

**Testimony**

**of**

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights; American Civil Liberties Union; Citizens for Global Solutions; National Women's Law Center; Advocates for Youth; American Association of University Women; American Jewish Committee; Center for Women Policy Studies; Center for Women's Global Leadership; Church Women United; Coalition of Labor Union Women; Communications Workers of America; Democratic Women's Forum; Demos; Department on the Status of Women, City and County of San Francisco; Feminist Majority; Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.; Human Rights Advocates; Institute for Science and Human Values, Inc.; League of Women Voters of the United States; National Association of Social Workers; National Committee on the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA; National Council of Jewish Women; National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States; Refugees International; The Abortion Care Network; U.S. National Committee for UN Women; U.S. Women Connect; United Church of Christ; Women Graduates/USA Inc.; Women's Environment and Development Organization; Women's Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; WomenEnabled; WomenNC; Women's Business Development Center; and Zonta International

**on**

**“Women and the Arab Spring: Spotlight on Egypt, Tunisia and Libya”**

**before the**

**Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy and Global Women's Issues**

**and**

**The Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Central Asian Affairs**

**November 2, 2011**

We are pleased to submit this statement on behalf of 37 organizations, to support the many local efforts to advance women's equality as part of the democratization taking place in countries in the Middle East and North Africa. We thank Senator Barbara Boxer, chair, and Senator Jim DeMint, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy and Global Women's Issues, and Senator Bob Casey, chair, and Senator Jim Risch, ranking member of the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Central Asian Affairs, for convening this hearing. We are pleased that this hearing will shine a spotlight on the importance of ensuring women's rights as these new democracies begin to take shape and urge that the committee

consider the importance of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in supporting these efforts.

We are members of a broad-based, diverse coalition of more than 180 national organizations coordinated by The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and are seeking U.S. ratification of CEDAW, the most comprehensive women's human rights treaty. Our organizations have come together to increase the understanding and visibility of CEDAW and to build a greater awareness among policymakers and the public about the need, importance and impact of ratification of CEDAW by the United States, now one of only six countries in the world that has not ratified this treaty.

Since the start of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, some countries in the region, including Egypt and Libya, have toppled former dictators, while other sitting governments, such as Jordan and Morocco, have begun their own reform processes. In each of these countries, women have been important leaders and active participants in the "revolutions" and are determined to continue to press for equal participation in the democratization process and to enshrine women's equality in their new laws and constitutions.

This September, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, speaking at the United Nations just before the start of the General Assembly, noted:

"We are in an age of participation. Social networking and connective technology has made that a fact. And every party in any democracy should recognize the rights of women and make room for women to play roles in the political process. As the Arab Awakening enters a new chapter, we all have a stake in ensuring that the potential of all citizens – men and women, boys and girls – have a chance to be realized."

It is no coincidence that this year the Nobel Peace Prize went to three women, including Tawakkul Kaman from Yemen, "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace building work."

It is now well-recognized that empowerment of women is central to building democratic, peaceful and prosperous societies. On numerous occasions, both President Barack Obama and Secretary Hillary Clinton have reiterated that a society can be neither democratic nor prosperous without the full participation of women, and that no nation can thrive when it fails to tap the potential of half its

population. In September, when the World Bank released its *World Development Report: Gender Equality and Development*, Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank, explained the need for the full participation of women in a *Politico* op-ed entitled “Empowering Women Empowers Nations.” He said, “Equality is not just the right thing to do. It’s smart economics. How can an economy achieve full potential if it ignores sidelines or fails to invest in half its population?”

The Senate has already gone on record expressing bipartisan support for women’s rights and political participation as leaders in North Africa and the Middle East undertake constitutional reforms to shape new governments. In April 2011, the Senate unanimously approved a resolution emphasizing the critical importance of women’s rights and political participation in these transitional periods. This resolution (S.Res.109), initiated by Senator Olympia Snowe, was co-sponsored by the 16 other women senators of both parties, among others. It was followed by a letter initiated by Senators Barbara Mikulski and Kay Bailey Hutchison, co-signed by all the women senators and others, to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces of Egypt, urging the inclusion of women in shaping the government. On July 29, the Senate again unanimously approved a resolution (S.Res. 216) sponsored by Senator Boxer encouraging women’s political participation in Saudi Arabia.

We believe another important step that the United States should take to demonstrate its leadership and support for the efforts of women in the Middle East and North Africa is for the U.S. to ratify CEDAW and formally join with the rest of the world in working to advance equality and eliminate discrimination at home and abroad. CEDAW is a comprehensive international agreement that affirms principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women around the world. CEDAW offers countries a practical blueprint to achieve progress for women and girls by calling on each ratifying country to overcome barriers to discrimination. Around the world, CEDAW has been used to reduce sex trafficking and domestic abuse; provide access to education and vocational training; ensure the right to vote; ensure the ability to work and own a business without discrimination; ensure inheritance rights; improve maternal health; and end forced marriage and child marriage.

Here in the United States, women enjoy opportunities and status not available to most of the world's women. However, few would dispute that more progress is needed, particularly to close the pay gap, reduce domestic violence, and stop trafficking. CEDAW would provide an opportunity for national dialogue on how to address persistent gaps in women's full equality. It would be a catalyst for the United States to engage in a systematic analysis of discrimination against women and develop strategies for solutions.

CEDAW is the "gold standard" or international norm that countries around the world consult in shaping their laws and constitutions on equality and women's rights, and that women's advocates use around the globe to urge recognition and protection of these rights. One of CEDAW's primary goals is to ensure that women are able to exercise the full rights of citizenship and emerge as leaders in their own societies. For example, last year in a hearing convened by the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law, Wazhma Frogh, who works with the Afghan Women's Network, testified about how women's rights activists looked to CEDAW in their successful effort to include a gender equality clause in the new Afghan Constitution. Similarly, in Tunisia and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, women are seeking to incorporate the comprehensive approach of CEDAW into their own new laws and constitutions. These women activists also report that some of their opponents question the seriousness of the United States' commitment to women's rights pointing to the fact that the U.S. has not ratified CEDAW.

CEDAW has been ratified by Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and almost all of the other countries in the Middle East. When many of these countries ratified CEDAW, however, they attached reservations to the articles dealing with issues such as a woman's right to retain her own nationality and pass it on to her child, and the right to freely contract and own property. Women activists in the region, in collaboration with the Women's Learning Partnership, have undertaken a systematic regional campaign to promote the full implementation of CEDAW. As a result of this campaign, Morocco, for example, has lifted its reservations, and in its new constitution recognizes men and women's equal status as citizens and bans

discrimination on the basis of sex. Jordan has lifted its reservations relating to women's right to travel freely and choose their place of residence. One of the first acts of the new Tunisian government this year was to remove its reservations to CEDAW and other human rights treaties. Discussions of CEDAW and efforts toward implementation, including changes in laws and policies, are taking place throughout the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1</sup>

As you know, CEDAW has been ratified by 187 countries. Only the United States and five other countries (Iran, Somalia, Sudan and two small Pacific Islands—Palau and Tonga) have not yet ratified this comprehensive women's human rights treaty. As we noted above, advancing women's human rights is also fundamental to America's national security and economic interests. Moreover, ratification of CEDAW would continue America's proud bipartisan tradition of promoting and protecting human rights.

Women in the Middle East and North Africa, like women in many countries around the world, have found CEDAW to be a valuable tool for protecting and advancing women's rights. The question they always ask us is why the United States, a trailblazer in guaranteeing these rights, has failed to ratify CEDAW, this landmark treaty for women and girls.<sup>2</sup>

The United States is rightfully known as a global leader in standing up for women and girls. Yet our failure to ratify CEDAW enables opponents of women's rights in the Middle East and elsewhere to decide that U.S. arguments on behalf of women's rights need not be taken seriously. This September, Secretary Clinton, along with women heads of state and foreign ministers from countries around the world, endorsed a "Joint Statement on Advancing Women's Political Participation," which reads in part:

"We reaffirm our commitment to the equal rights and inherent dignity of women ... We call upon all States to ratify and fulfill their obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)...."

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Learning Partnership, [www.learningpartnership.org](http://www.learningpartnership.org).

<sup>2</sup> Report by the International Center for Research of Women, "*Recognizing Rights Promoting Progress: The Global Impact of CEDAW.*"

We applaud the bipartisan consensus in the Senate supporting women's participation in the transition to democracies in the region and the recognition of the centrality of advancing women's human rights as an essential ingredient of success. We believe the hearing today will deepen our understanding and appreciation of the need for U.S. policy and funding that strongly support the acceptance of and implementation of women's human rights in countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

U.S. ratification of CEDAW would put the muscle of action behind words of America's global commitment to women's rights as human rights. Action now would come just when America needs such leverage and credibility to enhance its global leadership in standing up for women and girls who are pushing for equality in the Middle East. We urge the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to build on this consensus on women's human rights and take up U.S. ratification of CEDAW next year.