



## Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan

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

### FROM THE CONVENER

*The Bush era has come to an end; the inauguration of Barack Obama lifted peoples' spirits around the world. What will it bring for Afghanistan, and what will it mean for Afghanistan's women?*

*Guantanamo on Cuba will be closed, but Bagram in Afghanistan, where some 670 people are held under similar conditions, is undergoing expansion. Following the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, Afghanistan will become the new focus of war. Already thousands of families have been forced to leave their villages to escape from US bombardment and indiscriminate destruction of houses. A large number of villagers have fled and are forced to spend the harsh winter near Kabul, and RAWA receives reports of children's deaths almost every day.*

*The press and even some politicians realize that the greatest problem of the country are not the Taliban but the totally corrupt Karzai government that through its actions creates the conditions under which the Taliban can be successful. Last month the New York Times published a price list. You want to be appointed police chief: \$100,000; you have to drive a truck from Iran to Kabul: \$6,000; you need a court ruling that the confiscation of your house was illegal: \$25,000; and the list goes on ...*

*In a country where everything now has its price, security for women is not a consideration. Earlier this year Hungama, a female student from Kandahar University, asked the Canadian International Development Agency to arrange a safe transportation system for herself and her classmates. Currently, the girls' families walk or drive them to the campus. "People make trouble for us because they see us coming to school. They chase us and say they will hurt us because we are coming," she says. One girl stopped coming to school after someone threatened to set her on fire if she continued with her studies.*

*The threat is not idle. Students, particularly girls, have been frequent targets of fundamentalists. In November a young girl was blinded and several female students and their teachers injured when insurgents sprayed acid in their faces as they walked to school. Afghan filmmaker Abdul Rashid Azimi, who filmed "Akse Yadgari" ("The Keepsake Photo"), a movie about*

*rape that just premiered in Herat, says: "As things now stand people's attitudes punish the victims, while those who commit the crimes usually walk free." Rights activists know of 112 reported rape cases in Afghanistan involving underage girls in the first three months of the current Afghan year and insist that many more cases go unreported.*

*The price of staple foods such as rice doubled during 2008. The number of child beggars is on the increase because families, particularly families of war widows, cannot feed themselves any more. More troops are not the answer. As long as the USA and its allies including Australia support a parliament of warlords and criminals and a government of money-hungry ministers and state officials Afghanistan will sink deeper into misery. It appears that our work is now not only needed to defend Afghanistan's women against fundamentalist misogyny but increasingly necessary to counteract the misery brought upon them by the actions of our own governments. Donations are needed more than ever. Please keep up your support; and impress on your politicians that what is required is not more troops but more justice – no warlords as parliamentarians, no corrupt officials in positions of power, security for women.*

Matthias Tomczak

### Computer course at Hewad High School



As reported in the last SAWAN, SAWA's call for donations to set up a computer course at Hewad High School found wide support, but the course was delayed because the school had to move into smaller premises to avoid a steep rent rise.

RAWA prepared a budget for computer training for the long summer vacation in June – August, when the class rooms are available for the course. Eight

SAWA-Australia P.O. Box 90, Flinders University PO, Bedford Park SA 5042    www.sawa-australia.org    info@sawa-australia.org

**Bendigo Bank Account Number: 126035633 Adelaide Branch BSB: 633-000**

### 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.

**Convener:** Matthias Tomczak

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**Membership Officer:** Helen Fletcher

**Committee:** Dawn Atkinson, Grace McCaughey, Ruth Redfern

**Newsletter Editor:** Matthias Tomczak

**Public Officer:** Ruth Redfern

**Auditor:** Bob Shahinger

computers will be used in three shifts, so that 150 students can gain their first experience in the use of computers and develop valuable skills.

The plan is to hold computer classes every year during the summer vacation. There are not many opportunities for refugee children in Rawalpindi to do anything else but stay at home during holidays, and the students are already looking forward to spend their holidays productively by attending a computer course.

The decline in the value of the Australian dollar meant that SAWA could not cover the cost of the computer course to the full extent, but RAWA has assured us that the course will go ahead, if necessary with a borrowed generator. Future course costs will be much reduced, now that computers and appropriate furniture have been purchased. We again thank all supporters who contributed to our "computers for Hewad High School" appeal.



*Students from Hewad High School: elementary students (previous page) and high school students (above)*

### **Where do refugees go when they go home?**

During the five years of SAWA's existence SAWA supporters met many Afghan women in the pages of the SAWAN and on SAWA's website. Last October, when an opportunity came up to visit Kabul, I thought that it would be good to meet some of them in person. I wanted to know how they had coped with the closure of Khewa Camp in Pakistan in 2008. Would it be uplifting to learn that their experiences with RAWA helped them to overcome the most difficult situations, or would it be depressing, meeting them in poverty and without hope?

I contacted RAWA before leaving Adelaide and asked whether I could meet Malalai and Shukria, teachers at Naseema Shaheed High School, and Shogofa, a student of the school, whose personal stories had featured in earlier SAWAN issues.

Malalai's story appeared in SAWAN 12, November 2006. She returned to Jalalabad when Khewa Camp closed. Most residents of Khewa Camp had come from Jalalabad. and Malalai continues to teach in a RAWA school in that city.

Shogofa's story appeared in SAWAN 14, May 2007, when she was in year 12 at Naseema Shaheed High School. Shogofa had always wanted to study journalism. She is now enrolled at Herat University. We wish her success in her profession, which is not without danger. Last year Parwez Kambakhsh, a journalism student in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, was condemned to death

for distributing an article about Islam and women's rights (see SAWAN 17, February 2008). His case was transferred from a religious court to a court in Kabul, who changed the verdict to 20 years imprisonment. An appeal is pending, but at the time of writing Kambakhsh is in prison.

I was able to meet Shukria, another teacher from Naseema Shaheed High School, whose life story appeared in SAWAN 13, February 2007. She had to travel over an hour by bus to get to the orphanage where I stayed. Shukria came in the finest white clothes, rings and bracelets and looked very elegant indeed. After the closure of Khewa Camp she had returned to her brother in Kabul, who was unemployed but could offer her a minuscule room. For several months she was unemployed as well and felt very bad about being a burden to her brother. Then her training as a nurse in RAWA's Malalai clinic got her a job as a nurse in a government hospital that is financed by an NGO. The clinic is good and the colleagues are nice but the pay is very low, and she has to travel two hours one way every day to get to work, taking four different buses.

In addition to her paid work Shukria runs a free literacy course for women in a private home of her neighbourhood during the evenings. The course is her initiative; she saw young girls in the street and asked them why they did not go to school. She was assisted in starting the course by her brother, who has a degree in chemistry but supports his family through work as a casual day labourer; before 9/11 he had worked as a chemistry teacher in Khewa Camp's boy school but had to return to Kabul after the US-invasion to look after his parents and other family members.

Shukria said that life in the camp had turned her life around. After the death of her husband (Shukria's husband was killed by the Taliban in 2000) she saw no reason to live, but RAWA gave her new hope, and now she wants to help others wherever she can. Although she is no longer in a RAWA project she will always support RAWA and feels that she is doing RAWA's work in her new positions. She knows that everyone who lived in Khewa Camp thinks the same, and now that they are scattered all around the country – Jalalabad, Herat, Kabul, and many other places – they will continue to spread RAWA's message. They all keep contact with each other.

I was grateful for the opportunity to meet one of the many courageous women who carry RAWA's spirit with them wherever they go and whatever they do and to hear first hand how RAWA has touched peoples' lives. Shukria's determination to change the life of the girls of her country challenges us to be equally determined and redouble our efforts to support RAWA and the girls and women of Afghanistan.

Matthias Tomczak

### **Birth kits**

The statistics are known and have been pointed out repeatedly: There are 6,500 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births; every 28 minutes a woman dies during childbirth. The reasons are two-fold: the refusal of husbands to allow routine medical examinations by male doctors, and low standards of hygiene.

The birthing kit developed by Adelaide Hills Club of Zonta International consists of a 1m x 1m plastic sheet for the mother to lie on, a piece of soap, two rubber gloves, three gauze squares,

three cord ties, two plastic clamps and a sterile scalpel blade, all contained in a small press-sealed plastic bag. A year ago SAWA sent 2,000 kits to Afghanistan, where RAWA distributed them to midwives. (See the report in SAWAN 17, February 2008)



*Women with Zonta birthing kits, February 2008*

Given the statistics, the 2,000 birthing kits will have saved the lives of 130 women. At the price of 80 cents per kit the cost to save one life was about \$12, an excellent return for the donations that made the distribution of the kits possible. But we can also look at the statistics in another way. It is now one year since SAWA sent the last batch of kits. There were good reasons for this, chiefly a bottleneck in the supply at Zonta's end but also insufficient donation income. Nevertheless, more than 18,000 women died in childbirth during those 12 months, and we could have prevented 130 of these deaths if we could have sent another 2,000 birthing kits.

SAWA bought the material for another batch of 2,000 kits in November. The kits had to be assembled and packed before Zonta arranges their transport to Afghanistan. 1,000 kits were assembled in Adelaide in December, the remaining 1,000 will be assembled in Sydney as this SAWAN goes out.

Dealing with women's lives as statistics is gruesome business, but it shows how much can be achieved with a small donation. We all know that the coming year will be difficult and that many of us will have to think twice before spending a dollar. But \$12 to save a woman's life should not be out of reach for most of us. So do not let the stream of donations run dry in these economically difficult times; saving on your support for SAWA may cost the life of one of your sisters in Afghanistan.



*Women and their children in a RAWA training session how to give birth without danger to health and life*

*A report from the birthing kit assembly in Adelaide:*

On 13 December 2008, SAWA-Australia and Zonta organized a "Birthing Kit Packing"-afternoon at Flinders University, Adelaide. Although it was pre-Christmas time, approximately 30 helpers arrived - ready to put together birthing kits destined for women in Afghanistan. It was a lively afternoon and the target was comfortably reached. Once 1,002 kits were counted, many hungry helpers stayed behind to finish off the smorgasbord of delicious food brought by the participants.

The whole afternoon was a success and everything was great: the people - in particular our 8-year old little helper, whose assistance was invaluable - , the people's spirits, the atmosphere, the food, the venue... Thank you everyone!

### **An urgent appeal for the Vocational Training Centre**

The Vocational Training Centre in Kabul is SAWA's major support project. It was established in March 2008 and is operated by OPAWC (Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities), the NGO set up by evicted parliamentarian Malalai Joya. It offers literacy courses for 90 women, especially war widows. The courses were originally planned to run for 24 months and finish with the issuing of a certificate. Since then the Afghan government has published regulations for adult education. Under these regulations literacy courses are to run for 12 months, after which the participants receive a government certificate.

To allow the women in the Centre to receive a certificate issued by the government OPAWC decided to change the duration of its course to 12 months. Consequently, the women who came to the Centre last March will soon have completed their course and will look for means to support their families with their newly acquired skills.



*Women at the Vocational Training Centre discuss their grades after the results of the first semester were handed out*

Hiring a handicraft trainer and offering handicraft courses was part of the original plan for the Centre, and the building that houses it has room for handicraft training. Unfortunately SAWA could only raise the funds for the literacy course, and the planned handicraft training had to be set aside for the time being.

Six months ago, when the Australian dollar appreciated in value riding on the resources boom from China's burgeoning economy, SAWA had real hopes that the income from donations would be sufficient to set up the handicraft training before the end of the first literacy classes. Since then the dollar has gone from nearly at par with the US dollar to 65 US cents or less, and our hopes evaporated.

The situation is now critical. Reading and calculating skills will allow the women to run a home business, but that alone will not bring bread on the table. Starting the handicraft training has become so urgent that the Centre has taken out a loan and purchased five sewing machines. This loan has to be repaid; and not only that, materials have to be bought, and the women have to be supported with some start capital for their home business.

Handicraft courses run for 3 months and can accommodate 10 trainees in two shifts. To support the courses SAWA has to raise an additional \$11,000.

We do not often issue urgent appeals; we usually rely on the good name that comes from the quality of our work and on people's generosity. However, these are not ordinary times. The financial and economic crisis has produced a rapid deterioration of the Australian dollar's exchange rate. This forces us to issue a special urgent appeal to come to the aid of the women at the Vocational Training Centre.

SAWA now has over 200 members. This should make \$11,000 an easy target. Please be generous and give, and ask your friends to chip in as well! And thank you for donations already received, including a \$1,000 donation from South Hobart!

### Fundraising around the country

Every new SAWAN offers a welcome opportunity to thank those who sent generous donations. Unfortunately the computer disk on which the information for the last three months was stored gave up its life. The best we can do is report some major events from memory. We apologize to all who supported SAWA in a major way and go unmentioned.

A quiz night at Flinders University raised \$1,350. We thank the students for this; we know how tight student budgets are!

We are particularly grateful to those who sent out birthday or wedding invitations with the notice "no gifts please; send a donation to SAWA instead." One birthday party raised \$650; donations generated by a wedding are still coming in.

### Reports from Sydney and Castlemaine

November 2008 was a busy fundraising time in Balmain. Finola's Restaurant at the Balmain Bowling Club was again the venue for our Third Annual SAWA Lunch. SAWA members and supporters from throughout Sydney welcomed guests from the Blue Mountains, Glen Innes, Chicago, England and Fiji.

Raffle prizes donated were a bottle of bubbles from Balmain Village Cellars; vouchers from Canteen, the Circle Cafe and Delissimo Cafe as well as a RAWA Pashmina.

Film-maker Jan Wood was with us and took the opportunity to add to a film she has been developing on SAWA/RAWA. It has been shown on her program Coffee Time.

Our sincere thanks go to Finola and her outstanding crew, as well as the people in small business on the Balmain Peninsula

who over the last 3 years have shown such generous support to all local SAWA events.

Two days after the lunch we had a *Shopping for SAWA* at Helen and Robert Toner's home. As well as Tamarind Trading supplying African craft work and jewellery we sold Afghani fabric craft and second-hand books. Altogether \$5,570 was raised through Third Annual SAWA lunch, Shopping for SAWA and donations. This also included \$360 raised by a supporter who raised money by inviting 6 people for a lunch she provided with funds generated donated to a chosen cause. A week later SAWA was the chosen cause. Thank you Catherine.

*Dawn Atkinson, Sydney*

40 people gathered in Castlemaine to watch "Kabul October 2008", a documentation of the visit of SAWA's national convener to Kabul. They found the DVD both enlightening and disturbing. With electricity available 3 hours every three days, it is easy to understand why this devastated country has one of the three lowest greenhouse emissions on earth. With little infrastructure, water and sewerage, circumstances are dire. Health suffers and life expectancy is at 43 for men and 39 for women.

The DVD inspired those attending in several ways. Five new members joined SAWA. \$320 worth of Afghan crafts were purchased, and a total of \$900 was raised. One attendee, Jill Gibson, spoke and unexpectedly donated \$500 which was the profit from a local Women's Dance held recently.

All expenses including hall hire and afternoon tea were donated. so that all money raised - \$1100 - will go directly to SAWA's two the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul. The Centre and an orphanage were featured in the DVD. (SAWA's administration is covered by a percentage of membership fees.) Another outcome is that Megan Wahr, who will be setting up a new Bazaar in the Old Mill in the main street of Kyneton, offered to sell Afghan crafts, with no commission. SAWA will be at Megan's official opening to promote its activities. Thanks were extended to all who attended and contributed and helped on the day and to SAWA's national convener Professor Matthias Tomczak, who made the DVD during his visit to Afghanistan.

*Grace McCaughey, Castlemaine*

### Annual General Meeting

This year's AGM will be held in Adelaide on 24 March 2009. SAWA members receive an invitation and proxy form with this newsletter. If you are a financial member and did not receive the invitation and form please email [info@sawa-australia.org](mailto:info@sawa-australia.org) or write to the SAWA PO box address.



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.