



Organising women in Afghanistan: 'Each of us needs a little RAWA'

Samia was interviewed by Luce Dubois by telephone

In the past months we heard about the US leaving Afghanistan, the march of the Taliban on Kabul and unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. The pictures of Afghans who worked for NATO forces and international organizations trying desperately to leave Afghanistan went around the world. The shameful lack of adequate help from governments has been highlighted. The work of Afghan activists however is rarely mentioned.

One organization that will continue to fight for women's rights and democracy is RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. Arundhati Roy once said 'Each of us needs a little RAWA' (Afghan Women's Mission, 2004).

Let's hear what Samia, a longtime activist, tells us about RAWA, the livelihoods of women in this largely agrarian and beleaguered economy, and the role that the international labour movement could play to support the women and the people of Afghanistan.

RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, was founded in 1977 in Kabul. Could you please tell how you started to get involved in RAWA?

I was born in Kabul during the occupation of the Soviet Union [1978 to 1989]; a civil war was going on and my family fled to Pakistan. Most of the camps there were in the hands of religious fundamentalists; people were suffering in those camps. I was however lucky that, thanks to the advice of a family's friend, we went to a different camp. In this camp there was a clinic, an orphanage, a school, a shelter for women, women could speak... It was surprising for my family. The school I went to was run by RAWA, though not openly, because otherwise they would have been threatened by fundamentalists. Those fundamentalists killed our leader Meena in a Pakistani camp.

RAWA not only ran schools or clinics but also had political activities such as awareness classes for young girls, a newspaper, organized demonstrations... And so I started to be an activist at 13. In the morning I went to school, in the afternoon I teach a small group of women. [In] 2001, when I turned 16, I decided to become RAWA's member.

RAWA was created to fight for women's human rights and the

establishment of a democratic and secular government in Afghanistan. After the Soviet occupation in December 1979, RAWA became directly involved in the resistance, of course in a different way than the Islamic fundamentalist 'freedom fighters'. Could you tell us about the history of RAWA?

You have to know that this was a military occupation and as such very brutal. The Soviet Union generally pretended to be for the rights of poor people and workers, but it was not true in Afghanistan - they imprisoned and killed left activists and intellectuals, normal people... The resistance started in cities and in villages: 'No to the occupation'. It was the beginning of Afghanistan's tragedy: if people want human's rights, democracy, socialism, it cannot be done by occupation, either a socialist or a capitalist one. From that time on, the extremists fought in Afghanistan, as we know the US trained the fundamentalists. And so it became a tragedy for Afghanistan, the region and the world.

Fundamental change

People often ask us why we are for revolution and not for reforms; what does it mean. We always say that if you want to change the situation of women and the population you have to change the political system, the social system, the economic system, and the mentalities. This means a fundamental change. Only with laws it won't change, it is exactly what we experienced over the last twenty years. If you want to change attitudes, you need to make a revolution. It doesn't mean an armed revolution, but that society's structures should be very different. When your life is threatened and you have to defend yourself such as the women in Kobane¹, against Daesh, then it is normal to take arms, otherwise fundamentalists will kill you. At the moment the big problem is that so many activists are fleeing to the EU. It is good since it will save their lives, but if you have a free place like Kobane, it is a place for resistance.

We started with social projects for refugees, schools, clinics, income generation projects for women and we will continue. In Afghanistan, RAWA is an underground organization - we cannot work openly, the fundamentalists want to kill us. In the last years it was possible to open private schools, we did that mostly in remote areas where there is no access to education for women, but under other names. RAWA was also not legal during

¹ Kobane is a canton in the autonomous region Rojava in Syria.

the NATO occupation because fundamentalists were actually in power.

Women's rights are also workers' rights, women do a lot of unpaid work and it is also about the right to work, to have one's own income. In a country where women were often not allowed to do paid work is it a topic for RAWA? Did you have the possibility of working with trade unions?

As far as I am aware trade unions do not really exist in Afghanistan. The main economy is a farmer economy, we don't have big industries, and the other sizable sector was the government sector. We imported most goods from other countries - no one was really interested in investing in Afghanistan. I heard about two trade unions who belong to men. I heard about them on the first of May and then as far as I know they disappeared.² Concerning work it is more about securing livelihood. RAWA had very small income generating projects with chicken farms or the like. But of course, the right to education, to work and to have an equal wage are some of core demands of RAWA.

Livelihoods

Could you tell a few words about the livelihood strategies of Afghan people and especially women?

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world and now that there is no foreign aid anymore, we are facing a human tragedy; everything is going to stop. Already people are not buying anything more. My family neighbours can't buy food anymore. Women are the poorest. Men are seen as the ones who are responsible for the family livelihood and women for care work. During the last forty years of war, and especially during the last twenty years, men died on both side [Afghan government and Taliban] and left women alone; now those women are the head of the family, they have no income, no education, no help; in the poor layers of the women's population begging and prostitution increased.

The involvement and the courage of RAWA's women in documenting the Taliban and bringing notes and pictures outside Afghanistan borders is quite famous. Could you please tell us how this worked?

In the 90s all the media left Afghanistan, there was no access to the outside world. RAWA was still active and we worked hard. In the late 90s there were no smartphones - we managed to find a woman reporter from the US and I think from Japan, who organized for us mini-cameras. With those camera we could document the crimes and atrocities of the Taliban, such as women's executions. Our members were also collecting reports;

at the time there were no media, we were the ones doing that and friends brought the reports to Pakistan and there we translated them into English and posted them on our website to tell the world about the situation of women under the regime.

Despite what they are saying now, the Taliban didn't change, but maybe since the country needs to be connected to the outside world, reports might come out. We will see how we have to continue our struggle.

Freedom can't be donated

RAWA says that 'freedom and democracy can't be donated; that it is the duty of the people of a country to fight and achieve these values'. Is it still possible to fight for this in Afghanistan?

Every time is a time for fighting. Now many activists try to go out, but RAWA wants and decided to stay, because we want to continue the fight; I am here in Europe, but I can only do awareness work, other members have to deal with the real situation. It is very important for a revolutionary group to have hopes and to fight for these hopes.

What can progressive people and the labour movement do to support women and progressive groups such as RAWA?

We always ask progressive groups to support us in two ways: first with political support. In some countries you have some political freedom, you can use your liberty to push governments not to recognize the Taliban regime. They are a criminal group, not a government. Progressive groups and the labour movements should speak with politicians. Right now we can see some interests for the situation in Afghanistan, but we are afraid that soon we will be forgotten and the tragedy will unfold. You should stand with Afghan people and groups such as RAWA and other revolutionary groups, they are in danger. You need to speak about them, the media never does.

Then, you could also raise funds for projects helping women, for awareness and literacy classes, income generating projects, because it is through such work that women start fighting for their rights. Women in Afghanistan need a revolution because for them everything has to change. Activists will continue to fight underground. I ask progressive people: remember Afghan people, remember us.

References

Afghan Women's Mission (2004) [With all our strength](#), Afghan Women's Mission, 18 August

² It is not surprising that Samia has not heard of efforts to unionise. Apart from gendered divisions, repression also keeps unions' profiles low. See, for example, this letter: <http://www.industrialunion.org/global-labour-movement-condemns-seizure-of-union-property-by-government-of-afghanistan>

Global Labour Column

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