

**CPACS Working Paper 03/1
Women's Rights in Post-Taliban Afghanistan: Seminar Report
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Introduction

On Tuesday 5 August 2003, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies was visited by Tahmeena Faryal, a Pakistan-based member of RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. RAWA was established in 1977 as an independent organisation of Afghan women campaigning for democracy and women's rights. The organisation provides education and health facilities for women and children in Afghanistan and in Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan.

This paper provides a summary of this seminar and some additional information on further contacts and materials regarding the situation of women in Afghanistan and the work of the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women. Tahmeena spoke about the current situation for women in Afghanistan, and the activities of RAWA. She also showed the video 'The Silent Revolt', a French documentary about RAWA by Stéphanie Carron.

As a child, the Soviet invasion forced Tahmeena and her family to flee Afghanistan for a Pakistani refugee camp. She was educated in RAWA schools in Pakistan and through her education with RAWA became committed to working for human rights and women's rights. During her years as a RAWA member she has taught children in refugee camps, distributed food, medical supplies and other humanitarian aid to refugees, and has taken part in RAWA demonstrations and functions to protest the inhumane situation in Afghanistan and to support women's rights. Tahmeena is a member of RAWA's Foreign Committee and travels extensively to raise international awareness of the plight of Afghan women and RAWA's projects in orphanages, schools, refugee camps and medical clinics.

The history of the conflict in Afghanistan and the situation of women

It is important to know something about the history of war and conflict in Afghanistan in order to understand the situation of Afghan women in Afghanistan today. There is a lot of information about Afghanistan in the media but it is not always correct. Throughout its history, Afghanistan has been invaded by foreign powers. The people of Afghanistan have always fought back and the country was never colonised. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. As a reaction to this invasion there were uprisings from all levels of Afghan society. Some 5 million Afghans fled the country to different parts of the world.

The fundamentalists in Afghanistan are not supported by the ordinary citizens. Foreign powers chose to support them against the Russians for reasons to do with the Cold War power play and the presence of oil in the region. These foreign powers saw them as the best guarantors for the defence of their interest in the region. Between 1992 and 1996, the Northern Alliance was in power before the Taliban took over in 1997. Many people were killed for supposedly ethnic and religious reasons. They wrought an enormous amount of destruction on the country.

When the Taliban arrived they were welcomed. They came in the name of peace and people hoped that things would get better. Soon however the people realised that the Taliban were just another regime of terror. Restrictions were imposed which deprived women of the right to education, the right to work, the right to travel and much more. Often, the outside world sees the burka as the main problem because it's a strong symbol, but other problems are much more important. The people of Afghanistan became very frustrated with the outside world because they recognised the fundamentalist regime. After September 11 it looked like this might change.

However, again the international community supported the fundamentalist Northern Alliance to fight against the Taliban. As a result, no peace or stability has been achieved. You may have heard that Afghanistan has been liberated but this is not so. The official restrictions that were in place during the Taliban regime may have been lifted. Women can once again listen to music and watch television. But other things have not changed. A majority of women still wear the burka for security reasons: they fear the memory of the Northern Alliance when it ruled from 1992 – 1996.

Since the new government came into power there have been bombings, two ministers were killed, foreign aid organisations' offices were looted. The rate of unemployment is very high. There are no jobs for those who have no connections to the government. There are no jobs for teachers although education is very necessary in Afghanistan. When teachers do find a job they often have to wait for their salaries that are very small. Many taxi-drivers have a degree but no job; even those with a foreign education cannot find work.

Liberation means not just being able to listen to music or shedding the burka, but access to health care, education, freedom of speech, etc. Elections will be held in 2004 but it will be difficult for people to organise themselves to push for democracy. The warlords will remain in power if disarmament does not happen. The United Nations peacekeeping mission should be expanded in Afghanistan to similar levels as in East Timor and Cambodia.

RAWA – the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women

In the media the women in Afghanistan are often portrayed as silent, as if there is no resistance from these women. But many thousands of women worked underground under the rule of the Taliban. There have also been protests that were never covered by the media.

In 1978 RAWA was formed by Meena to raise the status of women and educate them on their rights because they often do not get this message through their families. Meena was killed in 1987 but RAWA continued her work and grew to a network of 2000 members in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For security reasons it has no office and has always run its activities in secret. In Pakistan things can now be run publicly but not in Afghanistan. In 1997 RAWA established a website and was able to connect with people worldwide. Then in 2000 Oprah Winfrey mentioned RAWA and its website on her show, which resulted in an immense response from people all over the world.

Most of RAWA's funding comes from individual donations as well as some organisations. The word 'revolutionary' in RAWA's name has raised some questions. However, fighting for secular democracy and education is a revolution in Afghanistan so RAWA's name reflects the nature of its work. 'Many have asked us to drop the word 'revolutionary' from our name in return for more funding. We feel we cannot do that; reality needs to be told', Tahmeena concluded.

More information

- The book 'With All Our Strength' describes the history of RAWA in more detail. The author Anne Brodsky is an American psychologist who spent four months in Afghanistan and interviewed over 100 people, many of whom were RAWA members. The CPACS reference library holds a copy of the book.
- The video 'The Silent Revolt', a French documentary about RAWA made by Stéphanie Carron. The CPACS reference library holds a copy of the video.
- Here in Australia, Jane Chesher, a Peace and Conflict Studies student, and Katina Goussetis have organised many successful events to promote RAWA's cause. There are plans to set up an Australian support organisation for RAWA. Please send an email to mailto:sawa_australia@yahoo.com.au for more information.
- More information on RAWA can of course also be found on their website: <http://www.rawa.org/>