other Afghan women and would resist the new regulations. *National Geographic* writes in an essay on the Hazara people in February 2008:

"Some 80 percent of eligible girls attend school in the Hazara region – a stark contrast to 10 percent in five southern provinces. Hazara women aren't required to seclude themselves from men, as are many of their counterparts, and they have even attained leadership roles in the newly emerging Afghan government: In March 2005 Habiba Sarobi was the first Afghan woman to become a governor, appointed by President Hamid Karzai to head the province of Bamiyan."

It appears that the new Shia Family Law is more designed to gain election support from the fundamentalists among the various Sunni groups. This would merely be a continuation of Afghanistan's history of oppression of the Hazara minority.

Following the outcry in the west President Karzai declared that he was not fully aware of the contents of the law and announced a review, to bring it into line with Afghanistan's constitution. It remains to be seen what its final fate will be.

### AFCECO's orphanages

AFCECO, the *Afghan Child Education and Care Organization*, operates several orphanages in Kabul and other centres. All children are supported through sponsorships, which are organized through *Charity Help International* in the USA.

There is a great need for more orphanages. To establish a new orphanage costs US\$16,000. A new orphanage is set up as soon as a donor is found (mostly individuals) who gives this amount. Once the orphanage is established, children's profiles are posted on the AFCECO website to identify sponsors, and once every child has a sponsor the orphanage is self-supporting. To sponsor one child costs US\$120 per month. There is

also the option of sharing the support for one child through part-sponsoring.

SAWA's priority is to secure the ongoing support for Hewad High School and the Vocational Training Centre for Women. But wouldn't it be wonderful if we could raise enough money, over and above what is needed for those two projects, that we could finance the establishment of a new orphanage! Here is a profile of one of AFCECO's orphans:

Farzana is one of the survivors of a Taliban massacre. It happened on 9 January 2001 when the Taliban raided Yakaolong, a district in Bamiyan province that is inhabited mainly by the Hazara minority. They followed the decree by their spiritual leader, Mullah Omar, who had ordered: "Behead all men above the age of 12". And they did it with utmost cruelty: They be-



headed over 300 men in one day, including Farzana's father and many of her relatives.

We could only take 60 children of the survivors to our orphanages in Pakistan. Farzana and her sisters were of course the luckiest on that golden wagon. A small kid of 7 years that had acquired a minor mental disorder soon emerged as a firebrand student in Watan Orphanage and buried all those miseries and hardships with a strong commitment to work hard for a peaceful Afghanistan. This little master of the computer with a magic power of drawing and a good command of English is now an icon for our children. She translates the letters that come from sponsors to children and helps the children to write back to their sponsors.

14 year old Farzana is interested in becoming a journalist, because she might be thinking to disclose the grime realities that had been inflicted upon her people that were never reported by the western media.

### International Women's Day in Hewad High School

Despite low funds, Hewad High School managed to hold a function to mark the International Women's Day on 8 March 2009. The event was attended by the students and some parents and teachers. Furthermore, a group of six Japanese supporters from Friends of RAWA Japan made us proud by their presence.

The function started at two in the afternoon and lasted till four. Speeches were delivered by a teacher and some students, poems were declaimed in both Pashto and Dari; patriotic songs, a skit and the national dance of Afghanistan (Attan) were enthusiastically performed by the boys and girls of the school.

The 8<sup>th</sup> March gathering was hosted by two teachers of Hewad High School. It began with Humaira, one of the teachers of this school, giving a short speech about the elevated position of



women in a society and the way it is suppressed and downtrodden in Afghanistan.

Yoshiko Kiryu, representing the entire group of Japanese supporters, expressed her sorrows for the worsening situation of Afghanistan especially women and very heartily encouraged RAWA to continue their struggle. Also, she praised the students of Hewad High School for their love of education and strongly advised them to pursue their careers to be the first generation in bringing true freedom, democracy and liberation to Afghanistan.

The students who gave a speech were Zarmina, Zainab and Nabila. Zarmina spoke about the history of 8th March while Zainab (in Dari) and Nabila (in English) mainly focused on the conditions of the bereaved Afghan women. They depicted the heart-wrenching situation of women and young girls in Afghanistan under the tyranny of the fundamentalists and their foreign masters. They held the US-nurtured, failed, mafia-ridden and rotten government responsible for the entire crisis, including the alarming position of women. Their speeches reeled through the history of Afghanistan and vividly described how women were oppressed and how brutally their rights were snatched from them at every stage by the warlords and fundamentalists with rapes, kidnappings, selling of girls, killings and other horrendous crimes.



The poems were passionately declaimed by Masouda, Zarin Taj, Zubeida and Sharifa in both Dari and Pashto. These poems illustrated the pains of women and strongly called upon them to stand up and struggle for their rights. One of them was an inspirational Farsi poem "I am a woman" by Marzia Iskoe, an Iranian revolutionary woman.

The patriotic songs were actively performed by two choirs; one of older girls and another of small ones describing the plight of women stabbed under the criminal Jihadis.

A short skit exhibited the domestic violence women undergo under the shadow of deep-rooted male-chauvinism, fundamentalism and cultural and political backwardness.

Gifts were given to the dedicated and hard-working female staff of Hewad High School in celebration of Women's Day.



The function ended with the national dance of Afghanistan called Attan, performed energetically by the boys and girls dressed in beautiful Afghan traditional clothes. After the function guests were served tea.

*Written and submitted by RAWA*

### Taliban threaten co-education

*A letter from RAWA received 21 April 2009.*

"We have faced some problems with Hewad High School in the past few days. After Pakistani Taliban threatened that they will blow up any school which offers co-education, the Pakistani people who have their houses around the school asked us to either close the school or make separate benches for boys and girls, as they worry about any attack which may put them in danger. But we cannot give in to Taliban threats like many other schools in Pakistan, so the neighbours reported us to police."

"The Afghan Embassy in Islamabad usually helps Afghan schools in such situations. However, although our school is registered with the Embassy, it did not provide any help to defend us. It is unwilling to help because the RAWA school does not always follows its instructions. We had a problem with them in the past when they asked us to display photos of Karzai and Ahmad Shah Massoud in the school and celebrate the 28th of April as "Victory Day" in the school which we did not, so the embassy even threatened to cancel our registration!!"

*[Note from SAWA: The 28th of April 1992 saw the fall of the Soviet-backed regime and the beginning of the civil war between the forces that later became the "Northern Alliance". The civil war totally destroyed Kabul and produced many thousands of deaths. The Afghan government focuses on the fall of the Soviet-backed regime and declares the 28th of April "Victory Day". RAWA reminds people of the day as the day when the warlords unleashed war on the population and remembers it as "Black Day."]*

"So the police gave us only two days to move the school to another location out of the residential area. Finally we were given a week to find a new building and shift the school, and during that time the school had to remain closed. The police is very harsh with Afghans these days. Many innocent refugees have been arrested for nothing just to show that the Pakistani police is active and arrests people involved in "terrorist acts"! Everyone knows that the suicide attacks in Pakistan's cities are not made by Afghans, but still the police has found a good excuse to disturb our unfortunate refugees."

"This created a big problem for us and cost us much. We had to search for a new building. Fortunately we soon found another suitable one, but its rent is much higher. But we have no option but to pay it. Also we have to pay half month rent to the property agent and also bear the shifting costs."

"The school is closed since a few days and will be closed until our shifting to the new building is completed. But still we need to take some security precautions against the Taliban's attacks. Some Pakistani schools of the rich are guarded officially by Pakistani police lately, but for schools of refugees and poor Pakistani no security measures are taken by the government. Although we are used to such problems in Pakistan and Afghanistan, we wanted to let you know about our situation."

The new rent is 32% higher than the previous rent. SAWA supports Hewad High School with \$18,000 annually. This will have to be increased significantly to cover the rent increase. The rent represents 40% of the school's budget, so we have to find an additional \$7,200 annually. Please help us to achieve this.

### April fundraising night in Adelaide

What a fantastic night! With energy and good will, the event began with some hard facts about the plight of women in Afghanistan and a personal insight through the eyes of SAWA's convener, Matthias Tomczak, who showed his revealing documentary on life in Kabul today.

We were then fortunate to hear Sonia, a proud, courageous young Afghan woman, speak to us about her inspirational achievements. In Australia through a Peace Scholarship Program, she has striven against all odds throughout her life to ensure her Afghan sisters have access to education.

The sweet, lyrical tones of The *Three of Us* followed; a young four piece, Adelaide band with a big future.

Then we were back in Afghanistan with the music of *Bahar*. Fraid on harmonium, sang some beautiful Afghan songs to the accompaniment of Jay on tabla.

Due to people's generous donations, SAWA raised over \$1500 which will go directly to support the Vocational Training Centre for war widows in Kabul. This is SAWA's way of ensuring that these women gain the means to feed their family and pay their rent through secure income.

SAWA thanks and acknowledges the AEU for its outstanding help on the night: allowing us to use the hall, Tish and Jo for promotion and Dean for invaluable AV assistance. We also thank WILPF for their support of the event.

Barbara James

### Birthing kit packing in Sydney

An enthusiastic group of forty inner west members and supporters of SAWA-Australia gathered at Leichhardt Rowing Club on 3 February to assemble 1000 birthing kits for distribution in Afghanistan by RAWA health workers.

The majority of participating women were mothers from a range of backgrounds including health, education, media and the arts.

Working in groups led to spirited and informed discussions on women's issues particularly human rights in relation to women in Afghanistan.

Following our morning tea break Sue Ndwala, mid-wife and Maternal and Child Health Advisor with World Vision, lead an informative and informal discussion on the use of the birthing kits in developing countries. Sue had recently returned from East Timor where she had trained village birth assistants in the use of the Birthing Kits.

Our sincere thanks to all who contributed to the success of the Birthing Kit morning, with special thanks to Deanna Fekete and Jo D'Antonio as well as those who brought along the delicious morning tea treats. Jo and Deanna are perfect examples of 'if you want something done ask a busy woman'.

We appreciate the donation of the use of Leichhardt Rowing Club's premises and facilities on the day. To the committee and members we offer our sincere thanks as the excellent venue was a major contribution to the success of the day.

For having the structure in place and providing access to groups like SAWA we are most grateful to the Birthing Kit Foundation, Zonta 23 area 2 and AusAid, both the organizations and the individual staff who guided us.

Everyone involved has contributed to lowering the maternal death rate in Afghanistan.

Dawn Atkinson



### SAWA financial statement for 2008

The financial statement for 2008 presented to the AGM shows that compared to the previous year administrative costs were reduced by 17%, which brought these costs down to 2% of SAWA's total revenue for the year.

| 2008                                  | income           | expenditure      |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| bank balance 1 January                | 23,945.94        |                  |
| revenue (1)                           | 58,963.07        |                  |
| <b>total funds available for 2008</b> | <b>82,909.01</b> |                  |
| transfer to RAWA (2)                  |                  | 44,019.98        |
| administration (3)                    |                  | 1,197.51         |
| <b>total expenditure</b>              |                  | <b>45,217.49</b> |
| bank balance 31 December (4)          |                  | 37,691.52        |
| <b>Balance income/expenditure</b>     | <b>82,909.01</b> | <b>82,909.01</b> |

- (1) Donations and membership, interest from term deposits.
- (2) Support for Hewad High School: \$18,119.99  
Support for the Vocational Training Centre: \$25,899.99
- (3) Postage of newsletters, website maintenance, auditor's report etc.
- (4) Reserves held to cover payments for Hewad High School and the Vocational Training Centre due in January 2009



To become a member of SAWA subscribe to the SAWAN at <http://sawa-australia.org/joinus.htm> or write to SAWA's PO Box.

Send a message to [membership@sawa-australia.org](mailto:membership@sawa-australia.org) if you wish to receive the SAWAN by email rather than ordinary mail.