



## Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan

### Brave Afghan Woman Activist to Visit Australia

#### BACKGROUNDER: 6 May 2009

Shazia Shakib, a member of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), will be visiting Australia in May and June on a national tour to highlight the challenges facing women in her war-torn country.

She will give a first hand account of the struggle for human rights, democracy and secular values in a country ravaged by war and religious fundamentalism.

Shazia's tour has been organized by the Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan (SAWA). Her identity is being kept deliberately vague to protect her safety.

SAWA spokesperson Barbara James expects large crowds at Shazia's engagements and says they will hear an inspiring story.

"The achievements of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan are remarkable given the circumstances," she says.

"For 30 years, through Soviet occupation, Taliban rule, the American invasion and the current reign of warlords, RAWA has continued the struggle for democracy, human rights and secularism."

"As well as providing leadership to Afghani women struggling for human rights and equality, RAWA runs health clinics, schools and adult education centres. The Taliban prohibited the education of girls and are still destroying schools and murdering teachers who dare to do so."

"The brave women of RAWA take great risks. The organization's founder, Meena, was killed in 1987 and members' work regularly puts them at risk from the Taliban and the warlord-dominated Afghani government."

"The real achievements of RAWA in extreme circumstances are inspiring," says Ms James. "We are proud to be able to bring Shazia to Australia and encourage the public to come and hear her inspiring story and support the brave work of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan."

Shazia will visit Adelaide, Hobart, Melbourne, Castlemaine, Newcastle, Sydney, Brisbane and Lismore.

Her tour is supported by the Australian Education Union and Zonta District 23 Area 2.

SAWA raises awareness and funds to support the work of RAWA. Money raised in Australia maintains RAWA's Hewad High School for Afghan refugees in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, and a Vocational Training Centre for War Widows in Kabul.

#### For further information contact

**SAWA secretary Barbara James at 08 8333 3479 or 0416 188 015**

**SAWA convener Matthias Tomczak at 08 8377 2305 or 0423 900 889**

**Tour itinerary updates are available at [www.sawa-australia.org/events.htm](http://www.sawa-australia.org/events.htm)**

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**RAWA speaking tour May/June 2009**

**For further information contact**

**Barbara James of SAWA at 08 8333 3479 or 0416 188 015.**

**The tour itinerary is available at**

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About the speaker

25 year old Shazia (not her real name) was born in Kabul into an open-minded and educated family.

In 1991, when the situation in Afghanistan accelerated towards civil war, the family moved to a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan, where Shazia went to a school operated by RAWA.

After the fall of the Taliban regime the family returned to Kabul.

Shazia completed her final year of high school in Kabul and then entered Kabul University to study psychology.

She received her Bachelor degree in 2008.

Shazia now works for RAWA full-time, teaching English to children in a RAWA orphanage, translating RAWA publications for the international media, and visiting rural Afghanistan as a reporter for RAWA's magazine, Payam-e-Zan (Message of Women).

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### **About SAWA**

SAWA-Australia, the Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan, was set up in February 2004 by a group of concerned people from Sydney, Melbourne and Central Victoria,. Now in its fifth year, it has grown to a membership of over 250 with members in all states.

SAWA is dedicated to raising funds for human rights, education, nutrition, health, safety, and improving the self-esteem of the millions of Afghan women and children in Pakistan's refugee camps and within Afghanistan.

SAWA's aims are to

- 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.

SAWA is operated entirely by volunteers. All funds raised go to RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) projects and projects dedicated to the advancement of the rights of Afghanistan's women. Administration costs are held as low as possible (less than 2% of donation and membership income.)

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### **About RAWA**

RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, is an independent, anti-fundamentalist, feminist organization for women's human rights, and for a fully democratic and secular government in Afghanistan. RAWA was established in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1977 with the objective to involve an increasing number of Afghan women in social and political activities aimed at acquiring women's human rights and contributing to the struggle for the establishment of a government based on democratic and secular values.

Before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, RAWA's activities concentrated on agitation for women's rights and democracy. From 1979 RAWA became directly involved in the war of resistance, advocating from the outset democracy and secularism. Demonstrations against the Soviet invaders and later against the fundamentalists have been a hallmark of RAWA's activities.

Despite the horrors and political oppression, RAWA's appeal and influence grew in the years of the Soviet occupation, and a growing number of RAWA activists were sent to work among refugee women in Pakistan, where RAWA established schools with hostels for boys and girls and a hospital and conducted nursing courses, literacy courses and vocational training courses for women.

RAWA rejects violence, relying on education and relief work. Currently RAWA runs schools, orphanages, income-generation projects and medical services in Afghanistan and for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.