



Written Testimony by Human Rights First

Before The U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS,
HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY, AND GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EASTERN AND SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN
AFFAIRS

“Women in the Arab Spring”

November 2, 2011

419 Senate Dirksen Office Building

Washington, DC

To the Honorable Barbara Boxer and Robert Casey:

We welcome today's hearing on the Arab Spring and the role of – and impact on – women in these historic transitions. The Subcommittees, under the leadership of Senators Casey and Boxer, are to be commended, as is the U.S. Department of State, for their consistent focus on women's rights that has resulted in significant strides for women's groups and individuals throughout the world.

Human Rights First has had a longstanding program in Egypt, and the opportunities available in the post-Mubarak era are ample.

However, in Egypt, women are still being targeted by the security forces in ways similar to that of the old regime. Local activists from Nazra and elsewhere have reported to Human Rights First that the “virginity tests” inflicted on women arrested in Tahrir Square in March were a far from exceptional incident of gender violence committed by the army.

The 17 women subjected to the virginity tests by soldiers were threatened with prostitution charges if they were found not to be virgins, and such threats to women's privacy remain common.

A pattern of targeting politically active women has emerged. Women at a political meeting in June to honor those killed in the January revolution were arrested and beaten by security forces. Female Muslim activists are threatened with rumours – that stories will be spread about them being romantically active with Christians.

In May, a female journalist was attacked by the police. When she asked a passerby for help, the police told the bystanders that “she’s been committing adultery.”

Local activists report being assaulted, stripped, sexually baited, threatened with charges of prostitution and virginity tests. There appears to be a policy of trying to intimidate women out of the political sphere through this gender violence.

Human Rights First supports human rights defenders. In recent months, we have been approached by Egyptian women’s groups about the challenges of organizing a movement with so many complexities. This week, a Human Rights First delegation is traveling to Egypt and Indonesia to coordinate a peer-to-peer exchange for women activists from many countries undergoing transitions and have experienced similar harassment by officials. Women in Bahrain, Indonesia and elsewhere can share valuable and practical advice to help overcome this intimidation.

In Egypt there is a particularly large group of what are called ‘First Time Activists’ – stereotypically those who joined the revolution protests this year -- but who were not very active or vocal before. Like many activists who are newly-engaged in Egypt, they need to be assured that the public space is safe for them to venture into without fear or harassment.

In Bahrain there are First Time Activists as well, many of whom are women. These range from doctors and nurses to teachers, like Jaleela Al Salman, who, although a civilian, was put on trial in a military court and sentenced to three years in prison, where she was subjected to torture and harassment. She was initially released on bail pending her appeal on December 11, then re-arrested last week, and just released yesterday.

HRF has also received testimony from activists about gender-based violations. For instance, female digital activists covering Bahrain are subject to organized online campaigns to discredit them for drinking alcohol or being promiscuous.

U.S. policy prioritizes women’s rights as human rights. We urge the witnesses at today’s hearing to be specific about the achievements of women in the revolutions and ongoing protests, the threats they face for their courage, and the actions the U.S. government and NGO’s can take to support this movement.