



SAWAN Editorial note:

Following the sad loss of Matthias Tomczak in May this year, SAWAN has been without an editor. The NSW Association produced a 3 page tribute issue in August and we are now putting together an issue for November to ensure the newsletter continues. We have highlighted the visit to Australia of members of the Afghan Women's Orchestra. They embody the spirit, courage and values that we also see in the women of OPAWC who run the projects we fund in Afghanistan. We will continue to build on the outstanding work of Matthias and other founders of SAWA.

Shirley Allen, Convenor, SAWA-Australia (NSW)

ZOHRA Orchestra of Young Afghan Women at Sydney Opera House on 14th October, 2019

As part of the celebration of 50 years of diplomatic exchange between Australia and Afghanistan, this event highlighted some very positive developments for women in Afghanistan.

The ensemble from the Zohra orchestra who performed in this concert, and also in Melbourne, come from many different provinces to study in Kabul where they live with relatives or at the "orphanage" run by AFCECO (Afghan Child Education and Care Organisation). This is achieved under the patronage of the Afghan National Institute of Music (ANIM). Dr Ahmad Sarmast left Australia in 2010, where he had originally come as a refugee, to found this Institute. Inspired by his strong belief in the healing powers of music to help bring peace and hope for the future for young people who have only known violence and conflict, he concentrated his efforts on disadvantaged young people and girls and offered places to homeless children. He formed a Youth Orchestra, but the girls wanted an orchestra of their own and so the Afghan Women's Orchestra was launched in 2015. It is named after Zohra, the Persian goddess of music, and a symbol of freedom for Afghan women.



Young woman welcoming guests at the concert.

Zohra was welcomed at the Opera House by the NSW Governor, Margaret Beazley, and by the Afghan Ambassador to Australia, Wahidullah Waissa who highlighted the historical connection between Australia and Afghanistan going back to the Afghan cameleers who, like the women of the Zohra orchestra, helped build communication and relationships in Australia. He also spoke of the importance of music in Afghanistan and the 1500-year-old tradition of women musicians recorded in rock art in his country.

The concert opened with a small group from Zohra playing traditional instruments accompanied by a drummer. Later Zohra members played piano, cello, violin, oboe and percussion and were joined on stage by students from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music to form a full orchestra. The concert concluded with an innovative and heart-warming rendering of Waltzing Matilda. Three more traditional encores followed with a standing ovation in which members of SAWA in attendance were delighted to participate!

In its short history Zohra has won international acclaim. In 2017, the orchestra was invited to play at the closing ceremony of the World Economic Forum in Davos. After Davos, they toured Switzerland with a Geneva orchestra, then went on to Zurich and Berlin before returning to Weimar where they had previously been hosted and played with the Belvedere School of Music.



Orchestra member playing the tanbur.

On return to Kabul, there were celebratory receptions from Ministries of Education and Women's Affairs and Dr Sarmast was interviewed numerous times. The publicity reopened a conversation about the role of women in society and the importance of music which not so long ago was forbidden by the Taliban. Since then Zohra has received many invitations to tour internationally.

This acclaim has been an important step forward for young women in Afghanistan where many would say that playing in a woman's orchestra is a dangerous thing to do. Several of the young women had expressed deep concern at the prospect of travelling overseas. One girl, Zarifa Adiba, confessed that she almost cancelled her participation; which had been kept secret from all but her mother and stepfather. But on her return from Davos, her uncles welcomed her. "I changed my family. Now it is time for other girls to change their families because I am sure that slowly all Afghanistan will change" she said. There are now 2 young women conductors amongst the 30 members of the orchestra and the whole group is extremely proud of what they have achieved.

NEWS FROM AFGHANISTAN

Presidential Election

The Presidential election was held on 28th October with 15 candidates. As in the 2014 election, the two major candidates, current President, Ashraf Ghani and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah have both claimed victory. The preliminary results were to be announced on 19th October which would have determined whether there would be an outright winner or the need for a second ballot. However, this has been delayed and disputes and allegations of corruption continue.



Presidential candidates who both claimed victory

Afghanistan struggles to carry out what we see as routine democratic processes and each election throws up many challenges. There are many opportunities for fraud and mismanagement in voter registration, at the polling stations and within the Independent Election Commission. After the Parliamentary elections in 2018, the former head of the IEC was jailed for 5 years on charges of fraud and misuse of authority and 8 commissioners were also imprisoned. At that election, biometric voter identification was used for the first time and created chaos as many officers did not know how to use it. Before this election, a group of former government, Mujahideen and Taliban leaders urged that it be postponed so the country could focus on peace negotiations, claiming the election would exacerbate differences and that the poor security situation would not allow it to be a democratic process. (TOLO News 23rd September).

Although the IEC says 9.6 million were registered to vote, only 2.6 million votes had been counted by early October. Threats of violence from Taliban and others resulted



An Afghan Electoral Commission worker counts votes

in some polling stations remaining closed and there were some small-scale attacks, but generally security was good.

The Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan said turnout was poor and no women voted in 12 of 34 provinces. The requirement to be photographed (for identification) may have contributed to this. Another factor affecting voting numbers was that in using biometric systems involving fingerprinting and facial recognition, voters could only vote at a polling station at which they were registered and the system was open to failure. Over 4,500 complaints have been made to the IEC which are being investigated. (Ghandara News)

Continued violence killing civilians in Nangarhar Province

On 7th October, at least 10 civilians were killed after explosives placed in a rickshaw blew up next to a bus carrying Afghan army recruits in Jalalabad.

On 18th October, one of the worst bombings in recent years resulted in at least 62 deaths in a mosque during Friday prayers. The mosque was destroyed and some claim it was a mortar, not a suicide bomb that was the cause. This took place in Haska Mina district in the south of Nangarhar Province, bordering Pakistan, a 100% Pashtun area. It is fortunate that the Vocational Education Centre funded by SAWA-NSW is in the far north-eastern corner of this province but nevertheless there must be a constant fear living in one of the most dangerous provinces of Afghanistan.



A child being rescued after the attack

Throughout Afghanistan, civilian deaths continue. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has reported that 1,366 civilians were killed and 2,446 others wounded in the first half of 2019. Aljazeera reported that there were 1,174 deaths and 3,139 wounded between July 1st and September 30th. More than 40% were women and children.

A Save the Children statement issued on the 18th anniversary of the US-led intervention, said 12,500 children were killed or maimed between 2015 and 2018 and 3.7 million children (60% of them girls) are not in school.

Education Centre in Nangarhar Province funded by SAWA-NSW

In September we had a very encouraging and detailed report from Krishma, the Project Manager noting that the overall results for the last twelve months. Altogether 130 students were involved: 50 women and girls learned tailoring skills, 25 women and young girls learned computer programs, 25 women and girls learned English language and 30 women and girls benefited from the literacy program. Krishma highlighted that “big changes” occurred in lives of these participants because most are able to make women and children clothes, and can now earn money working at home. In addition, most of the 30 who learned writing and reading will go public schools after graduation.

However, perhaps most enlightening for us in Australia were the outcomes typified by the four students reproduced as in the report below.



Basmina, age 29 says “I was born in a very poor family and spent most of my life in war and migration. Because of the many problems we had, none of our family members could study and now all of us are illiterate. I was more interested to go school or learn tailoring skills to stand on my own feet and

also help my family than all my siblings. When I became aware of the tailoring training courses, I was the first one to come here for registration. Now, after passing several months, I learned tailoring skills and I can sew different types of Afghan clothes.

Today I sew children and women clothes at home and earn money. OPAWC’s center helps me to stand on my own feet and now I am able to found that much money to pay for my parent’s treatment. Thanks OPAWC and its generous donors to provide this great opportunity for us.



Nadiya , age 19 says “I was born in one of the most traditional families in Kuner province which all men and women are illiterate in our family. Like dozens of other women, I got married at the age of 17 without my consent and now I am mother of four children. Before

I came to a literacy course, I thought that it was the duty of a woman to take care of children, cooking and cleaning the home but when I learned writing and reading I understood that women also can work outside the home to earn money. Now I entered to school and I got the third position in my class and dream to become a teacher.



Khlida age 23 says “I was born in a traditional and poor family in Kunar province and because of security condition we come to Nangarhar province. My father is a shepherd and has low income. I was always eager to help my dad to have a better life. OPAWC center helped me to make my dreams

come true. Now I and my sister both are sewing children and women’s clothes at home and found money. Now our life is getting better every day, and all the family is proud of us.



Zahidda, age 19 says “I am from Laghman province but we live in Khewa district from many years ago. I learned a lot from this center. Now I am able to read and write perfectly and I help my small brothers in their home works. I am so thanks full from OPAWCs center to provide this great

opportunity for Afghan women in such a remote area. Now I am working in vaccination and having salary.



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www.nsw.sawa-australia.org; Facebook *Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan SAWA -NSW.*

As an interim measure this page will show news from both SAWA Associations.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

AGM and Afghan Banquet

SAWA-Australia (SA) AGM was held Tuesday, 19th November 2019 following an Afghan banquet at Rumi Palace Restaurant 303 Prospect Road, Blair Athol. As South Australia's SAWA focuses on ongoing development after the enormous loss of Matthias Tomczak's leadership, the current committee members were willing to stand for re-election.

NEW SOUTH WALES

Strategic Planning

As well as fundraising the NSW Committee has been busy attending to matters related to our strategic plan. One of the six Strategies under Objective 2 of the plan "To increase community awareness of the needs of Afghan women and children" is to link with Afghan women in Australia to increase SAWA's knowledge of their concerns and to investigate possible cooperation with Afghan families here.

A meeting was held recently with Malia from the Bamiyan Restaurant in Five Dock who coincidentally attended a school for refugees in Pakistan when her family fled Afghanistan when she was a child. The school was similar to that funded until 2015 by SAWA-NSW so provided free tuition. Malia and her friend Shaista talked about their childhood in Afghanistan, their extremely valuable schooling in Pakistan and explained many of the cultural differences that influence the lives of women there.

Other strategies achieved this year under the same objective were to update our SAWA Brochure to include details of giving a tax-deductible donation and the expansion of the rural education centre in Nangarhar Province which is our major project. We have also developed a Power Point Presentation. This will aid Committee Members when addressing other organisations to publicise SAWA and the needs of Afghan women and children.

Recent Events

• AGM - 16 October 2019.

This was well attended. The current Office bearers were reelected and it is hoped that some other members of SAWA may volunteer for the 2 vacant positions on the committee. The AGM Report of the Convenor Shirley Allen has been circulated to Members. Shirley emphasised how grateful SAWA is to all our donors. The expansion of OPAWC Vocational Skills Centre which has been so successful in helping women like those represented on page 3 of this SAWAN, could not happen without this very generous support.

• The Annual Lunch on 20th November 2019

at the new Bamiyan Restaurant, Level 1 147-149 Great North Road, Five Dock. We were fortunate with the weather and the 50 attendees enjoyed a delicious Afghan banquet and listened with great interest to Malia talk about her early life which led to their seeking refuge in Pakistan before she married and came to Australia to join her husband in running the successful Bamiyan restaurants.



*Above: Malia with some of the Afghan handicrafts on display
Below: the vibrant setting of the new restaurant.*



• Street Stall at Woolworths Balmain on 7th December.

The stall offered SAWA bags, jams and baked goods for sale which raised over \$900. Brochures and a photo board gave information about SAWA and the Education Centre in Nangarhar Province.

Date for your diary

Birthing Kits will be packed as usual on International Women's Day Monday 2nd March 2020; an appeal to raise \$3,000 to purchase the kits will be launched in the new year.