

Saudi Arabia: Time is long overdue to address women's rights

"Saudi woman is a first class citizen....has rights...duties ...and responsibility... when we talk about the comprehensive development which our country is experiencing in all aspects we can not ignore the role of Saudi womanand her participation in the responsibility of this development."

Crown Prince 'Abdullah bin 'Abdul-'Aziz Al-Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia quoted by Al-jazeera newspaper on 6 December 1999.

"Despite an encouraging emerging debate on women's rights in Saudi Arabia, women still face extreme forms of discrimination and restriction on their basic human rights." Amnesty International said in its report " Gross human rights abuses against women" released today.

The report details different patterns of human rights violations suffered by women as a result of policies and practices cemented by customs and fatawa (religious edicts).

Discrimination against women touches virtually all aspects of their lives including family life, decision making, employment, education and the justice system. It impacts upon and compounds the wide range of human rights violations commonly reported in Saudi Arabia.

" The lives of women in Saudi Arabia are regulated by a web of mores, rules and fatawa. It is the will of the state that controls almost every aspect of women's daily life, from their right of movement to the right to redress for violent assault." Amnesty International said.

Limitations on movement

Women can not walk alone even in their own neighbourhood without the fear of being stopped, beaten or detained particularly by the religious police as suspected moral offenders. This is because there are more constraints placed on the behaviour of women than men. For instance they are not allowed to go anywhere, or leave the country without a male guardian (mahram) or his written consent.

Criminal justice system

Women in Saudi Arabia, like men, face torture, corporal judicial punishment such as flogging and execution after summary trials which do not meet the basic standards of fair trial. However, it is more harsh for women due to the discrimination which they are subjected to in society. When they come into contact with the criminal justice system, women are invariably interrogated by men. Having no previous contact with unrelated men, they are consequently vulnerable to being intimidated into giving confessions, which are used as a sole evidence for conviction and punishment.

Discrimination in education and work

"Is there any logical justification for spending huge amount of money on women's education when thousands of female graduates face the prospect of either remaining at home or entering a single profession."

Editorial article by Saudi Arabian Journalist Abdul Rahman Al-Rashid, published in the Saudi Arabian newspaper Arab News, 4 April 2000.

Discrimination in law against women is not only limited to laws regulating the system of government and decision-making. For example, the Labour Code in Saudi Arabia contain direct and indirect discriminatory clauses against women. Gender segregation often means that women are limited to unequal facilities and opportunities

Statistics from the last few years show that women represent 55 per cent of university graduates. They own 40 per cent of private wealth, own 15,000 commercial establishments, yet can not publicly administer or be part of any dealings regarding their business. They must be represented by a male relative or a wakil shar'iy (attorney).

Domestic violence

"Violence in dealing with the wife in our Saudi society is a crime that no one likes to talk about and the harm continues because of that silence." **Dr Abu Baker Ba Qadir, Professor of Sociology at King 'Abdul-'Aziz University in Jeddah quoted by Al-Majalla, issue No 1063, 25 June -1 July 2000.**

Amnesty International has been able to uncover little about the issue of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia. The authorities do not publish statistics in relation to the prosecution of men who have been accused of assaulting their wives.

Amnesty International believes that some laws and practices in Saudi Arabia, such as limitations on women's movement, aggravate the impact of abuses committed by private individuals. Limitations on the freedom of movement of women are such that it is often difficult for them to seek protection or redress without risking further abuse.

Domestic workers

" I was regularly spat at by all members of the family, and beaten, usually by the father. He used to hit me with his Iqal. The beatings began when I had been in the house for three months. I asked for my salary as at that point I had received nothing.... From that point, I was beaten everyday."

Quotation from Natividad Lumpiado, a domestic worker from the Philippines.

Female domestic workers suffer from discrimination as foreign nationals and women. They are excluded from the protections afforded to other workers by the Labour Code. As a result, they are frequently overworked and rarely given time off and often locked in the homes of their employers. Their isolation makes them even more vulnerable to assaults which will not be witnessed by anyone outside the family of their employers, as well as being an easy target for false allegations.

Domestic workers interviewed by Amnesty International described gross exploitation including arbitrary deprivation of liberty, verbal and physical abuse, restriction of movement and sometimes non payment of their salaries, which amount to slave-like working conditions.

Karsini binti Sandi, a 19-year-old Indonesian domestic worker, told Amnesty International that she was assaulted by her employers and then abused and threatened with execution by police officers when she asked them for help. She eventually escaped and returned to Indonesia.

Time for Action

Amnesty International welcomes Saudi Arabia's recent important and positive step in signing the United Nations Covenant on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), albeit with sweeping reservations. The human rights organization urges the Saudi Arabian Government not to use such reservations to undermine the value and intent of the Convention.

"We hope that this report will contribute to the ongoing debate," Amnesty International's Secretary General Pierre Sane said, "We believe that the time is long overdue for Saudi Arabian women to be given more opportunity to enjoy their full rights as human beings".