

RELEASE IN PART
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From: Verveer, Melanne S <VerveerMS@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, November 20, 2011 8:31 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: women in Libya

Welcome Back! You were magnificent

thought you'd enjoy this as you have certainly made the point to the transitional leaders in Libya.

From: Tom Malinowski [redacted]
Subject: women in Libya

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Plenty of difficult news out of Libya has demanded our attention in the last few weeks. But I wanted to pass on this account from the head of our women's rights division of a meeting she attended in Tripoli last week between Libyan women activists and the NTC leadership. The still hopeful spirit at the heart of Libya's revolution is well captured here.

A quiet revolution in Tripoli

I was invited to give one of the keynote addresses at the first Libyan women's rights conference that took place in Tripoli this weekend. A unique event, it brought together a few hundred women from all over Libya to discuss issues most important to them. Gathered together in a meeting room overlooking the Medditarrear, I listened as women debated the best way to facilitate their participation in a new government, argued about the role of sharia, and demanded that laws that discriminated against them in marriage and divorce, be set aside.

In many ways, I could have been at a women's rights conference anywhere in the world. There were a few men sprinkled about in the audience, very little media interest and a few low level bureaucrats from some of the newly established embassies. I had asked some of the organisers, at the official opening the night before, whether they expected to have any government representation. I was told that a member of the Tripoli Council was in the audience. I got the sense that was the best that we could hope for.

Then a pretty amazing thing happened – at around 5pm today, with very little fanfare, President Jilil arrived. Accompanied by members of the NTC, the Tripoli Council, and his Minister of Capacity Building, he walked into the conference hall. There was a moment of complete silence, and then women began to applaud as he took the stage. This time, unlike his by now infamous speech on the day of the Declaration of Liberation, he made sure to acknowledge the contribution that women had made to the revolution. He then confirmed that Libyan women can expect to have the same rights as men and to play an important role in government. Again, the women applauded and then, remarkably, women, old and young, from Tripoli, Benghazi and the western mountains, some with headscarves, some dressed in jeans and sneakers, lined up at the microphone to pepper him with questions. For almost an hour, they took him to task for his previous comments on polygamy, asked him whether he would include a quota for women in the new Constitution and reminded him again and again, that women have a key role to play in the rebuilding of Libya. President Jibril listened quietly and patiently, took notes and answered as many questions as he could. Word had gotten around that the President was at the conference, and journalists began to crowd into the room.

As he answered the questions, a commotion broke out in the back of the hall. The new Prime Minister, Abdulrahmin El Keeb, had arrived. He also took the podium, and confirmed that women's rights are an integral part of a free and democratic Libya. He was followed into the hall, in rapid succession, by the Minister of Justice, the Security Minister and the Information Minister. All of them talked about the important role that women had played in the revolution and affirmed the role that they must now play. The Minister of Justice went as far as to say that he would support a quota for women in government and that at least one of the top three positions in government should go to a woman. By now, the excitement was palpable. A table had been hastily set at the front of the room, and by now, almost the full transitional government was seated there, listening as women began to lay out a vision for women in this new Libya.

Then, as if this was not enough, the former prime minister Jibril arrived. Cheering, singing, chanting broke out as women began to realise the full significance of what was taking place in an ordinary conference room on a warm Tripoli evening. Women crowded around the table to listen as Jibril confirmed his personal commitment to women's rights.

What started as a very modest event to gather women together to talk about their rights, had become a momentous and historic occasion.

Women's rights have been placed firmly on the agenda in Libya – there will be no going back now. I was profoundly moved and honored to have been part of that moment.