

Joint statement in support of Saudi women human rights defenders and their call for gender equality

8 March 2021

We, the undersigned Parliamentarians, call on the Saudi authorities to end all forms of discrimination against women; fully dismantle the male guardianship system; and immediately and unconditionally release all women human rights defenders (WHRDs) detained for their peaceful human rights advocacy, and drop the charges against them.

Over the past two years the Saudi authorities have lifted some of the restrictions women face under the country's male guardianship system, including allowing women to apply for their own passports as well as granting them more control over family matters.

While these, as well as measures to relax strict gender segregation in public and allow women to drive, are steps in the right direction, they are by no means enough.

The male guardianship system – a legal framework that treats women as minors – continues to negatively affect all aspects of women's lives and severely restrict their fundamental liberties.

Women cannot yet therefore freely make decisions about their education, employment, health or who they want to marry; neither can they pass their nationality on to their children. Moreover, gender-based violence is not adequately defined in law and criminalized, and new reforms to protect women from abuse lack adequate means of enforcement, leaving many trapped in abusive relationships.

“Disobedience” by a woman towards her male guardian (father, husband, brother or even son) also remains a crime, effectively rendering any new freedoms null and void. While a woman may now legally be entitled to apply for her own travel document and study abroad, she can be stopped by her male guardian from ever leaving the country if he files a case against her of disobedience or absconding.

Additionally, women are still not able to leave detention centres or state-run shelters without having to seek and receive the consent of their male guardians, who may have previously abused them. This can lead to situations of prolonged administrative detention if a male guardian refuses to sign a release form or collect a woman under his guardianship.

What most clearly undermines the authorities' claims of genuine reform on women's rights is their treatment of the very women who have led the fight for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. In 2018 a number of these women were rounded up, arrested, tortured, and portrayed in the official media as traitors and spies. Some have been temporarily released while still on trial, but others, including Nassima al-Sadah and Samar Badawi, remain in detention.

On 10 February 2021, Loujain al-Hathloul was conditionally released by the Saudi authorities after spending over 1,000 days in prison, having served a sentence imposed by Saudi Arabia's terrorism court, solely for her peaceful activism. While she is no longer in detention, she is still not free, as her sentence imposed heavy restrictions including three years of probation and a five-year travel ban.

We therefore reiterate our call on the Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release from prison all women detained for their human rights activism, to drop all charges against them and to compensate them fairly. We further ask that the released WHRDs are granted their right to free movement and are able to carry out their legitimate human rights work without fear of reprisals. Lastly, we call on the Saudi authorities to abolish the male guardianship system by repealing the laws and ending the practices that discriminate against women.

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