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The Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco
Vital Voices Global Partnership
Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies
“The Political Empowerment of Moroccan Women”
Friday October 10, 2008, Georgetown University, CCAS Boardroom

To commemorate Women’s National Day in Morocco, The Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco, with the co-sponsorship of Vital Voices Global Partnership, and Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies held a session entitled “Political Empowerment of Moroccan Women.” Speakers included **Ms. Aicha Afifi**, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco; **Ms. Mahnaz Afkhami**, President and CEO of Women’s Learning Partnership; **Dr. Laith Kubba**, Senior Director for Middle East/North Africa at the National Endowment for Democracy; and **Dr. Loubna Skalli-Hanna**, Assistant Professor at American University’s School of International Service.

Aicha Afifi began the session with an historical overview of the women’s rights campaign in Morocco since independence in 1956, and **highlighted some major recent achievements**, including: **1) the adoption of the new family law on January 26, 2004 affirming the principle of equality between men and women, 2) adoption of the new citizenship law in 2007 allowing the children of Moroccan women married to a foreigner to obtain Moroccan citizenship, 3) adopting a new penal code prohibiting all forms of discrimination against women and harshly penalizing sexual harassment, and trafficking in prostitution and pornography, 4) the adoption of a new labor code in 2004 confirming the principle of equality between men and women in careers and salaries.**

Mahnaz Afkhami spoke about the “**international implications**” of the reforms. Her organization, Women’s Learning Partnership took the strategies used by activists and used it as a case study on leadership for women around the world. **Highlighting a “four pronged approach” her organization has held leadership conferences in over 20 countries, and 17 different languages emphasizing the need to master the topic of women’s rights from four angles: 1) national law, 2) international law, 3) Islamic law, and the differences of opinions between the schools of thought, 4) the sociological implications of reforms, and the prospective impact on people’s lives.**

Internationally, her curriculum has been most well-received in Iran and Malaysia, and she also highlighted the need to work from both grassroots up, and top-down approach to maximize results, the role of free technology such as blogs to mobilize activists, and online video to spread the message.

Dr. Laith Kubba described the role of the NED in promoting women's rights in the Middle East since the early 1990's (Post Cold War Era). He said **while governments in the Middle East are usually hostile to democratic reform and human rights, sometimes women's rights issues are eagerly pursued**, most often **by secular dictators seeking to exclude conservative elements in the country**. Nevertheless, it presents a window of opportunity to be seized. He also **underscored the importance of adapting the agenda according to the real socio-economic challenges faced on the ground**.

Dr. Loubna Skulli-Hanna began by stating the Moroccan reforms prove "change is possible," but then asked, **"What conditions are necessary for change?" Her answers are: 1) transnational network of activists, 2) effective women's organizations at the grassroots level, 3) strong leadership from the top**. To her, the Moroccan example shows how women played a major role in defining the public sphere, democracy, and political participation.

Moreover, she notices **shift in demographic trends among Moroccan youth: they have loose ties with the Independence movement (*istiqlal*), no memory of the Cold War, or the period of repression under Hassan II. political activism in the future, therefore, will have to rely on the forms of expression young people use today (e.g. cyber-cafes as meeting points, or the Internet generally)**, rather than older forms of political expression (political parties or public demonstration).