



Hollow Words, Empty Reforms

**SAUDI ARABIA'S EFFECTIVE
REFUSAL TO REFORM WOMEN'S RIGHTS**



**Americans for Democracy
& Human Rights in Bahrain**

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Refusal to Reform Women's Rights*

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Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

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Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain is a non-profit, 501(c) (3) organization based in Washington, D.C. We seek to foster awareness of and support for democracy and human rights in Bahrain and the Middle East.

The Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy is a London, UK based non-profit organization focusing on advocacy, education and awareness for the calls of democracy and human rights in Bahrain.

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Introduction

A number of major events in mid-2017 has brought renewed international attention to gender relations and the status of women in Saudi Arabia. On 14 April, Dina Ali Lasloom, a young Saudi citizen residing in Kuwait, was forcibly repatriated by her uncles to Saudi Arabia from the Philippines. She was traveling to Australia to request political asylum to avoid a forced marriage.¹ The Saudi embassy in Manila reportedly facilitated her forced repatriation. The same day, Riyadh airport security officials detained and briefly disappeared 23-year-old medical student and activist Alaa Anazi as she waited for Lasloom's return to the kingdom.² These incidents also revived concern for the plight of women's rights activist Mariam al-Otaibi, whom Saudi officials arrested during the week of 17 April 2017 in Riyadh after she fled her father's house to escape domestic violence.³ These incidents are not new, but are emblematic of the situation of women in Saudi Arabia under the kingdom's male guardianship system.

Yet, on 19 April, the member states of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council elected Saudi Arabia to a position on the Commission on the Status of Women,⁴ the UN's principal body "dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women."⁵

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain's (ADHRB) new report, *Hollow Words, Empty Reforms: Saudi Arabia's Effective Refusal to Reform Women's Rights*, contextualizes these recent developments within the structure of gender-based discrimination in Saudi Arabia and highlights ongoing violations of women's rights. The report begins by looking at several recent developments within the past five years to demonstrate the steps the Saudi government has ostensibly taken towards promoting women's rights in the kingdom. Among the developments are Vision 2030 and its meaning for women's rights and the April 2017 announcement by King Salman curtailing aspects of the guardianship system. The report proceeds to a discussion of several thematic issue areas in order to demonstrate that despite recent changes, the government has largely failed to enhance women's rights. These issue areas include women's inability to drive and their lack of independence, the 2011 decree allowing women to vote and their appointment to the Shura Council, the introduction of domestic violence legislation in 2013, the 2015 Shura Council decision to grant women their own identification cards, and the 2016 announcement of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

This report examines these thematic issue areas because they have shown recent advances by the government towards increasing women's equality. Taken together, these areas provide both a view of how, despite these changes, the status of women in Saudi Arabia is largely unchanged. For example, while domestic violence is a problem in all countries around the world, abuse of women within the domestic sphere in Saudi Arabia speaks to the power dynamic inherent in relationships,

1 "Fleeing Woman Returned to Saudi Arabia Against Her Will," Human Rights Watch, 14 April 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/14/fleeing-woman-returned-saudi-arabia-against-her-will>.

2 "Alaa Al-Anazi Detained," Frontline Defenders, accessed 4 May 2017, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/alaa-al-anazi-detained>.

3 Ron Nordland, "Cellphones in Hand, Saudi Women Challenge Notions of Male Control," *New York Times*, 21 April 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-women-male-guardianship-activists-social-media.html?_r=0; "Saudi Arabia: Gulf Centre for Human Rights supports campaign to end male guardianship system of women," Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 21 February 2017, <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1501>.

4 Adam Coogler, "How Was Saudi Arabia Voted Onto A UN Women's Panel," Human Rights Watch, 28 April 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/28/how-was-saudi-arabia-voted-un-womens-panel>.

5 "Commission on the Status of Women," United Nations, accessed 4 May 4, 2017, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>.

wherein a woman cannot leave an abusive husband because of restrictions on movement and impositions due to the guardianship system. Thus, despite new legislation, not only does the problem persist, but authorities remain unable to adequately address it. Similarly, the success of a Shura Council resolution to grant women identification cards is ostensibly a move toward greater freedom. Rather, it illustrates the manner in which women must rely on their guardians for identifying documents and for working with government bureaucracies. This reliance subjugates women to their male relatives.

While this report identifies several positive steps, this report finds that despite these developments, women in the kingdom remain highly dependent on, and subservient to, men. Furthermore, despite this apparent progress, significant obstacles remain in the way of women achieving equal rights. Among the barriers are a lack of political will by the government to tackling systematic discrimination and the male guardianship system. Ultimately, as long as the guardianship system remains intact, women will be unable to achieve equality with men in Saudi Arabia.

Recent Developments

While women's roles in Saudi society continue to be constrained by the country's male guardianship system, there have been changes in recent years to this overarching framework and legislative progress concerning gender discrimination.

In 2011, then-King Abdullah granted women the right to vote, although they would need to wait until 2015 to exercise this right. But, two years after this decision, in 2013, he appointed the first women to the kingdom's consultative Shura Council and today there are 29 women in the council. In 2013, for the first time ever, the Saudi government promulgated a law criminalizing domestic abuse. This step marked a significant advancement in recognizing and understanding the problem of domestic violence against women. Then, in 2015, the Shura Council voted to amend the kingdom's civil status law, taking a significant step in "enhancing"⁶ some women's citizenship.

In mid-2016, Saudi Arabia announced the launch of Vision 2030, the kingdom's long-term economic plan to transform its economy and society.⁷ Significantly, among the changes outlined in the plan is increasing the number of women employed from the current estimate of 22 percent to 30 percent.⁸ This increase would ostensibly also entail changes in the guardianship system so as to allow women more freedom, including driving to get to their places of work.

Vision 2030 and the recent alterations to the guardianship system come on the heels of reform efforts aimed at abolishing gender-based restrictions in recent years. In late 2016, women's rights activists circulated and delivered to the king a petition that gathered nearly 15,000 signatures calling for an end to the guardianship system.⁹ In November 2016, Saudi Prince Awaleed bin

6 Hatoon al-Fassi, "Finally, Saudi women have their own ID cards"

7 "Full Text of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030," *Saudi Gazette*, 26 April 2017, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/saudi-arabia/full-text-saudi-arabias-vision-2030/>.

8 Karen Young, a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington disputes the government's figure of women employed. She states that in 2013, Saudi women were just over six percent of the workforce. This figure may have increased, but it is hard to imagine that in only four years, it would spike up to 22 percent. See, Karen Young, "Women's Labor Force Participation Across the GCC," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 7 December 2016, http://www.agsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Young_Womens-Labor_ONLINE-4.pdf, pg. 11.

9 Mazin Sidahmed, "Thousands of Saudis sign petition to end male guardianship of women," *The Guardian*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/26/saudi-arabia-protest-petition-end-guardianship-law-women>.

Talal, a wealthy businessman, posted a letter on his website arguing for allowing women to drive. In his letter, he noted that the amount of money women spend on hiring foreign drivers could be better spent to further the Saudi economy.¹⁰ It is highly significant that a Saudi prince made these remarks—indicating perhaps that there are factions in the government that vocally support women’s equality—but his comments are unlikely to affect policy as he is neither in government nor does he speak for it.¹¹

Then, on 17 April 2017, King Salman issued an order to all government agencies mandating that women not be denied government services if they do not have a male guardian’s permission unless existing regulations continue to require a guardian’s consent.¹² The order also requires government agencies to compile a list of all procedures requiring a male guardian’s approval.

The ruling could constitute a significant improvement for women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, which remains the only country in the world that maintains a system like male guardianship over women.¹³ If consistently implemented and enforced, Human Rights Watch observes that this order “could end the arbitrary guardian consent requirements imposed on women by government officials,” and “open the door to reviewing, amending, or cancelling these requirements.”¹⁴ However, the entrenched nature of the guardianship system and the lack of officials’ political will to affect change in the system cast serious doubt on the success of the implementation and enforcement of this measure.

Nevertheless, while these are positive developments and there are potential reforms on the horizon, women currently remain second-class citizens in Saudi Arabia and subject to extensive restrictions under the still-extant male guardianship system. Despite all of these nominal changes, the underlying structure of discrimination remains untouched and the guardianship system remains intact. The following sections will examine how despite these ostensible advancements, the government has yet to seriously implement moves that improve women’s rights.

10 Sewell Chan, “Let Women Drive, a Prince in Saudi Arabia Urges,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-women-driving.html? r=0>.

11 Ibid.

12 “Saudi Arabia: ‘Unofficial’ Guardianship Rules Banned,” Human Rights Watch, 9 March 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/09/saudi-arabia-unofficial-guardianship-rules-banned>.

13 Mazin Sidahmed, “Thousands of Saudis sign petition to end male guardianship of women.”

14 “Saudi Arabia: ‘Unofficial’ Guardianship Rules Banned,” Human Rights Watch, 9 March 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/09/saudi-arabia-unofficial-guardianship-rules-banned>.

Women's Roles and Places in Saudi Society

Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System

Saudi Arabia's system of male guardianship is a set of formal regulations and informal structures that act as *de facto* law that governing women's place in Saudi society. The system is a "set of bylaws and state-sanctioned discriminatory policies and practices that restrict a woman's ability"¹⁵ to make a wide range of choices independently of her male guardian. Under the system, every Saudi woman must have a male guardian—often a father or husband, but sometimes a brother or son—who is empowered to make a variety of important decisions on her behalf. A woman must first obtain the consent of her guardian before she can make a number of decisions or undertake a number of actions, including travelling, marrying, or even exiting prison.¹⁶ The cumulative impact of this system takes away women and girls' autonomy and inhibits their ability act independently and ultimately reduces Saudi women and girls to second-class citizens.

Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system is inextricably related to broader understandings of women's places in Saudi society. The "ideal Saudi woman" is understood to be an "obedient wife and mother, educated as her family permits, segregated from gender mixing unless necessary, and entrusted with preserving the Islamic morality and traditional values promoted by the Saudi state." In this way, the ideal Saudi woman is meant to be dependent on a man in the family rather than be the head of a family.¹⁷ This understanding of a woman's role in the family and in society underpins the level of control men have over women, particularly over their wives and daughters. For example, this level of control allows a father to declare a run-away daughter to be "disobedient," and to obtain the assistance of the police in returning his "disobedient" daughter to his care.

In part because of this perception of what makes an "ideal Saudi woman," many aspects of the guardianship system are uncodified, although some are codified. For example, there is no law prohibiting Saudi women from driving, however, the relevant government ministries will refuse to grant women licenses.¹⁸ In addition, while government regulations decree that some institutions in the private sector demand a guardian's approval, many institutions may require a guardian's consent in circumstances when their approval is not formally required. For example, Saudi regulations do not require a guardian's consent for the carrying out of some medical procedures. However, many hospitals demand a guardian's consent before they will admit a woman to the hospital.

While many aspects of the guardianship system are informal and uncodified, they exist as *de facto* law. They are supported by the kingdom's powerful clerical establishment which, because of the unique interdependence between the government and the clerical establishment, grants religious opinions the force of *de facto* state law. However, because of the interplay between codified law

15 Hala al-Dosari, "Saudi male guardianship laws treat women as second-class citizens," *The Guardian*, 7 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/07/saudi-arabia-women-rights-activists-petition-king>.

16 "Boxed In: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System," Human Rights Watch, 16 July 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/16/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system>.

17 Hala Aldosari, "Family Identification Documents for Saudi Women: An Identity Dilemma," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2 March 2016, <http://www.agsiw.org/family-identification-documents-for-saudi-women-an-identity-dilemma/>.

18 "Dozens of Saudi Arabian women drive cars on day of protest against ban," *The Guardian*, 26 October 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/26/saudi-arabia-woman-driving-car-ban>; Tom Embury-Dennis, "Saudi Arabia refuses to even consider allowing women to drive," *The Independent*, 3 November 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-women-drivers-refuses-to-even-consider-a7395131.html>.

and informal regulations, the question of the exact nature of the guardianship system remains undefined in a systematic way. It is precisely because of the murky nature of the guardianship system, that King Salman's April 2017 edict has the potential to affect serious change.

Driving and Lack of Independence

One of the most significant barriers to women's empowerment and eventual achievement of equal rights is the informal restriction on women driving. Saudi Arabia's prohibition on women driving became unofficial policy in the early 1990s, when the Council of Senior Religious Scholars issued a *fatwa* on the subject. The *fatwa* states that "women driving leads to many evils and negative consequences. [...] Sharia prohibits all things that lead to vice. Women's driving is one of the things that leads to that."¹⁹ In this way, the debate is often cast as a religious and cultural issue.

In April 2016, the kingdom's Deputy Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, the son of current King Salman, argued against granting women the right to drive. He stated that allowing women to drive is "not a religious issue as much as it is an issue that relates to the community itself that either accepts it or refuses it."²⁰ He continued, "The community is not convinced about women driving."²¹ However, while bin Salman cast the issue in cultural terms, the country's top cleric, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin-Abdullah al-Sheikh, framed the issue in stark religious terms. He defended the ban on women driving by stating that "it is a dangerous matter that exposes women to evil."²² The *fatwa* issued by Grand Mufti Sheikh al-Sheikh also defends the ban on women driving by citing the dangers of allowing mixing between un-related members of the opposite sex.²³

The ban on driving – whether based on culture, religion, or some combination thereof – shapes many aspects of women's public engagement in Saudi Arabia. For example, it negatively impacts women's ability to engage in politics, like when the country held municipal elections in 2015. It also negatively impacts women's ability to integrate themselves into Saudi Arabia's economy and also to partake in public life. At its most basic level, the ban effectively denies women the freedom of independent movement. If a woman wants to go outside the house, she must take a taxi or ask her guardian or a male family member to drive her to her destination, whether it is a grocery store, a woman's-only coffee shop, or the mall. In an interview with Human Rights Watch, Rania, a 34-year-old Saudi woman stated:

It is very hard to say you live, you just survive.... The simple freedom of opening your door and going out for a walk.... I have to call a driver to get my coffee. What if I want to walk in peace and get my coffee and come back?²⁴

Rania's concerns address one of the most restrictive aspects of the guardianship system: the inability of some women to even leave their homes without the approval of their guardian and the accompaniment of a man.

19 "Boxed In: women and Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system," Human Rights Watch; "The Rule of Women Driving a Car," Binbaz, 1 May 2017 [حكم قيادة المرأة للسيارة], <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/article/399>.

20 "Saudis 'not convinced about women driving'—Deputy Crown Prince," *Gulf News*, 26 April 2016, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudis-not-convinced-about-women-driving-deputy-crown-prince-1.1812320>.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Kayleigh Lewis, "Saudi Arabia's top Islamic cleric says women would be 'exposed to evil if allowed to drive,'" *The Independent*, 11 April 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-women-driving-islamic-grand-mufti-sheikh-exposed-to-evil-rights-a6978621.html>.

23 "Boxed In: women and Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system," Human Rights Watch.

24 *Ibid.*

This restriction has particularly hampered women's ability to engage in politics, particularly in the 2015 municipal elections. The need for women to gain the approval of their guardians in order to get to some polling stations by car is one of the reasons women did not vote in the same numbers as men. If a woman's guardian did not give his consent, then she would have been unable to vote.²⁵

Some fathers have even locked their daughters within their homes, holding them against their will, as in the cases of Mariam al-Otaibi and Moudi al-Johani.²⁶ In early April 2017, al-Otaibi, a 29-year-old woman and a prominent activist on social media, was detained and jailed for disobeying her father when she moved out of his house without permission.²⁷ According to the Gulf Center for Human Rights, al-Otaibi asked authorities to protect her from domestic violence and ultimately fled her abusive family members,²⁸ moving from al-Qassim Province to Riyadh.²⁹ However, after her father filed a "disobedience" case against her, officials detained al-Otaibi in a women's prison.³⁰ This is not the only time Saudi officials have detained her at the behest of her family. In November 2016, authorities arrested al-Otaibi after she attempted to file an abuse claim against her brother. Instead, her family filed a "disobedience" claim against her, which led to her detention for a brief period. When she returned to her family, the abuse continued.³¹

Like Mariam al-Otaibi, Moudi al-Johani, a 26-year-old Saudi law school graduate, faced detention for "disobeying" her family and exercising what they deemed as too much independence. Unlike al-Otaibi, al-Johani's family detained her themselves without involving the authorities.³² Al-Johani succeeded in obtaining a scholarship from the Saudi government to study in the United States for one-and-a-half years. However, upon her return to Saudi Arabia, for a vacation, her family locked her up inside their house.³³ According to al-Johani, they told her, "you're not going back to America, you've become too Americanised."³⁴ Her family kept her locked in the house for almost eight months. She escaped and obtained asylum in the United States after she told her family that she wanted to visit her high school friend in Bahrain, although she flew to the United States instead.³⁵

Women's lack of independence is one of the most significant ways in which gender-related rules have a negative impact on women's lives. Their inability to drive is the most visible, and in some ways, the most salient example of the restrictions on women's autonomy. Unable to drive themselves, women must hire drivers or rely upon others to transport them. Unlike being able to drive, a woman's detention at the behest of her family—whether in a detention facility or within the home—captures less attention internationally. However, detention is the epitome of women's lack of independence. A father's word carries more weight than the word of a female dependent, such that a claim that a daughter is disobedient brings with it the power of the Saudi state apparatus.

25 Xanthe Ackerman and Christina Asquith, "Women Haven't Really Won in Saudi Arabia Yet," *Time*, 15 December 2015, <http://time.com/4149557/saudi-arabia-elections-women-vote/>.

26 Rod Nordland, "Cellphones in Hand, Saudi Women Challenge Notions of Male Control."

27 "Saudi Arabia: Gulf Centre for Human Rights supports campaign to end male guardianship system of women," Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 21 February 2017, <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1501>.

28 Ibid.

29 Adam Coogle, "How was Saudi Arabia Voted onto a UN Women's Panel?," Human Rights Watch, 28 April 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/28/how-was-saudi-arabia-voted-un-womens-panel>.

30 "Saudi Arabia: Gulf Centre for Human Rights supports campaign to end male guardianship system of women," Gulf Centre for Human Rights.

31 Adam Coogle, "How was Saudi Arabia Voted onto a UN Women's Panel?"

32 Rod Nordland, "Cellphones in Hand, Saudi Women Challenge Notions of Male Control."

33 Ibid.

34 Jacob Atkins, "Fleeing Islam: My house was a jail, my brother murderous," *The Australian*, 18 February 2017, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/fleeing-islam-my-house-was-a-jail-my-brother-murderous/news-story/efbff7b41a1e536731912e23c5593e43>.

35 Ibid.

Women and Politics

Participation in Municipal Elections

In September 2011, King Abdullah granted women the right to vote and stand for office in Saudi Arabia for the first time in the kingdom. However, while the country did hold municipal elections in 2011, the government refused to allow women to vote during that cycle, citing “logistical difficulties.”³⁶ It was not until 2015 that women were in fact allowed to vote, in what was then the country’s third cycle of municipal elections. On 12 December 2015, over 100,000 women voted and 21 women won municipal council seats.³⁷

While granting women the right to vote is a step towards including women in the political process, municipal councils operate within a restricted sphere and national politics remains the realm of the royal family and its advisors. In practice, the municipal councils have no influence on national politics and only exercise limited authority over local affairs. The circumscribed nature of the councils has led some Saudi women to “express ambivalence at the extent to which these elections will bolster their participation in public life.”³⁸

The decision to grant women the right to vote was a significant mark of progress for women’s rights in the kingdom. Only two years earlier, then-Interior Minister and Crown Prince, Nayef bin Abdulaziz responded negatively to a 2011 interview asking about the official government position on women’s rights, reportedly saying he “saw no need for women to vote or participate in politics.”³⁹

Despite the success of a number of women in the elections, the elections were marred by restrictions placed upon the female participants, which may have prevented wider turnout. A total of 978 women registered as candidates in contrast to 5,938 men. Likewise, around 130,000 women registered to vote, while 1.35 million men registered to vote.⁴⁰ All of the candidates contested 2,106 open seats in 284 municipal councils.

During the election, female candidates faced significantly more obstacles than their male counterparts. Some of these issues stemmed from the guardianship system, the ban on driving, and government interference.⁴¹ The ministry in charge of the elections, the Ministry for Municipal and Rural Affairs (MOMRA), instituted a number of restrictions on women’s ability to freely and fully participate in campaigning and voting. In early August 2015, the MOMRA ordered the Beladi Initiative, a civil society organization aimed at increasing women’s participation in the elector process, to stop its voter- and candidate-education workshops. The MOMRA did not give a clear explanation for why it stopped the workshops.⁴² Furthermore, the MOMRA banned

36 Hala Aldosari, “Analysis: The value of women voting in Saudi Arabia,” *Al-Jazeera*, 13 December 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/analysis-women-voting-saudi-arabia-151213055435453.html>.

37 “It Is Our Right: Saudi women speak on the positives, pitfalls of municipal elections,” Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, January 2016, <http://www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/It-is-Our-Right-Saudi-Women-Speak-on-the-Positives-Pitfalls-of-Municipal-Elections.pdf>.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 “Saudi Arabia’s women vote in election for first time,” *BBC*, 12 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35075702>.

41 Hala Aldosari, “Analysis: The value of women voting in Saudi Arabia.”

42 “It Is Our Right: Saudi women speak on the positives, pitfalls of municipal elections,” Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain.

women from campaigning directly to men. Instead, it encouraged women to appoint or hire a male spokesperson to speak to their male constituents. The ministry also provided with them with limited opportunities to speak indirectly to men via public address systems.⁴³

Beyond restricting female candidates' ability to campaign, the government also imposed barriers to women voting. The government only granted citizens a three-week window in which to register as voters. This narrow window affected women in particular. Because of requirements related to the male guardianship system and restrictions on women's freedom of movement—including the ban on driving—many women were unable to travel to voter registration centers in time to register their votes. Even if women succeeded in registering to vote, the restrictions on movement negatively impacted their ability to travel to voting booths. Additionally, the bureaucracy was ill-equipped to assist and provide for women who did not have identifying documentation.⁴⁴

These factors were only a part of the reason why registration and voting among women remained low. Other factors that contributed to the low numbers of women participating in the electoral process are dominant social norms about the role of women in Saudi society, particularly the perception of the “ideal Saudi woman” as belonging within the household, and the government's support—whether tacit or otherwise—for these norms.

For example, in April 2015, several months before the voting, government officials removed Norah al-Faiz from her position as the deputy minister of education. She had been the highest ranking woman in Saudi Arabia's government.⁴⁵ Additionally the two-month detention of women's rights activists Loujain al-Hathloul and Maysaa al-Amoudi for driving,⁴⁶ as well as the ongoing repression of peaceful, women human rights defenders⁴⁷ and political reformers⁴⁸ had cast doubt on the government's willingness to empower women and follow through with reforms to the election process.

Partly as a result of these limiting factors, voter registration among women remained low. Ultimately, women comprised 22 percent of first-time registered voters and formed just six percent of the electorate.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Simon Tisdall, “Saudi Arabia shakeup as much about retrenchment as reform,” *The Guardian*, 29 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/29/saudi-arabia-mohammed-bin-nayef-crown-prince>.

46 “Saudi women drivers ‘freed from jail,’” *BBC*, 13 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31449972>.

47 Including the interrogation of human rights defender and activist Souad al-Shammari on 28 October 2014 over tweets in which she used “sarcasm while mentioning religious texts and religious scholars,” and the imposition of a travel ban against human rights defender Samar Badawi (who is the sister of imprisoned blogger Raif Badawi and former wife of human rights defender and lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair) on 4 December 2014. For more information about Souad al-Shammari see “Stop jailing and threats to women human rights defenders in the Gulf,” *The Guardian*, 29 November 2014, <https://witness.theguardian.com/assignment/5473251ee4b012ac8415b04a/1265142>; for more information about Samar Badawi see, “Case History: Samar Badawi,” Frontline Defenders, accessed 17 May 2017, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-samar-badawi#case-update-id-795>.

48 “UN highlights Saudi Arabia's appalling record on detention of peaceful activists,” Amnesty International, 24 November 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/un-highlights-saudi-arabias-appalling-record-detention-peaceful-activists>.

Women on the Shura Council

While women faced significant impediments to their ability to participate in the electoral process in 2015, women were appointed to the advisory Shura Council for the first time in January 2013—two years before they were granted the right to vote. The Shura Council is a traditionally all-male council that drafts laws, debates major issues, and provides advice to the king, though it does not possess legislative or oversight powers.⁴⁹ In January 2013, then-King Abdullah appointed 30 women to join the 150-person council. He also decreed that women should, in the future, comprise up to 20 percent of the council's membership.⁵⁰

According to scholar Hala Aldosari, the appointment of members to the Shura Council usually follows a pattern, wherein the king typically selects councilmembers from conservative Islamist backgrounds, technocrats, professors, or businessmen.⁵¹ But, when the king appointed the first women to the council during the state-managed reforms in the aftermath of the Arab Spring protests in 2011, he not only drew from apolitical, subject matter experts and religious experts, but he appointed as members women who actively discussed gender reforms.⁵² Among the women he appointed were Thoraya Obaid, the previous director of the UN Population Fund, and Latifaah Alshaalan and Haya Almanea, professors of humanities. Both Alshaalan and Almanea have written critically on women's rights in local media outlets. Despite these advances, King Abdullah did not select a woman to head any of the 14 specialized committees in the Council. He also declined to appoint any women to the Islamic and legal committee, which is responsible for legal reforms.⁵³

According to Aldosari, under recent regulations modifying the Shura Council's abilities,⁵⁴ members of the Council can propose and submit legislation directly to the king. This change allows the councilmembers to bypass the Council of Ministers. As a result, the Shura Council – and particularly its female members – now have greater influence than before, allowing them to bring issues of women's rights straight to the king.⁵⁵ Despite this potential, there has been resistance not only from male councilmembers, but also female councilmembers opposed to gender reform.⁵⁶

Ultimately, women on the Shura Council were unable to effect significant gender reforms in the areas of the nationality act, personal status law, anti-sexual harassment, anti-hate speech, national unity law, or the ban on women driving, by the end of their first Council session. However, by taking several steps, including engaging directly with the Saudi public through social media and walking out of meetings, the appointed female members were able to bring attention to the cause of women's rights. According to Aldosari, simply “appointing women to the Shura Council has

49 Sara Hamdan, “Women Appointed to Saudi Council for First Time,” *New York Times*, 16 January 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/17/world/middleeast/women-appointed-to-saudi-council-for-first-time.html>.

50 Ibid.

51 Hala Aldosari, “All the King's Women: New Shura Council Members Stir Gender Debate,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 11 May 2017, <http://www.agsiw.org/kings-women-new-shura-council-members-stir-gender-debate/?platform=hootsuite>.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 “Article 17 of Consultative Council (Shura Council) Law Promulgated by Royal Decree No. A/91 of 27 Sha'ban 1412 Corresponding to 1 March 1992,” WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), accessed 18 May 2017, http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=336100.

55 Hala Aldosari, “All the King's Women: New Shura Council Members Stir Gender Debate.”

56 Ibid.

helped in publicly portraying the different attitudes toward approaching gender reforms within the council, and opened these differences to a public debate.”⁵⁷

In December 2016, King Salman appointed new members to the Shura Council, including 29 women.⁵⁸ In contrast to the previous session, fewer women with conservative Islamic credentials were appointed to the Council.⁵⁹ The women he appointed reflected a “broader, more diverse base” and included a businesswoman, an economist, a sports entrepreneur, a diplomat, and feminist scholar.⁶⁰ While this was an encouraging development, the first discussion on gender-related issues ended without success, as the specialized Shura Council committee on education and scientific research refused a recommendation submitted by Lina Almaeena, Latifaah Alshaalan, and Ata Alsubaiti to open a women’s physical education college.⁶¹ The Council rejected the proposal by a vote of 76 to 73. The vote came one day after Saudi Arabia was elected to the UN Commission on the Status of Women.⁶² Despite the rejection of the proposal and the failure to advance women’s rights through legislative means, Aldosari has expressed optimism about women’s participation on the council and their growing presence in leadership positions around the country.⁶³

In contrast, ADHRB is concerned that many of the reforms concerning Shura Council membership are largely cosmetic. As a body, the Council remains subservient to the royal family and largely ineffective at advancing reforms. While the number of women on the Council is a positive sign that demonstrates advances the kingdom has made, women remain in the minority and with limited power. Furthermore, within the current legal structure, the Council’s influence is largely circumscribed and secondary to other areas of the government. Ultimately, until the Council’s membership reflects the kingdom’s population diversity as a whole and is empowered to enact laws, it remains largely ineffective.

57 Ibid.

58 Ismaeel Naar, “Who Are The Women Named To Saudi Arabia’s Shoura Council,” *Al Arabiya English*, 4 December 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2016/12/04/Who-are-the-women-named-in-Saudi-Arabia-s-Shoura-council-.html>.

59 Hala Aldosari, “All the King’s Women: New Shura Council Members Stir Gender Debate.”

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 James Dorsey, “Saudi Ultra-Conservatives Take Anti-Reform Stand on Women’s Sports,” *Huffington Post*, 25 April 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/saudi-ultra-conservatives-take-anti-reform-stand-on-us_58fff3ee4b06feec8ac91c0.

63 Hala Aldosari, “All the King’s Women: New Shura Council Members Stir Gender Debate.”

Identification Cards and Women's Status in Society

On 13 October 2015, members of the Shura Council voted 96 to 28 to amend the Civil Status Law.⁶⁴ The amendment makes it easier for divorced or widowed women to complete government, administrative, and legal procedures without requiring a male guardian⁶⁵ and allows them to receive an identification card. The measure was proposed by three female Shura members and one male Shura member, Princess Sarah al-Faisal, Latifaah Alshaalan, Haya Almanea, and Nasser bin Dawoud. The proposal comprised nine points including addressing the issue of identification cards for women.⁶⁶

The success of the vote paves the way to granting some women—divorced or widowed women only—family registry cards. This is significant because the Civil Status Law both reflects and reinforces inequality between genders, illustrating the fact that “women are simply unrecognized by the state as equal.”⁶⁷ Prior to the vote, women were not granted their own identification cards. Instead, they were listed on the identity cards of their male next-of-kin, often their husband or father.⁶⁸ Because women were not granted their own ID cards, they often carried photocopies of their male relative's card. However, these photocopies lacked a picture of the actual holder, posing an obvious challenge to actual identification. As one woman described the problem: “How on earth can the bank teller be sure that I am the person I say I am.”⁶⁹

This reform came more than one decade after Prince Ahmad bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, Saudi Arabia's former deputy interior minister, broached the subject in an interview with English-language newspaper *Arab News* in 1999. In that interview, Prince Ahmad said that identity cards for women would be issued as soon as preparations were completed.⁷⁰ He stated that, “Women in Saudi Arabia, just like men, have their rights in all areas... and they have the right to carry their own identity cards and to enjoy their legitimate rights.”⁷¹ One reason for the delay was opposition from Saudi conservatives.

After Prince Ahmad's announcement, some women greeted the plan with cautious optimism. One young woman from Jeddah described two sides to the issue: “It is a matter of dignity and self-respect for us... Perhaps it [the identity card] will help, but not much.”⁷² Another woman from Jeddah was less optimistic, stating, “You're dreaming. I can't even go to Riyadh without my husband's permission, let alone London. And whatever [interior minister] Prince Nayef says about women driving, I shall believe it when I see it.”⁷³ Such skepticism highlighted one of the problems inherent in the proposal, and eventual granting, of identification cards for women: deeper forms of discrimination persist, undermining the benefits of individual reforms.

64 Hatoon al-Fassi, “Finally, Saudi women have their own ID cards!” *Saudi Gazette*, 31 October 2015, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/opinion/local-viewpoint/finally-saudi-women-have-their-own-id-cards/>.

65 Habib Toumi, “Saudi women now allowed family ID cards,” *Gulf News*, 27 January 2017, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudi-women-now-allowed-family-id-cards-1.1661032>.

66 Hatoon al-Fassi, “Finally, Saudi women have their own ID cards!”

67 Hala Aldosari, “Family Identification Documents for Saudi Women: An Identity Dilemma”

68 David Hirst, “Progress as Saudi women get ID cards,” *The Guardian*, 9 November 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/nov/10/saudi-arabia>.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

Though the new regulation allows some women to access identification cards, other laws and customary practices present obstacles to women's ability to actually receive identification documents.⁷⁴ Under the reform, only divorced women, widows, and Saudi women married to foreigners are eligible to receive identification cards.⁷⁵ Even then, under the Civil Status Law, fathers can abstain from registering or updating their children's civil information. Because women remain in a subservient position vis-à-vis their male guardians, they are often dependent on their guardians, including their father, to update their civil information and assist them in obtaining services and resources.⁷⁶ According to the Civil Status Law, the responsibility for reporting a marriage, divorce, or annulment of a marriage falls to men with the exception of widows.⁷⁷ Thus despite the ability of some women to receive identification cards, the majority of Saudi women remain reliant on their guardian to properly register with the government.⁷⁸

In recognition of these limitations, the Shura Council in 2015 approved several amendments to the Civil Status law aimed at curbing guardians' abuse of women's information. However, these amendments are still awaiting approval by the Ministry of Interior. The proposed amendments would grant mothers the ability to gain family cards, register their children, and update their civil information without their husband—and guardian's—consent. However, according to Aldosari, “the suggested amendments or allowing mothers access to family cards have not touched on the root cause of the problem; women are simply unrecognized by the state as equal.”⁷⁹

In this way, the question of issuing identification cards to women remains a significant and representative issue for women's rights and independence in Saudi Arabia. Without their own identification cards and ability to change their civil information without the approval of their guardian, women remain in a dependent position. While the granting of identity cards to divorced or widowed women represents progress, the government needs to extend this right to all Saudi women regardless of their married status. Until the government does this, married women continue to rely on their husbands and close male relatives, effectively denying them an individual identity in the eyes of the state.

Domestic Violence

On 20 March 2016, the Ministry for Social Affairs opened a center for women to report incidents of domestic violence and abuse. Within its first three days, the 24-hour call center received 1,890 reports of domestic violence.⁸⁰ The call center was established as part of reforms started in 2013 to criminalize domestic abuse, including the country's first law on domestic abuse.⁸¹

Acknowledgement of domestic violence as a public health problem is a fairly recent development. Saudi media only began to report on cases of domestic violence and spousal and child abuse

74 Hala Aldosari, “Family Identification Documents for Saudi Women: An Identity Dilemma.”

75 Habib Toumi, “Saudi women now allowed family ID cards.”

76 Hala Aldosari, “Family Identification Documents for Saudi Women: An Identity Dilemma.”

77 Ibid.

78 According to Hala Aldosari, in some cases, the information of women on family cards has been used to conduct activities without their consent or to engage in crimes like human or drug trafficking. See, *ibid.*

79 Hala Aldosari, “Family Identification Documents for Saudi Women: An Identity Dilemma.”

80 Shabtai Gold, “New Domestic Violence Hotline in Saudi Arabia Flooded With Calls,” *Haaretz*, 29 March 2016, <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.711561>.

81 Ibid.

in 2004.⁸² The willingness to publicly discuss these issues reflects not only greater openness in the press concerning issues that were previously considered private family matters, but also a more general willingness in broader Saudi society to recognize there are problems that need to be acknowledged and addressed.⁸³

One of the seminal moments for public engagement on the issue of domestic violence was in 2004, when television personality Rania al-Baz's husband beat her severely enough that she needed to be hospitalized. Al-Baz published the photographs of her injuries, which sparked outrage and initiated one of the first public discussions of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁴

A similar incident involving nine-year-old identified as Ghosun also initiated widespread debate about child abuse. Ghosun's father and stepmother beat her to death in April 2006, calling attention to the lack of resources and legal mechanisms for protecting children from abuse.⁸⁵ Ghosun's father and stepmother physically abused her for a year and the signs of abuse were visible to her uncles and mother whenever they saw her. Her mother intervened and attempted to remove Ghosun from her father's custody. However, officials were not able to transfer custody because Ghosun's father denied the officials access to her. When Ghosun's uncle took her to his own home, her father filed a complaint with the police accusing the uncle of kidnapping his daughter. Saudi authorities helped him regain custody.⁸⁶

As a result of growing awareness of women's rights and domestic violence, the government in 2005 established the National Family Safety Program to raise awareness for domestic violence and provide assistance to victims.⁸⁷ However, it would be another eight years before Saudi Arabia's Council of Ministers would pass the first law criminalizing domestic violence—the Law on Protection from Abuse—on 26 August 2013.⁸⁸

Prior to the law's approval, Saudi Arabia's criminal justice authorities did not have written legal guidelines to treat domestic abuse as criminal behavior. In the absence of a codified framework, judges relied solely on their individual interpretations of Sharia law to determine whether certain actions were to be considered criminal.⁸⁹ In addition to codifying the legal approach to prosecuting domestic violence, the law provides for shelters for victims of abuse and places the responsibility on following up with reports of abuse on law enforcement agencies.⁹⁰

Despite this advance, the law does not detail specific enforcement mechanisms that would ensure officials promptly investigate allegations of abuse or prosecute those who commit abuse. More broadly, one problem with the implementation of the law concerns limitations on reporting incidents of abuse, particularly abuse perpetrated by a woman's guardian. A woman who reports

82 Natana J. DeLong-Bas, "The Freedoms Saudi Women Really Want," Middle East Institute, 1 October 2009, <http://www.mei.edu/content/freedoms-saudi-women-really-want>.

83 Ibid.

84 Farah Kader, "Saudi Arabia fails to address the root of its domestic abuse problem," Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, 25 July 2016, <http://www.adhrb.org/2016/07/saudi-arabia-fails-address-root-domestic-abuse-problem/>.

85 Maha Akeel, "Fatally Abused Girl Buried in Makkah as Abusers Await Trial," *Arab News*, 20 May 2006, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/284963>.

86 Ibid.

87 Farah Kader, "Saudi Arabia fails to address the root of its domestic abuse problem."

88 "Saudi Arabia: New Law to Criminalize Domestic Abuse," Human Rights Watch, 3 September 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/03/saudi-arabia-new-law-criminalize-domestic-abuse>.

89 Ibid.

90 Nesrine Malik, "Saudi Arabia's domestic violence law is a first step to changing attitudes," *The Guardian*, 30 August 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/30/saudi-arabia-ban-domestic-violence>.

abuse by her guardian may find herself at further risk of abuse due to the control he exercises over her life and the restrictions he can apply to her actions and choices.⁹¹

The guardianship system imposes even further constraints. Adam Coogler of Human Rights Watch highlights the core issue: “How can a woman escape an abusive husband if she’s not allowed to drive and can’t travel without the permission of her male guardian?”⁹² Human Rights Watch also reports that while the law defines abuse as “bodily, psychological, or sexual,” it does not address “institutional systems that grant male family members and employers inordinate power over their female relatives, such as Saudi Arabia’s guardianship system.”⁹³ One example of the power imbalance inherent in the dynamic between a woman and her guardian is the need for a woman to receive the permission of her guardian before she can exit a shelter for abuse victims. Because a woman needs the consent of her guardian—who can be the abuser—a shelter’s release of a victim to her family does not necessarily ensure her safety.⁹⁴ In fact, this policy can directly put the woman at further risk of violence.

Compounding these issues, there is no national, systematic method in Saudi Arabia to accurately and fully document domestic violence and abuse.⁹⁵ Domestic violence remains a “hidden problem associated with social stigma, fear from perpetrator, hope of change, self-blame and acceptance as a norm” in some circumstances.⁹⁶ In a 2016 study published by the kingdom’s Qassim University, Dr. Ahmad Hamad Al Dosary found a low rate of disclosure of abuse among women and suggested that under-reporting is more common than over-reporting of violence.⁹⁷

In this way, the Saudi government has largely failed to substantially and seriously address the issue of domestic violence and abuse of women and children. At the heart of the issue is the government’s failure to address the root cause of some of the abuse, which lies in broader structures of gender-based discrimination in Saudi society.⁹⁸ In this way, the law theoretically constitutes a step toward seriously addressing violence against women and abuse in the family, but it may end as an empty promise in practice. The success of this legislation relies upon the government’s willingness to support the law in both letter and spirit.⁹⁹

But four years after the passage of the law, not only does domestic violence remain a significant concern, but the government has yet to set up a national mechanism that can systematically keep track of abuse. Until the government takes concrete steps to implement the Law on Protection from Abuse and to implement it consistently around the country, domestic violence will remain a problem. More structurally, until the government abolishes the guardianship system, the power imbalance between a woman and her male family members has the potential to enable abuse and preclude prosecution for perpetrators.

91 Ibid.

92 Stephanie Ott, “Human rights campaigners welcome Saudi Arabia’s law on domestic violence,” *CNN*, 2 September 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/02/world/meast/saudi-arabia-domestic-violence/>.

93 “Saudi Arabia: New Law to Criminalize Domestic Abuse,” Human Rights Watch.

94 “Saudi Arabia: Male Guardianship Boxes Women In,” Human Rights Watch.

95 Ahmad Hamad Al Dosary, “Health Impact of Domestic Violence against Saudi Women: Cross Sectional Study,” *International Journal of Health Sciences*, Qassim University, April 10 (2) 2016, 165-173, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4825889/>.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Nesrine Malik, “Saudi Arabia’s domestic violence law is a first step to changing attitudes.”

99 Ibid.

Women and Vision 2030

Employment

In April 2016, Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, announced the launch of the kingdom's Vision 2030, a blueprint for "Saudi Arabia's vision for the future, which expresses [Saudi's] long-term goals and expectations."¹⁰⁰ Among the objectives Vision 2030 enumerates is an increase in the percentage of women employed in the kingdom's economy. According to the text of the Vision,¹⁰¹ the Saudi government aims to increase the number of women employed from 22 percent of the workforce to 30 percent of the workforce. Increasing the number of women employed would help drive the economy forward, adhering to the larger goals of the Vision.

Notably, however, despite the figures provided in the text of Vision 2030, statistics from the Central Department of Statistics and Information collected in 2015 indicate that Saudi women so far only occupy 13 percent of public and private positions occupied by Saudi nationals.¹⁰² This contrasts with relatively high education rates: women account for 51 percent of all Saudi graduates from undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The Department's statistics also showed that from 2010 to 2012, 64 percent of bachelor degrees from public and private universities in the kingdom were granted to women.¹⁰³

Women thus represent an untapped resource, both physically and in terms of knowledge. Many women are educated and willing to participate in the workforce, but face social restrictions.¹⁰⁴ However, slowly changing cultural mores have led to an increase in women's employment by 48 percent from 2010.¹⁰⁵ This still leaves women's employment below Vision 2030's target of 30 percent.

While there remains the possibility that the Saudi government could meet its target of women in the workforce, the kingdom does not have a lot of time left within the frame of the plan. Quickly increasing the number of women employed would require a concurrent increase in the number of available jobs. However, according to statistics in 2016, Saudi Arabia's non-oil private sector grew by only 0.2 percent year-over-year,¹⁰⁶ illustrating that the economy will need to quickly and substantially improve if the government is to meet its target of women employed.

Integrating Women into the Economy

Still, if the Saudi government follows through with Vision 2030 as planned, the number of women employed will increase. This change is likely to drive other developments, including in the social fabric of the Saudi state. As Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, notes "The radically new approach reflected in Vision 2030 [...]"

100 "Full Text of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030," *Saudi Gazette*.

101 Ibid.

102 "Women constitute 13% of Saudi workforce: stats agency," *Al-Arabiya English*, 10 February 2015, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/02/10/Women-constitute-13-of-Saudi-workforce-stats-agency.html>.

103 Ibid.

104 Kevin Sullivan, "Saudi Arabia struggles to employ its most-educated women," *The Independent*, 13 November 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-struggles-to-employ-its-most-educated-women-8312035.html>.

105 Jonathan Chew, "Women are taking over Saudi Arabia's workforce," *Fortune*, 10 August 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/08/10/women-saudi-arabia/>.

106 Elena Holodny, "A Bunch of Ugly Warning Signs Are Bubbling Up in Saudi Arabia," *Business Insider*, 12 July 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-non-oil-private-sector-growth-2016-7>.

recognizes the need to encourage full female participation in the labor market, which will drive the cultural changes to enable women to become both more economically productive and more independent.¹⁰⁷

One pathway to easing women's access to steady and productive employment is ending the ban on women driving. This would not only save families money by not needing to hire drivers for women, but it would make it easier for women to seek employment opportunities.¹⁰⁸ Lifting the ban on driving would entail concomitant changes to the guardianship system. Granting women the right to drive would not yield substantial benefits for their employment prospects if they still needed authorization from their male guardians to travel or work.¹⁰⁹

However, while granting women the right to drive would align with the kingdom's overall reform effort it is not yet formally included in the agenda,¹¹⁰ perhaps because such a reform would necessarily mean easing the restrictions inherent in the guardianship system and social norms. As Hala Aldosari observes:

Women as a category are the “visible” representation of the state's specific brand of Islam. An “ideal Saudi woman” is an obedient wife and mother, educated as her family permits, segregated from gender mixing unless necessary, and entrusted with preserving the Islamic morality and traditional values promoted by the state. *Consequently, a woman is meant to be dependent on a man in the family rather than the head of one.*¹¹¹

Saudi social norms continue to dictate that Saudi women belong in a subservient, dependent role within their homes vis-à-vis the men within the household. While women are advancing in employment, their opportunities are largely circumscribed to certain fields like medicine, nursing, and teaching¹¹² although they are making strides in the law and in the private sector.¹¹³

Beyond traditional views of women in Saudi society, one of the biggest barriers to increasing women's employment is the prohibition on gender mixing and the need for women to be accompanied by their guardian or a male relative. According to Saudi Arabia's official interpretation of Islam, it is forbidden for unrelated men and women to mix. Many Saudis also oppose women working or leaving their homes unaccompanied by a male relative.¹¹⁴ Because of this, some employers are compelled to create spaces for women to work where they will not mix with men. Taking approaches to ensure the women and men do not mix in the workplace would likely resemble the current framework for restaurants, wherein they have separate entrances and eating areas, one for single men and one for families.¹¹⁵ While these efforts may be necessary according to the government's proposal of increasing women's employment, they also represent a drain in resources for businesses.

107 “Saudi Vision 2030 could be a catalyst for realizing women's rights”—UN expert,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 19 January 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21099&LangID=E>.

108 Matthew M. Reed, “Saudi Vision 2030: Winners and Losers,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 August 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64227>.

109 “Saudi Vision 2030 could be a catalyst for realizing women's rights”—UN expert,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

110 Matthew M. Reed, “Saudi Vision 2030: Winners and Losers.”

111 Italics added, from Hala Aldosari, “Family Identification Documents for Saudi Woman: An Identity Dilemma.”

112 Kevin Sullivan, “Saudi Arabia struggles to employ its most-educated women.”

113 Jonathan Chew, “Women are taking over Saudi Arabia's workforce.”

114 Kevin Sullivan, “Saudi Arabia struggles to employ its most-educated women.”

115 Ibid.

While it is too soon to evaluate the impact Vision 2030 will have on women's rights, it is apparent that the Saudi government has not made as much progress towards the plan's implementation as it may like to. The government has 13 years to overhaul its economy and, among other things, increase the number of employed women. But increasing the number of women in the economy may not be as feasible as the government expects because it involves changing the country's guardianship system at its most basic level, a task which officials have shown little appetite for. Thus, ADHRB remains very doubtful over the changes Vision 2030 can bring to women's rights.

Conclusion

Recent developments in Saudi Arabia signal some ostensible advancements in women's rights including increased transparency regarding the guardianship system thanks to King Salman's April 2017 decree, increased women's employment thanks to Vision 2030, and a potential repeal of the ban on women driving possibly due also to Vision 2030. If the government follows through with these changes and enforces them around the country, the status of women's rights will increase dramatically.

However, the Saudi government has not demonstrated the necessary political will to see these reforms through and there is strong opposition in key quarters of Saudi society. Over the past five years, the government has taken several important steps toward granting women relatively greater rights and privileges, albeit within sharply delineated boundaries. However, even within the limitations the government set, Saudi authorities have failed to fully follow through with the implementation and enforcement of these new steps. Fundamentally, though, as long as proposed reforms do not work toward dismantling the kingdom's government-sanctioned guardianship system, women will remain second-class citizens and unequal in Saudi Arabia.

Recommendations

CONCERNING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- A)** Establish a national body to monitor and collect information year-by-year and month-by-month data concerning domestic violence;
- B)** Empower a national domestic violence prevention agency to investigate and prosecute domestic violence;
- C)** Issue clear and explicit directives to all shelters stating that women may leave the shelter independently without the permission of a male guardian and without a requirement that she be released to a male relative;

CONCERNING THE GUARDIANSHIP SYSTEM

- A)** Codify clearly and precisely what services require a guardian's permission to access;
- B)** Issue clear and explicit directives prohibiting health providers and hospitals from requiring a guardian's approval before admitting women;
- C)** Eliminate any restrictions on women driving, ensuring that women are afforded the same opportunities to drive and acquire a driver's license as men;
- D)** Abolish the guardians' right to file a legal claim against women based on parental disobedience or leaving the guardian's home;

CONCERNING VOTING

- A)** Repeal the restrictions placed on the Beladi Initiative;
- B)** Establish a nation-wide government body empowered to 1) increase women's voter turnout; 2) educate women in voting and the political process;
- C)** End restrictions on female political candidates talking directly to male constituents;
- D)** Enlarge the voter registration window from three weeks to two months to allow all voters time to register

CONCERNING OTHER ASPECTS

- A)** Support proposed amendments to the Civil Status Law to allow women to obtain all forms of identification available to men and to register themselves, their marital status, and births and deaths of family members with Civil Status offices;
- B)** Lift reservations made upon acceding to CEDAW, which violate the object and purpose of the treaty, and sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to CEDAW;
- C)** Promulgate by decree a prohibition on any form of discrimination against women in practice, policy or regulation and the dismantling of the legal guardianship system for adult women, guaranteeing that women are considered to have reached full legal capacity at 18 years of age.



