International Women's Day

Saudi Arabia: Unfulfilled Promises

[english] - Region - North Africa & Middle East - Saudi Arabia -

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Description :

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"The past few years have witnessed a series of promises by the Saudi authorities but reform is slow and symbolic announcements often remain unimplemented in practice," said Saudi activists and FIDH in a statement released today.

In September 2011, King Abdullah declared that women would be able to vote and run in local elections for the first time in 2015 and could be appointed to the Consultative Assembly. The first women joined the Consultative Assembly in 2013, yet they were unable to assume their duties pending the designation of separate spaces. Such segregation risks limiting their active engagement in debate and reducing their influence on decision-making.

In 2008, the Ministry of Labour announced that a woman no longer requires a guardian's permission to seek employment. Yet in practice, many bodies continue to require a guardian's authorisation, without any legal consequences. In 2012, the Ministry of Labour issued a mandate requiring certain retail sectors selling merchandise to women to hire women only. In response, the religious police issued conditions, such as the erection of 160 cm physical partitions to isolate saleswomen and limit their mobility and prevent them mixing with male staff. Other major limits on economic participation include the driving ban (Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that prohibits women from driving). Economic participation of Saudi women remains among the lowest in the region.

Despite public statements to the contrary, there are no laws prohibiting violence against women. Lack of access to adequate shelters and untrained personnel restrict women's capacity to escape violence. Police officers often refuse to accept complaints made by women without their guardians. Women are not allowed to leave state shelters and "correctional facilities" unless they are accompanied by a consenting guardian.

Women protesting for their rights have been arrested and on occasions beaten. Citizens are afraid to join campaigns, such as those advocating for increased political participation for women, for fear of prosecution. Women who have challenged the ban on driving have been arrested and even imprisoned.

In 2012, a major conference on women's rights was announced, sponsored by influential figures. In fact, speakers were predominantly religious male scholars and conference recommendations emphasized the concept of guardianship and gender segregation as prerequisites for women's access to education or work. Recommendations also called for abandonment of the government's commitment to international treaties advocating women rights.

On International Women's Day, FIDH joins independent Saudi activists to call on the Saudi authorities to effectively combat discrimination in the private and public spheres, including by abolishing the discriminatory guardianship-system in law and practice and enacting laws protecting women's rights within the family.