



Domestic violence against women in Saudi Arabia: A persistent dilemma amidst claims of reform

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Violence against women in Saudi Arabia is rooted in decades-long practices of marginalization, deprivation, and discrimination against women, making them vulnerable to domestic, community, and state violence. This violence is exacerbated first by a patriarchal culture that appoints men as guardians of women's lives and justifies violence against them under the pretext of protecting family honor and maintaining order; and second by legislation that either tolerates this culture or ignores all forms of violence against women. All of this is perpetuated by the power of the State and the ruling patriarchy, which suppresses women's voices, groups, and movements seeking to bring about change.

While breaking the shackles of patriarchal upbringing in most Arab countries was associated with resistance and the quest for liberation from colonialism, women's cultural and political struggles emerged in Saudi society after the transformations of the oil revolution. Although Saudi women went out for education and were allowed limited participation in professional fields and public life, their paths were largely determined by social legacies, tribal and religious considerations, and the absolute power of the political system, all of which contributed to the perpetuation of family, community, gender, economic, and political violence.

After the events of the Haram al-Sharif in 1979, when Islamist insurgents seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca, a changing and militant societal structure towards women emerged. These primarily included fundamentalist movements and political Islam, which some see as regressive rather than forward-looking. This selective fundamentalism came to embellish a political system or a particular social or cultural body and, as such, it appealed to the existing patriarchal framework by weakening the status of women and increasing social and economic distinctions between men and women.

The journey of Saudi women's struggles began with the issuance of several decisions restricting their freedoms and their role in society, such as banning them from appearing on television screens, prohibiting the publication of their photos in the printed press,

imposing the wearing of the so-called *sharia abaya*, and establishing and enforcing the male guardianship system over women. This restricted their freedom and stripped them of their social, economic, and political rights.¹

In the past few years, Saudi society has witnessed a noticeable rise in the rates of violence against women. The latest statistics issued by the Human Rights Commission confirm that the rates of domestic violence in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have reached about 45%. This has led some specialists and family-oriented not-for-profit associations to sound the alarm and call for a national campaign to raise awareness of this issue.² Women have begun to speak out publicly about the suffering they are experiencing within families, explaining how this phenomenon threatens the integrity of the family system and of society at large. Some women took to cyberspace to demand their rights and denounce violence against them. Media outlets and feminist organizations amplified these angry outbursts to put pressure on the Saudi government and its decision-makers to take action. These efforts resulted in the passage of several laws to curb and criminalize violence against women. Despite this unprecedented shift, these laws were not enough to eradicate or even reduce the incidence of violence in society, leaving the Saudi government exposed to much internal and external criticism.

Although there have been initiatives by the Saudi State to respond to international and domestic pressures calling to reduce violence against women and ensure their rights, they have been largely ineffective. In 2022, the authorities passed Saudi Arabia's Personal Status Law, describing it as a "major reform." While the law does introduce some positive reforms, such as setting a minimum age for marriage, it simultaneously upholds some practices rooted in the male guardianship system, fails to protect women from domestic violence, and entrenches a gender-based system of discrimination in matters of marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance.

The aim of this research paper is to study and analyze the Personal Status Law in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia issued in 2022, and the decisions derived from it in relation to the issue of domestic violence against women. In addition, this paper considers the many failures of the law and the impact this has had on the lives of women today in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Domestic violence against women and its many forms

Domestic violence against women is defined as any violent behavior by men to physically or emotionally harm women or deprive them of some or all of their rights. This includes violent behavior directed towards both married and unmarried women, whether they are wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters, characterized by discrimination, oppression, or

¹ المرأة السعودية في أزهى عصورها...لازالت تعيش في العصور المظلمة"، المركز الديمقراطي العربي، 2019، متاح في <https://www.democraticac.de/?p=61482>

² حقوق الإنسان: ارتفاع نسب حالات العنف الأسري والمرأة الضحية الأولى، الجمعية الوطنية لحقوق الإنسان، متاح في <https://nshr.org.sa/infocenter/?press=>

coercion.³ UN Women defines violence against women as "any gender-based aggression against women that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm or pain to women and also includes threats of such aggression, pressure or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."⁴

There are many forms of violence practiced against women, and they have been categorized by Badawi (2017)⁵ into seven types. First, **physical violence**, which is one of the most prominent and harmful manifestations of violence, where physical force is used, such as beating and the use of sharp tools and hard objects to threaten or cause damage and pain. Second, **psychological violence**, which is one of the most insidious types of domestic violence because of the difficulty to clearly detect or objectively measure it. Examples of this type of moral violence include rejection, contempt, disregard, ignoring, intimidation, emotional inertia, mistrust, and the use of foul language. Third, **sexual violence**, which includes sexual harassment, rape, or forcing a woman to engage in any sexual act under duress. Fourth, **economic violence**, which includes preventing one's wife from independently disposing of economic resources or property, denying her inheritance, preventing her from obtaining a job or spending on her needs. Fifth, **health violence**, which involves depriving women of access to appropriate health conditions and care, disregarding their reproductive health, as well as forcing them to have multiple pregnancies or forced abortions. Sixth, **social violence** is when women are isolated from society and prevented from communicating with others. This may also take the form of interfering in their private affairs, such as preventing them from studying, visiting relatives, and taking on specific social roles. **Verbal violence** includes sarcasm, scolding, and threats of divorce and remarriage.

A study conducted by Al-Muhaimid (2010)⁶ found that 51.4% of Saudi women are exposed to domestic violence of various types. Al-Muhaimid pointed out in his study that there are no official statistics in Saudi Arabia regarding violence against women but that this estimation is the result of monitoring and records maintained by charitable institutions, women's rights organizations, hospitals, media, and human rights bodies. However, numbers and percentages vary between these sources regarding violence against women.

Another study also recognized that the phenomenon of battered women in Saudi Arabia is greater than can be seen on the surface. The rate of violence against women in Saudi Arabia is average compared to Arab countries, with the rate Saudi women's exposure to violence reaches 40% and is limited between physical violence, power and control, economic violence and psychological violence. Despite this, one study also indicated that the index of

³ العنف الأسري كأحد أخطر أنواع العنف ضد المرأة، مركز المواطنة المتساوية، 2018، متاح في

<https://www.equalcitizenshipcentre.com/ar/page/>

⁴ "Types of violence against women and girls," UN Women Arab States, available at:

<https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence>

⁵ بدوي، عبدالرحمن عبدالله علي، العنف ضد المرأة في المجتمع السعودي "دراسة ميدانية على النساء المعنفات في مدينة الرياض"، مجلة كلية

التربية، جامعة الأزهر، العدد (١٧٣)، الجزء الأول، (أبريل/نيسان 2017)

⁶ المحيميد، علي محمد عبدالعزيز، "العنف الأسري ضد المرأة في المجتمع السعودي"، رسالة دكتوراه، جامعة نايف العربية للعلوم الأمنية،

الرياض، 2010.

violence against women in the Kingdom reached 87.6% in 2013⁷. Based on these studies and statistics, the King Khalid Foundation launched a media campaign in 2013 to raise awareness about the issue of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia. This first official Saudi awareness campaign to address violence against women carried the tagline: *"What is hidden is greater. Together to fight violence against women"*.

Nevertheless, local statistics continue to show the persistence of cases of violence against women. Estimates of the 2017 National Safety Program for Domestic Violence indicated that 35% of Saudi women had already been exposed to at least one type of domestic violence. The survey results also revealed that "psychological violence" is the most prevalent type of violence against women in Saudi society (64%). The head of the Human Rights Commission confirmed that of the 1059 cases that reached the Saudi courts, 59 were related to domestic violence.⁸

In 2009, the case of Samar Badawi caused quite a stir in Saudi society. In her appeal to the Saudi judiciary, Badawi accused her father of physically abusing her for 15 years and trying to force her into marriage. In the heated dispute that ensued, her father responded by filing lawsuits accusing his daughter of disobedience, leading to Badawi's detention in April 2010. A local and international solidarity campaign led to her release in October of the same year, after which her guardianship was transferred from her father to her uncle.

In March 2014, another Saudi woman was forced to pay her husband, over several periods of time, to stop beating and abusing her and her children under the age of five, until the amounts paid amounted to nearly 300,000 Saudi riyals (\$80,000). This prompted the wife to resort to the concerned authorities to dissolve the marriage contract, after which her husband locked her and their children in the house and put cement on the door for five months. She was not able to leave until the police came and opened an investigation into the matter.⁹

In both of these cases, the common denominator of violence against women, whether physical, moral, or material, is the male guardianship system enshrined in Saudi Arabia.

The male guardianship system entrenches violence against women

The male guardianship system is a series of extra-judicial laws introduced in Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s, which limited women's rights and freedoms by designating a male guardian to manage the affairs of women, who were seen as minors. Under this system, every Saudi woman must have a male guardian, usually a father or husband, but who can sometimes be an uncle, brother, or even a son. This guardian's approval is required for all

⁷ ارتفاع نسبة العنف تجاه المرأة في السعودية إلى 87%، قناة العربية، 2013، متاح في

<https://www.alarabiya.net/saudi-today/2013/06/26>

⁸ الجعيد، بندر عويض ونعمة فهد عجاج، "فعالية تويتر في الحملات الإعلامية التوعوية المناهضة للعنف ضد المرأة في السعودية"، المجلة

المصرية لبحوث الرأي العام، المجلد 19، العدد 4، 2020

⁹ Al-Dabbagh, M., "Saudi Arabian Women and Group Activism", Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, vol. 11, no. 2, 2015, pp. 235–238.

aspects of that woman's life: work, medical treatment, studies, marriage, judicial processes, obtaining a passport, traveling abroad, and so on.

Against the backdrop of horrific stories affecting women from different regions of Saudi Arabia, some of which were made public, an online campaign was launched on X (formerly Twitter) in 2016 to demand the abolition of male guardianship over women. The hashtag "#TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship" was used, and a petition with 14,700 signatories, including many women activists, was addressed to then-Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz. The petition demanded the abolition of the male guardianship system over women with regard to travel, work, and study. It demanded that adult women be treated as full citizens and that a certain age be set for women to be responsible for their decisions. These demands were quickly dismissed, especially by the Saudi *mufti*, as "calls against sharia." These campaigns spurred activists and battered women to share their experiences with the community. One such prominent activist was Maryam al-Otaibi, who faced imprisonment after her father filed a disobedience lawsuit against her in 2017 for leading the "#TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship" campaign on social media. She fled her family home after being subjected to violence at the hands of her father and brother and consequently spent three months in prison.

As the mobilization continued, these intensive social media campaigns were met with widespread support from various official media channels as well as different human rights institutions and organizations. This resulted in the introduction of the Law of Protection from Abuse in Saudi Arabia for discussion in the Shura Council in December 2012, which represented the first serious step to confront the growing phenomenon of violence against women. Following this, the Council of Ministers approved the law in August 2013 and ensured it was overseen by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development.

In a subsequent step, the Minister of Social Affairs announced a ministerial decision approving the executive rules of the law in March 2014. Under this law, domestic abuse is defined as "Any form of exploitation; physical, psychological or sexual, or the threat thereof committed by an individual against another exceeding the limits of powers and responsibilities derived from guardianship, dependency, sponsorship, trusteeship or livelihood relationship." The law stipulates a penalty for domestic abuse ranging from one month to one year in prison and/or a fine of between 5,000 riyals (\$1,333) and 50,000 riyals (\$13,330) unless the sharia stipulates a more severe penalty. Judges can double the penalties for repeat offenders.¹⁰

Barriers to Protection from Abuse

Between Samar Badawi's story in 2009 and Maryam al-Otaibi's story in 2016, the legislation proposed by the Saudi government to protect women from violence presents many difficulties for taking tangible, real action. For example, to register a complaint at the police

¹⁰ بدوي، عبدالرحمن عبدالله علي، المرجع السابق

station, a battered woman needs to be accompanied by her "guardian," who, in most cases, is the very abuser against whom she wants to file a complaint. If she tries to file a complaint without her guardian, he can file a disobedience case against her, as happened in the case of Samar Badawi, where she was detained in prison for seven months due to her father's legal action.

In addition, the Law of Protection from Abuse has been met with waves of criticism from both State institutions and international human rights organizations. For example, five Saudi government agencies have listed 35 obstacles that must be addressed if it is to be implemented. The Ministry of Social Affairs emphasized the delay in deciding family cases, reminding of the dangers presented in some cases by lax safety measures as well as by a lack of adherence to social protection systems in place. At the international level, Amnesty International argued that the law and its executive regulations clearly state that a guardian can be convicted of abuse but criticized the definition of the concept of abuse as that which "exceeds the limits of his guardianship." The organization argued that this does not clearly define which actions are considered acceptable within the framework of a man's guardianship and which go beyond it. In addition, it omits other forms of harm, such as economic abuse, which is not explicitly mentioned in the law, despite international standards doing so.¹¹

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Justice pointed out difficulties in implementation arising from a lack of familiarity of judges with the Law and the developments in its legal definition, highlighting the need to organize seminars and courses for judges on these subjects. The duties and obligations of the guardian have not been precisely defined, making "failure or neglect" open to the judge's interpretation. This overly broad and vague definition thus makes it difficult to standardize rulings for similar cases and set useful jurisprudential precedents for the future.

Moreover, while the Law of Protection from Abuse stipulates in its Article 8 that "the Ministry shall, if it appears from the report that the case is serious and poses a threat to the life of the victim of abuse or his safety or health; take all necessary measures to deal with such case in accordance with its degree of seriousness, including notifying the governor or the relevant security authorities to take necessary measures," it also suggests that "in cases of non-serious abuse – the definition of which is not clarified – the case must remain with the family with an undertaking by the head of the family or his representative."¹² The Ministry of Justice's judicial systems in cases of violence and guardianship are limited to a standardized procedural guide, which means the seriousness of the case is often not taken into consideration. For instance, in 2008, the ministry dealt with a case of a woman who had escaped from her family to a shelter home by asking the relatives of the victim to take a

¹¹"Saudi Arabia: Personal Status Law Codifies Discrimination Against Women," Amnesty International, 2023, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/saudi-arabia-personal-status-law-codifies-discrimination-against-women> (Amnesty International, 2023)

¹² العنف ضد المرأة، 2017. متاح في [/https://fa6ima1heresy.wordpress.com/2017/04/](https://fa6ima1heresy.wordpress.com/2017/04/)

pledge not to abuse her again. However, when she was returned to her home, the violence and abuse resumed, despite the family's "pledge" to the authorities.¹³

In another example, a Saudi citizen was able to take over the guardianship of his three sisters after the death of their father, which he used to prevent the oldest from teaching after having spent 20 years in the profession, and to stop the others from going to university for their studies. He also beat them and locked them inside the house, which he kept monitored using video surveillance. When he finally threatened to kill them, the women reported him to the authorities. A month after the police report was filed, security officers went to the house and knocked on the door but were not able to enter. A representative of the social protection authorities followed up with the patrols only once but received no response.¹⁴

Online Campaigns Between Success and Repression

Social media has allowed for more effective media and social media campaigns that would have been difficult to achieve through traditional media outlets affiliated with the regime and its spokespersons. Social media networks focus on issues of violence against women from time to time, bringing visibility to this silent phenomenon eating away at society. As it was difficult for activists to publicly name victims of violence through individual tweets, they resorted to a strategy of using hashtags, which has yielded strong results. As soon as the hashtags #No_Fear_To_Say, for example, or #KeeptheStoryAlive were launched, Saudi cyberspace exploded with many stories of violence, forced marriage and gender discrimination.¹⁵ X (formerly Twitter) is one of the most important platforms used to spread social campaigns, as the interactive nature of the platform allows for building rapid engagement and following.¹⁶

In 2021, the hashtag #SaveRen was launched on X in Saudi Arabia, following allegations of violence against a girl whose family tried to force her into marriage. Activists on social media called for an end to violence against women and urged girls to raise their voices and not remain silent about any abuse they face. A tweeter using the handle "Ra" responded to this appeal by saying she was subjected to the worst kinds of violence and treatment over 10 years at the hands of her family. "I am R.A., a 20-year-old girl who endured ten years of beatings, bullying, and repeated insults, during which time I was subjected to the most severe forms of torture, harassment, and humiliation from a father and mother who know

¹³ مدونة حقوق المرأة السعودية. الحقوق و سياسات عدم التمييز ضد المرأة في السعودية، 2014، متاح في

[/https://saudiwomenrights.wordpress.com/category](https://saudiwomenrights.wordpress.com/category)

"Saudi Arabia: End Male Guardianship – Personal Status Law Discriminates Against Women and Excludes Activists' Views," Human Rights Watch, 2023, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/08/saudi-arabia-end-male-guardianship> (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

¹⁴ العنف ضد المرأة. 2017. متاح في [/https://fa6ima1heresy.wordpress.com/2017/04](https://fa6ima1heresy.wordpress.com/2017/04)

¹⁵ الجعيد، بندر عويص ونعمة فهد عجاج، المرجع السابق

¹⁶، سليم، حنان أحمد، الحملات العالمية عبر العالم الجديد، الرياض، دار جامعة الملك سعود للطباعة والنشر

only cruelty." She added, "I am thinking about suicide and consider it the best solution because I was forced to agree to marry a man six years older than me."¹⁷

In response to these campaigns, several Saudi civil societies announced their support for women's rights issues and called for awareness-raising to reduce violence against women. While social media platforms and digital technologies have been crucial in fostering social mobilization in the kingdom, the regime censors and suppresses content posted on these platforms. Activists are also subjected to prosecution, harassment, and even imprisonment in some cases.

Through studies related to the phenomenon of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia, the online campaigns against the male guardianship law, and the 2016 Human Rights Watch report¹⁸, which revealed the situation of Saudi women due to the guardianship law, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Saudi charitable and women's associations, and local media have paid attention to discussing this phenomenon and raising awareness about it. This has led to the establishment of protection centers to respond to women who are victims of abuse and domestic violence, providing counselling services and support to victims.

"Vision 2030" Unfinished Developments for Women's Empowerment

After the launch of "Vision 2030" in 2016, Saudi Arabia began working on implementing women's empowerment initiatives in the Kingdom, and issued many decisions with a humanitarian, social, and economic dimension to protect women. Of the 60 new human rights decisions within the Kingdom, 22 related to women's rights. This was accompanied by the development of legislation and the establishment of competent authorities, and the issuance of many orders and decisions, including the Law on Protection from Abuse, which addresses violence in all its forms, the anti-harassment system, the establishment of the Family Affairs Council, and the designation of centers to receive reports of domestic violence.¹⁹

In recent years, a humanitarian, legal, and media awareness-raising movement has been launched in the Kingdom, one of the most prominent features of which is the **legal axis**: The Kingdom has enacted legal regulations related to the family, especially women and children. On the **organizational axis**: The Kingdom's government has established a group of public institutions specialized in social development, such as the former Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, and several development programs, as well as the National Human Rights Commission and the Family

¹⁷ تعرضت لأسوأ أنواع التعذيب والتحرش.. حملة تضامن لإنقاذ السعودية رين، الحرة، 2021، متاح في

<https://www.alhurra.com/varieties/2021/01/01>

¹⁸ "Saudi Arabia: Male Guardianship Boxes Women In," Human Rights Watch, 2016, available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/17/saudi-arabia-male-guardianship-boxes-women>

Affairs Council. Saudi Arabia is a signatory to most of the international conventions against violence against women. The third axis includes allowing civil institutions to work and interact with **social mobilization demands** related to family development in order to raise awareness of violence against women and drive a change in behaviors.²⁰

Among the most notable of these changes are some of the laws and practices related to the guardianship law. Now, a 21-year-old woman can apply for a passport, book a flight, and travel without permission, provided that the application is for both her and a minor whose parents are deceased. Saudi women now also have the right to register births and deaths, and to live apart from their husband if they so wish. They can independently request a family registry from the Civil Status Department and be designated the "head of the family."²¹

Some activists have credited these decisions to the role of women and the effectiveness of communication media in mobilizing, organizing, and lobbying rather than to the recent reform plans represented by Vision 2030 or the inauguration of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has tried to present himself as a progressive reformer and an advocate for women's rights and empowerment in Saudi Arabia on the domestic and international stage.²²

However, these reforms remain limited in scope. While travel and study were "legally" exempted from the guardianship system, a guardian's approval is still required for marriage, divorce, opening a bank account, or starting a business. The gender segregation rule remains a barrier to women working and studying, forcing them to work in female-only fields. Guardians are still required to accompany women when they go abroad on a university scholarship, to pick them up when leaving a domestic violence shelter, to verify their identity in court, and to secure their release from jail. In the event of a guardian's death or divorce, the guardianship of a woman is transferred from her father or husband to her brother and then to her son. It is difficult for a woman to legally change her guardian in case of danger, and, as previously mentioned, it is difficult for women to file complaints of abuse or violence against their guardians with the police as they need to be accompanied to do so.²³

The Saudi regime's much-publicized and flawed reforms have not affected the rates of violence against women. The latest statistics released by the Saudi Human Rights Commission indicate that the rate of domestic violence against women has increased in recent years.²⁴ Despite Saudi Arabia's efforts to promote and export an image of modernity, progress, and openness to the outside world, many of its changes remain superficial. The arrests, imprisonment, censorship practices, and online threats against female activists

²⁰ الجعيد، بندر عويض ونعمة فهد عجاج، المرجع السابق

²¹ Human Rights Commission, *Women's Rights*, 2024, available at: <https://hrc.gov.sa/website/hrc-in-ksa/3> (HRC, 2024)

²² لم يعدن قاصرات اتهامات متبادلة بين السعوديات بعد إسقاط قانون الولاية، الجزيرة، 2019، متاح على <https://www.aljazeera.net/women/2019/8/3/>

²³ الجزيرة، 2019، المصدر السابق

²⁴ HRC, 2024

and participants in the 2016 anti-guardianship campaign and the 2018 women's right to drive campaign posed a serious challenge to the regime's "new" strategy and image.²⁵

In line with this context, 8 human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch²⁶ and Amnesty International,²⁷ have called on the Saudi authorities to take additional steps to end discrimination against women and fully dismantle the male guardianship system. They also criticized the new Personal Status Law, arguing that it officially codifies some aspects of male guardianship and entrenches gender-based discrimination in most aspects of family life, including marriage, divorce, and decision-making related to children. The organizations called on the Saudi authorities to allow women activists to exercise their rights to engage in advocacy without fear of harassment or arrest.²⁸ Amnesty International noted that the protection system and the new law reinforced stereotypical patriarchal gender roles, such as making financial support for women from their husbands conditional on the wife "empowering her husband." These provisions put women at risk of exploitation and abuse, including marital rape, which Saudi law does not criminalize. In addition, Human Rights Watch called for amending articles of the Protection from Abuse Law that prioritize family reconciliation over the protection of women, or laws that provide shelter only for cases deemed dangerous by the Ministry.²⁹ It also criticized the narrow choices battered women have after escaping their abuser and moving into a shelter, namely: Return to her abuser, marry somebody else, or stay and face an environment unfit for human life.

The Deep Challenges of the Gender Equality Dilemma

Despite all the efforts made, we must not lose sight of the seriousness of the challenges that stand in the way of implementing these initiatives in the context of Saudi Arabia. The historical roots of the philosophy of governance in women's issues lie in patriarchal tribal norms, the Salafi religious dimension of the state, and the material boom that accompanied the establishment of the state and its institutions. We must realize that any law that will be issued, no matter how elegant its articles, will be difficult to implement in a complex societal reality built on unjust systems that keep men in control of women's lives and their most basic affairs. For Saudi women, freedom of choice and movement are considered luxuries, as their decisions must conform to those of their guardians. Only women living with an understanding guardian can control some aspects of their lives, while others must live with the restrictions imposed on them by their guardians.³⁰

²⁵ "Saudi Arabia: Women's Rights Advocates Arrested," Human Rights Watch, 2018, available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/18/saudi-arabia-womens-rights-advocates-arrested>

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, 2023

²⁷ Amnesty International, 2023

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, 2023

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, 2023

³⁰ Moaddel, M. 2021. "The Saudi public speaks: Religion, gender, and politics". *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38: 79–108.

Historical and contemporary economic and political contexts have posed significant challenges to the social and political participation of Saudi women. Recently, however, a generation of increasingly aware women has emerged who reject the marginal role imposed on them. These women talk about the suffering they experience in all aspects of their lives, launch campaigns to demand their rights, reject violence against them in all its forms, and seek to create a state of awareness and concern in society on these issues to draw the attention of the authorities and achieve change.³¹ Despite the implementation of some reforms related to women's rights, criticism of the authoritarian government in Saudi Arabia has taken a new turn concerning women's rights and the official public and private violence against women, represented by repression, imprisonment, travel bans, and torture of women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia. In light of the absence of any role for civil society and human rights organizations, the authorities need to be more transparent and less authoritarian in dealing with human rights issues.

The government should acknowledge the existence of discriminatory laws and seek to repeal them, not entrench them. It should stand on the side of the victim, not her abuser, and give her security, not let her down. The ruling authority recognized this in principle by joining the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2000, despite its reservations. However, they have not committed to any agreements that would change the current situation for the better. Rather, they have continued to create and impose restrictive laws.³²

Serious reform work is the answer

There are still many obstacles to Saudi women realizing their rights and freedom, and there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality and eliminate domestic violence against women in all its forms. The Saudi regime should not exploit women's issues to polish its image in international forums without serious reform at all levels. This requires a radical change in concepts and beliefs and liberation from patriarchal family structures, as well as repressive societal and political authorities. This can be done by encouraging cooperation between different institutions, seeking the support of specialists and academics to draft appropriate laws, and successful awareness campaigns to combat violence against women, especially through various social media outlets.

There is no doubt that social media platforms have created a favorable environment for Saudi women's participation in political and social discourse. The lack of transparent and free media outlets that support women and women's rights movements in Saudi Arabia, a patriarchal society that prevents women from participating in the public sphere, and a restrictive social and family structure have made social media platforms a useful creative, interactive and tactical tool for women's activism and women's rights movements. However, digital media has limitations and risks for social and feminist movements and political participation in general. Women's online activism is limited by a number of variables, including the technical design of digital platforms (such as privacy and data

³¹ الجعيد، بندر عويض، وعجاج، نعمة فهد، المرجع السابق

³² Al-Rasheed, M. 2013. *A most Masculine state: Light at the end of the Tunnel*. Cambridge University Press.

protection), a restrictive political environment, and the persistent social discrimination faced by women's rights movements.

To make real progress on these important social issues, the Saudi authorities must fulfill their obligations under international human rights law by urgently amending the Personal Status Law and repealing discriminatory provisions against women, especially including those related to the male guardianship system. They must also ensure that women have equal rights and responsibilities regarding marriage, divorce, child custody and guardianship, and inheritance.