

**With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association  
of the Women of Afghanistan**

*Anne E. Brodsky*

*New York and London: Routledge, 2003. 318 pages.*

Anne Brodsky's *With All Our Strength* provides an ethnographic study of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). This organization was founded in 1977 by the enigmatic Meena as "the first independent feminist women's organization in Afghanistan, whose sole purpose and aim was the advancement and equality of Afghan women" (p. 43). RAWA's main vehicle of empowerment is education, through literacy and political consciousness, and its vehicles for promoting these tasks are

literacy classes and *Payam-e-Zan*, a quarterly political magazine (published in Dari and Pashtu) that includes political commentaries on a wide range of issues relating to Afghanistan.

The author describes RAWA as a humanitarian and political women's organization that has operated in Afghanistan and Pakistan since its founding in 1977. She provides a good review of its philosophy and workings through an impressive number of interviews and personal observations gained while living and traveling with RAWA members. Her analysis offers insight into Afghanistan's patriarchal culture, as well as the customs and traditions that have impacted its women. She presents readers with an excellent analysis of the events that led to the conflict in Afghanistan, discusses the country's situation since the regime change of 1979, and highlights the humanitarian cost of war, focusing on the conflict's impact on Afghani women. In addition, she describes the horrors women faced under the Taliban regime and outlines the continued challenges that they face in post-Taliban Afghanistan as well as RAWA's response.

The author also provides the reader with an interesting and thorough overview of RAWA's workings. She introduces us to Meena, who is regarded as a martyr after her assassination in Pakistan in 1987, and the impact that she had – and continues to have – on RAWA members. Brodsky presents an interesting look at the organization's structure and the contributions of each of its committees, whose members must work clandestinely and under assumed names for security reasons. Through her interviews and observations, she shows us how RAWA has evolved over the years and continued its mandate, despite the various challenges it faces, how it gained international attention following the 9/11 tragedy, and how it began enjoying unprecedented financial support.

Although the author's writing is lucid and the book is easy to read, her descriptive style leaves the reader wishing for some analysis or inclusion of opposing views. Such an omission weakens Brodsky's ability to view RAWA impartially. While the author does an excellent job providing the reader with a perspective on RAWA's day-to-day activities and the challenges its members face, she does not provide an outsider's perspective of RAWA. In other words, she denies the reader a full appreciation of the controversies surrounding RAWA and its work. In this way, the author paints an overly idealist picture of RAWA, thereby advancing the mistaken perception in the West that it is *the* Afghan women's movement, and ignores valid criticisms presented by other Afghan organizations about its work and politics, as well as that of its adherents.

This is an important point, because the Afghan women whom I met and with whom I worked in Afghanistan during the spring of 2003 did not feel that RAWA spoke on their behalf. They did not approve of RAWA's militant and secular feminist approach, and were troubled that it was being seen in the international community – especially in the United States – as representing their interests and goals as Afghan women. Furthermore, they were concerned about how western attention on RAWA dismissed the existence and important work of other Afghan women's organizations that were – and are – doing excellent work at the grassroots level throughout the conflict and in the post-Taliban era. To this reader, therefore, Brodsky's work does not provide a critical analysis of RAWA's work; rather, its sympathetic perspective ignores the fact that the organization's *modus operandi* has alienated its members from the wider Afghan women's movement, various components of which criticize many aspects of RAWA's work.

In fairness to Brodsky, she does address this weakness in her introduction by conceding that “neither my translator nor I is a ‘detached’ or ‘objective’ observer of RAWA” and arguing that “there are many truths that we construct as we interact with others, each of us guided in part by our own views of the world. This book does not claim to be the truth about RAWA, but a truth as I saw and experienced it.” Although this admission is appreciated, it does not diminish the facts that the book does not read as an objective and accurate presentation of RAWA and its work, and that it ignores the implications of its members' work on the country's burgeoning women's movement.

The book also left this reader wondering how effective RAWA's work can be, given that its members have so alienated themselves from mainstream Afghani society. Having worked in Afghanistan myself and meeting with many women representing various community organizations, I have observed courageous women who masterfully work for the advancement of women within the existing structures while seeking to change cultural attitudes through education and advocacy.

*With All Our Strength* provides a useful introduction to RAWA's history, philosophy, and inner workings. While it does not tell the story of all Afghan women or their various forms of resistance and advocacy, it provides the reader with a picture of the courageous, determined, and selfless sacrifices still being made by so many Afghan men and women in their quest for equality. For those who are new to the subject, the book is both interesting and valuable. For those who are well acquainted with the situation in Afghanistan and its burgeoning women's movement, the book is an incomplete representation of Afghan women's resistance and advocacy. Anyone

interested in this subject should supplement their reading by looking at the work of women's organizations operating openly in Afghanistan, such as the Afghan Women's Network ([www.afghanwomensnetwork.org](http://www.afghanwomensnetwork.org)), for an alternative perspective on Afghan women's activism.

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