

Developing narratives for revolutionary change: The role of testimony and life - writing in the recent North African uprisings

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From: Rebecca Wright, Legal Advisor for the North African Litigation Initiative
at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Cairo
To: Professor Frans Viljoen
Re: Abstract for Conference on Multi- and Inter-Disciplinary Human Rights In
Africa
Date: March 21, 2011

**Developing Narratives for Revolutionary Change: The Role of Testimony
and Life-Writing in the Recent North African Uprisings**

Recent events in North Africa have highlighted the critical role played by personal testimony in shaping the discourse on human rights and in providing momentum for revolutionary change. Combined with the power of modern media, these personal testimonies have shaped a social conscience and have driven demonstrators into the streets. Thus, personal stories not only *record* abuses, but also play an active role in *achieving* justice and reform.

I propose for your conference to present a paper that highlights the importance of testimonial narratives in shaping the human rights discourse during recent events in North Africa. My paper will be informed by my previous training in Literary Theory: I completed a PhD at the University of Oxford in 2001 that focused on the autobiographies of British suffragettes and the ways these women used their life stories to generate political change. I will demonstrate how, in North Africa, narrative constructions such as testimony have given life and substance to human rights law.

I will also discuss the *practical* importance of testimony in any human rights litigation strategy. The type of “story” that one tells about human rights victims, and the extent to which one can articulate this story within society, is often just as important as a legal case. These stories can provide a foundation for revolution. Just as importantly, they can empower an individual to an extent rarely achieved through litigation alone.