



Statement of Mahnaz Afkhami
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To

The Senate Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on International Operation and Organizations, Human Rights,
Democracy, and Global Women's Issues
and
Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Central Asia Affairs



Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on the state of women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa during this critical time of transition.

I am President and CEO of Women's Learning Partnership, a partnership of women's rights activists and NGOs from 20 countries¹, primarily in the Middle East and North Africa. We currently have longstanding relationships with organizations in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco, who regularly convene with activists from across the region to discuss how to best advance women's rights and political participation. I would like to share with you some of the challenges, successes, and recommendations that have emerged from our partners' experiences during the past year.

In recent months, this region has seen historic and unprecedented movement toward democracy. In Tunisia and Egypt, peaceful pro-democracy activists have overthrown long-time dictators. In Morocco and Jordan, activists have instigated major changes towards democracy. In Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the protestors have been met with violent resistance. In all these charged situations, women have been active participants, and in some cases leaders and spokespersons in the movements for democracy and human rights.

Each of these countries in transition has offered both risk and opportunity for democratic voices and activists who are speaking out for women's equality and full participation in the reform process. Now more than ever, it is crucial that the United States help these groups gain the tools they need for political leadership and advocacy.

To ensure that democracy movements result in truly equitable societies with equal rights for all, political authorities and those seeking elected office need to guarantee that all opportunities are at the disposal of all citizens. This means enshrining in laws and constitutions the principles of equal access to education, employment, and political participation; and unfettered access to communications technology and free expression. Most of all it requires full support and solidarity from the United States in embracing models of democracy and equal opportunity. That can best happen through an unequivocal endorsement of international mechanisms that support those values.

The grim truth is that women who are struggling to advance human rights and create secular, pluralistic, democratic societies, face grave challenges rooted in tradition and history. Traditional social and cultural norms have relegated Middle Eastern women and girls to a private space, and they often lack the social, economic, and political power they need to overcome antagonistic groups and regressive policy.

It is also true that in recent decades, far greater numbers of women in the Middle East have gained access to higher education and are intellectually and emotionally well prepared to manage and to lead. But the Arab world still ranks last among regions in women's political participation² and third lowest in gender equality.³ In fact the gap is widening in that region

¹ WLP partner list appended

² "Women Making a Difference in Parliament," Information Document, Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2007, <http://www.ipu.org/splz-e/abudhabi07/information.pdf>

³ http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Tables_reprint.pdf at page 160.



between women's potential to serve as political actors and agents of change and their actual participation in decision-making processes.

It is therefore of utmost importance for women's equality in these countries undergoing radical transformation that the United States give its explicit support for women's full and equal participation in national reform processes. The endorsement of international conventions that hold states accountable for enforcing women's human rights is central to this reform. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), is a key such instrument.

CEDAW has now been ratified by all the world's countries except for six, including the United States, Somalia and Sudan. U.S. ratification would strengthen the efforts of activists for democracy and women's equality throughout the Middle East. Our partners in the region have made clear to us that U.S. ratification of CEDAW would reinforce their own efforts to fully institutionalize and implement the treaty provisions for gender equality within their national legislation and constitutional reforms.

Egypt and Tunisia are prime examples of countries where progress towards women's equity may be undone without America's firm and increased commitment. Before the Arab Spring, Tunisia stood out in the region for its more equitable family laws, along with Morocco, and Tunisia's historic election last week was heralded as a model of transparency. There was even a provision that women be equally represented on electoral lists. But in most instances their names were placed below those of men on those lists, so that true electoral parity likely will remain elusive. Additionally, the October 23 elections resulted in a majority vote for An-Nahda, considered by some to be a moderate Islamic party. While party leaders have said they will uphold women's rights achieved under Ben Ali, women's rights and democracy activists are seriously concerned that the party will act differently once in power.

A similar challenge now faces women candidates in Egypt, where the need is critical for all policymakers to support women's equality, in order to minimize the association of past progress with the vestiges of the ousted autocratic regime. Despite the rhetoric of democracy that drove the reform movement in Egypt, the large numbers of women who played key roles during the Tahrir Square protests, and the longstanding networks of women's civil society organizations in the country, no women were included on the country's constitutional reform committee, not even a well-respected female judge on the constitutional court. Confronting this challenge, our partners and other women activists in Egypt have increased their efforts to train grassroots women, youth, and civil society organizations on political participation and ethical engagement in the electoral process.

Beyond electoral representation, a legislative framework that mandates protection of minorities and religious freedoms is key not just for women's equality, but also to achieving democracy and security throughout the region. In Libya, for example, prospects for women's rights and democracy seem bleak at the moment, as the chair of the country's Transitional National Council recently announced that Islamic law, not secular law, will be the basis for Libya's new constitution, and indicated specifically that practices such as polygamy would be fully legalized. This raises immediate concern that women's rights will be further rolled back during Libya's reconstruction process. These dangers are stark reminders of the need to ensure that political revolution indeed leads to a fundamental transformation, not merely a cosmetic one, toward democracy and equality for all members of society.



To address this risk, we recommend that the United States focus on long-term development of democratic practices and norms at both the social and political level through the following five actions:

- A clear commitment through foreign assistance to the development of information and communications infrastructures that are widely available, secure, and free from censorship;
- Investment in training women, young people and grassroots civil society members who are key actors in building cultures of democratic participation, to use new technology in support of this process;
- Funding and empowering institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy that have long-term experience with supporting democratic transition;
- Engagement with local and regional media as key outlets to promote voices for democracy and equality at the national, community, and family levels; and
- Support for international norms for women's equality at all levels of social interaction through the ratification of CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, thus reinforcing the efforts of women's rights activists in the region.

This is a time of critical opportunity in the Middle East – but it is also a time of serious risk for women's rights. There is a very real possibility that women will not only be marginalized but also lose ground there, unless we provide increased emphasis, training, and resources for women and civil society throughout the region. I urge you not to underestimate the power of your endorsement of those structures that are requisite to women's equality and the establishment of a deeply rooted culture of democracy both at the grassroots and through international frameworks. Through these paths, we can achieve true reform.⁴

⁴ A factsheet on women's rights and the Arab Spring, created in collaboration with The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, is appended in support of this testimony



WLP Partner Organizations

Afghanistan - Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL)

Bahrain - Bahrain Women Association

Brazil - Cidadania, Estudo, Pesquisa, Informação e Ação (CEPIA)

Egypt - Forum for Women in Development (FWID)

Indonesia - Women and Youth Development Institute for Indonesia (WYDII)

Indonesia - Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia/Indonesian Women Coalition (KPI)

Jordan - Sisterhood Is Global Institute-Jordan (SIGI/J)

Kazakhstan - Shymkent Women's Resource Center

Kyrgyzstan - Citizens Against Corruption

Lebanon - Collective for Research & Training on Development-Action (CRTD-A)

Malaysia - All Women's Action Society (AWAM)

Mauritania - Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille (AFCF)

Morocco - Association Democratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM)

Nigeria - BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights

Pakistan - Aurat Foundation

Palestinian Territories - Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC)

Turkey - Kadın Emeğini Değerlendirme Vakfı/ Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (KEDV/FSSW)

Zimbabwe - Women's Self-Promotion Movement (WSPM)