

Against All Odds *The Story of an Afghan Heroine*

by Melody Ermachild Chavis

Meena was a 20-year-old Kabul University student when she founded the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Ten years later, in 1987, she was assassinated. During those ten years, Meena inspired thousands of women (despite risk of imprisonment, torture, and death) to participate in clandestine schools, share literacy skills, and organize for change. The following excerpt of Meena, Heroine of Afghanistan (2003) begins with the story of how RAWA was started.

No one knows how [Meena] summoned up the courage to take these first steps. It is certain that she drew upon all that she had ever learned about freedom. Her husband encouraged her. Most of all, she relied on her closest women friends. Their organization was born among a very small circle of women who somehow believed, through the strength of Meena's conviction, that together, against all odds, they could do something.

At their first meetings, they decided on a name for their group. They knew they wanted it to include the word *zan*—women. Meena was adamant, and the others agreed, that they would open the group to women only.

"Who but women will work for women, and only women?" Meena asked . . .

The age-old women's culture of Afghanistan that oppressed them also sustained them.

"Afghan women are an oppressed group within an oppressed group," she said. "We have different goals than men, and much more ground to gain."

"All the men do is talk, talk, talk, and argue politics!" another woman complained. "I want to be in a group that actually helps people."

"Women," Meena told them, "are an untapped source of great strength. Look at what we accomplish every day, feeding our families, caring for children. If we can come together to

act in unison, we can make changes no one has dreamed of."

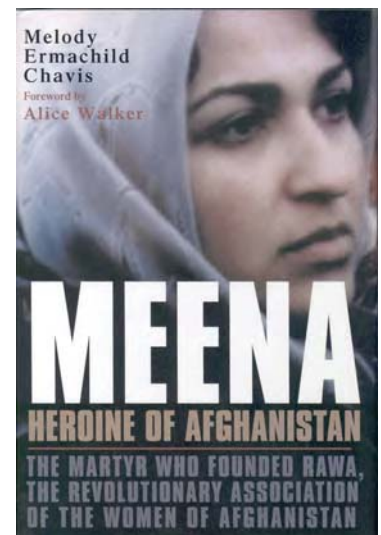
[So *zan* would be included in their name. Ultimately, the women decided on the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan—or RAWA.]

Next, the women discussed their founding principles. What did they believe in that they could agree on?

First of all, they agreed to work for democracy, by which they meant the restoration of elections in Afghanistan, and the right to vote for women and men . . .

Second they agreed their mission would be to struggle for equality and social justice for women. By that they meant the basic rights of women to education, legal rights, health care, and freedom from poverty and violence. . . .

They pooled their resources to help meet each other's needs. They shared food and gave each other outgrown clothes for their children. They learned how to help each other survive. They also talked about their personal affairs. If a woman was mistreated at home, the group



would talk about how she could avoid that in the future.

Nothing a woman needed to talk about was taboo. This was another way RAWA became stronger than the male political groups. The women forged intimate emotional bonds.

As educated women, [Meena and her friends] knew one way to reach out to their less fortunate sisters: They could teach them to read. Only eight percent of girls in the nation were enrolled in primary school. The constitution granted girls the right to education, but that meant nothing in places where there were no schools, no teachers, and girls were not allowed out of their homes. Meena suggested that they go to rural villages near Kabul where members of the group had relatives or friends and start free weekly literacy classes.

[But] their students faced huge obstacles to freedom. Fathers forbade them to study, and husbands punished them for reading. RAWA's literacy teachers soon learned what a long road lay ahead of them

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on their journey to bring knowledge to the mass of Afghan women. . . .

[However], the age-old women's culture of Afghanistan that oppressed them also sustained them. Though the separation of the sexes stifled women who wanted to move into work and

learning, it also meant that women traditionally spent long hours together. A group of men meeting together might look suspicious, but women gathering to talk was as normal as *naan* [bread]. RAWA turned every common women's custom

into a tool of liberation. Every woman walked out at dawn or dusk to the *hamom*, the communal baths, carrying a change of clean clothes with her. The bath bundles of a few women concealed books and leaflets.

The *burqa*, which they as modern women had rejected, they adopted for its many uses in their clandestine work. Under their *burqas*, they were not only anonymous, but they appeared to be their own opposites: They looked like the most conservative

and obedient of women, not like the rebels they were. The *burqa* also covered whatever contraband they needed to carry. And when they could not hold back their tears, they picked up the hated but ample cloth of the *burqa* and used it to wipe their eyes.



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Questions for Discussion

1. Who did Meena rely on for strength? Who do you rely on for strength?
2. What did Meena mean when she said, "Women are an untapped source of great strength?"
3. How did the "age-old women's culture of Afghanistan" both oppress and sustain the women of RAWA?