

# USA: Thermostats, locks and lights: Digital tools of domestic abuse

By Nellie Bowles

NY Times (23.06.2018) – <https://nyti.ms/2KrQ52q>– The people who called into the help hotlines and domestic violence shelters said they felt as if they were going crazy.

One woman had turned on her air-conditioner, but said it then switched off without her touching it. Another said the code numbers of the digital lock at her front door changed every day and she could not figure out why. Still another told an abuse help line that she kept hearing the doorbell ring, but no one was there.

Their stories are part of a new pattern of behavior in domestic abuse cases tied to the rise of smart home technology. Internet-connected locks, speakers, thermostats, lights and cameras that have been marketed as the newest conveniences are now also being used as a means for harassment, monitoring, revenge and control.

In more than 30 interviews with The New York Times, domestic abuse victims, their lawyers, shelter workers and emergency responders described how the technology was becoming an alarming new tool. Abusers – using apps on their smartphones, which are connected to the internet-enabled devices – would

remotely control everyday objects in the home, sometimes to watch and listen, other times to scare or show power. Even after a partner had left the home, the devices often stayed and continued to be used to intimidate and confuse.

For victims and emergency responders, the experiences were often aggravated by a lack of knowledge about how smart technology works, how much power the other person had over the devices, how to legally deal with the behavior and how to make it stop.

“People have started to raise their hands in trainings and ask what to do about this,” Erica Olsen, director of the Safety Net Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence, said of sessions she holds about technology and abuse. She said she was wary of discussing the misuse of emerging technologies because “we don’t want to introduce the idea to the world, but now that it’s become so prevalent, the cat’s out of the bag.”

Some of tech’s biggest companies make smart home products, such as Amazon with its Echo speaker and Alphabet’s Nest smart thermostat. The devices are typically positioned as helpful life companions, including when people are at work or on vacation and want to remotely supervise their homes.

Some connected device makers said they had not received reports of their products being used in abuse situations. The gadgets can be disabled through reset buttons and changing a home’s Wi-Fi password, but their makers said there was no catchall fix. Making it easy for people to switch who controls

the account of a smart home product can inadvertently also make access to the systems easier for criminal hackers.

No groups or individuals appear to be tracking the use of internet-connected devices in domestic abuse, because the technology is relatively new, though it is rapidly catching on. In 2017, 29 million homes in the United States had some smart technology, according to a report by McKinsey, which estimated that the number was growing by 31 percent a year.

Connected home devices have increasingly cropped up in domestic abuse cases over the past year, according to those working with victims of domestic violence. Those at help lines said more people were calling in the last 12 months about losing control of Wi-Fi-enabled doors, speakers, thermostats, lights and cameras. Lawyers also said they were wrangling with how to add language to restraining orders to cover smart home technology.

Muneerah Budhwani, who takes calls at the National Domestic Violence Hotline, said she started hearing stories about smart homes in abuse situations last winter. "Callers have said the abusers were monitoring and controlling them remotely through the smart home appliances and the smart home system," she said.

Graciela Rodriguez, who runs a 30-bed emergency shelter at the Center for Domestic Peace in San Rafael, Calif., said some people had recently come in with tales of "the crazy-making things" like thermostats suddenly kicking up to 100 degrees or smart speakers turning on blasting music.

“They feel like they’re losing control of their home,” she said. “After they spend a few days here, they realize they were being abused.”

Smart home technology can be easily harnessed for misuse for several reasons. Tools like connected in-home security cameras are relatively inexpensive – some retail for \$40 – and are straightforward to install. Usually, one person in a relationship takes charge of putting in the technology, knows how it works and has all the passwords. This gives that person the power to turn the technology against the other person.

Emergency responders said many victims of smart home-enabled abuse were women.

Connected home gadgets are largely installed by men, said Melissa Gregg, a research director at Intel working on the implications of smart home technology. Many women also do not have all the apps on their phones, said Jenny Kennedy, a postdoctoral research fellow at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, who is researching families that install smart home technology.

(One in three women and one in four men have been victims of physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner, according to a 2010 Centers for Disease Control report.)

The people who spoke to The Times about being harassed through

smart home gadgetry were all women, many from wealthy enclaves where this type of technology has taken off. They declined to publicly use their names, citing safety and because some were in the process of leaving their abusers. Their stories were corroborated by domestic violence workers and lawyers who handled their cases.

Each said the use of internet-connected devices by their abusers was invasive – one called it a form of “jungle warfare” because it was hard to know where the attacks were coming from. They also described it as an asymmetry of power because their partners had control over the technology – and by extension, over them.

One of the women, a doctor in Silicon Valley, said her husband, an engineer, “controls the thermostat. He controls the lights. He controls the music.” She said, “Abusive relationships are about power and control, and he uses technology.”

She said she did not know how all of the technology worked or exactly how to remove her husband from the accounts. But she said she dreamed about retaking the technology soon.

“I have a specific exit plan that I’m in the process of implementing, and one of my fantasies is to be able to say, ‘O.K. Google, play whatever music I want,’” she said. Her plan with the smart thermostat, she said, was to “pull it out of the wall.”

When a victim uninstalls the devices, this can escalate a conflict, experts said. "The abuser can see it's disabled, and that may trigger enhanced violence," said Jennifer Becker, a lawyer at Legal Momentum, a women's rights legal advocacy group.

Eva Galperin, director of cybersecurity for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, said disabling the devices could also further cut off a victim. "They're not sure how their abuser is getting in and they're not necessarily able to figure it out because they don't know how the systems work," Ms. Galperin said. "What they do is they just turn everything off, and that just further isolates them."

Legal recourse may be limited. Abusers have learned to use smart home technology to further their power and control in ways that often fall outside existing criminal laws, Ms. Becker said. In some cases, she said, if an abuser circulates video taken by a connected indoor security camera, it could violate some states' revenge porn laws, which aim to stop a former partner from sharing intimate photographs and videos online.

Advocates are beginning to educate emergency responders that when people get restraining orders, they need to ask the judge to include all smart home device accounts known and unknown to victims. Many people do not know to ask about this yet, Ms. Becker said. But even if people get restraining orders, remotely changing the temperature in a house or suddenly turning on the TV or lights may not contravene a no-contact order, she said.

Several law enforcement officials said the technology was too new to have shown up in their cases, though they suspected the activity was occurring.

“I’m sure that it’s happening,” said Zach Perron, a captain in the police department in Palo Alto, Calif. “It makes complete sense knowing what I know about the psychology of domestic violence suspects. Domestic violence is largely about control – people think of physical violence but there’s emotional violence, too.”

Some people do not believe the use of smart home devices is a problem, said Ruth Patrick, who runs WomenSV, a domestic violence program in Silicon Valley. She said she had some clients who were put on psychiatric holds – a stay at a medical facility so mental health can be evaluated – after abuse involving home devices.

“If you tell the wrong person your husband knows your every move, and he knows what you’ve said in your bedroom, you can start to look crazy,” she said. “It’s so much easier to believe someone’s crazy than to believe all these things are happening.”

Asking everyone in a home to understand smart home technology is essential, researchers said.

“When we see new technology come out, people often think,

'Wow, my life is going to be a lot safer,'" said Katie Ray-Jones, chief executive of the National Domestic Violence Hotline. But "we often see the opposite with survivors of domestic violence."

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# **KENYA: How outlawing female genital mutilation has driven it underground and led to its medicalization**

By Damaris Seleina Parsitau



<https://brook.gs/2MqJV0x>– The fight against female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) has been fraught with both success and failure, resistance and acceptance. Since Kenya banned the practice in 2011, FGM/C is now increasingly conducted underground, secretly in homes or in clinics by healthcare providers and workers.

The medicalization of FGM/C—defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as any “situation in which FGM/C is practiced by any healthcare provider whether in public or private, clinic or home or elsewhere”—has received recent media and public attention. Earlier this year, a doctor filed a court case asking the Kenyan government to declare the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act 2011, which outlawed and criminalized FGM/C, unconstitutional. Further, she wanted the Anti-FGM Board, a body created to help eradicate FGM/C and early marriage, also declared unconstitutional.

The doctor, Dr. Tatu Kamau, argues that the dignity of traditional practitioners of female circumcision is disregarded by the law which has failed to stop FGM/C in the country. She claims that FGM/C is still largely practiced in Kenya and is increasing due to medicalization. In Kenya, there is evidence that scrupulous medical personnel collude with parents to circumvent the law by cutting girls in their homes or in their private clinics away from public view.

This trend is evident in both rural and urban Kenya where 15 percent of women and girls have been cut by a medical practitioner. The practice is especially prevalent in Kisii counties in Western Kenya where FGM/C is nearly universal. Drawing on interviews with girls and women who have been cut

by health providers, my research shows that parents are increasingly having their girls, some as early as 5 years old, cut by nurses or other healthcare workers either in homes or in health clinics.

Moraa (not her real name), an 18-year-old college girl from Nakuru in the Rift Valley, explained to me how her mother, a primary school teacher, brought a nurse to their home during school holidays to cut her at dawn when she was barely 8 years old. Moraa feels resentful and bitter towards her parents, especially her mother for colluding with a nurse to have her cut without her consent, and has considered suing her parents for violating her rights. Moraa's story is just one of many cases of medicalized cutting.

### ***The commercialization and medicalization of FGM/C***

Throughout my larger research on FGM/C and early marriage, I came across many stories of medicalization of FGM/C both in rural and urban areas in Kenya. A nurse I spoke with told me that she carries out the cut for money. "Look," she said, "when parents call me to perform the cut on their girls, both in urban and rural areas or even in my clinic, I respond because they pay me handsomely. Some even pay for my bus fare and accommodation; I travel widely to cut girls and women. I see no reason why I shouldn't do this. I have not forced anyone to undergo the cut. I simply provide my services to those who need them."

Medical professionals who perform cutting services claim that they are fulfilling the demands of communities and that they

help enhance women's values and marriageability in communities that do not want to abandon the practice. They believe that by doing so they respect patients' cultural rights since some are of a mature legal age.

However, the real reason driving this is its economic value. Medical professionals are cutting girls and women for payment, replacing the traditional cutters in rural villages. Additionally, the commercialization of FGM/C helps parents and guardians to avert the law and authorities. The medicalization of FGM/C not only provides legitimacy to the cut but it continues to put millions of girls at risk from the consequences of the cut. It also continues to perpetuate and give tacit approval of the harmful practice by discouraging changed behavior and attitudes, thereby leading to the normalization of the cut in medical spaces.

While the medicalization of FGM/C is not a new phenomenon, its growing popularity is worrying and points to emerging shifts and tensions in the war to end it—a cat and mouse game between resistant communities and authorities. And while the medicalization of FGM/C went under the radar as authorities and stakeholders focused on traditional cutters in rural villages as well as alternative rites of passage, it is now emerging as a new frontier in the war against the harmful practice. Global, regional, and local focus should now shift away from traditional cutters to medical practitioners.

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## LEBANON: The Chief's Daughter



*SB OverSeas is a humanitarian organisation working in Lebanon to provide access to education. They are strictly against the practice of child marriage which affects many of the girls in our schools and work to keep them in education. Read more about our work here: [www.sboverseas.org](http://www.sboverseas.org)*

*Written by Kevin Charbel, Project Manager in Saida, Lebanon*

SB Overseas (06.20.2018) – I still see her sometimes, walking through the maze of corridors in the shelter she lives in. Our eyes will meet for the briefest of moments as she smiles nervously before dropping her gaze, and passing me by

silently. In that instant I feel the urge to reach out to her, to ask her how she's been and what she's up to, but I always hold back, because I know that any interaction between us carries a risk to her safety.

Sarah was married under duress three months ago, at the age of 14. For some time, she openly defied her father, the community's chief, resisting his attempts to marry her to another teenager. She wanted to stay in school, to keep learning and to be with her friends. Eventually though, her father grew tired of her refusals, resorting instead to beating her into submission. It didn't take long after that for Sarah to be engaged. When I found out what had happened I made sure she knew we could protect her and that we would defend her right to choose, but by then, in her mind, the only thing worse than getting married to a stranger was to stay living with her father.

The once vibrant, cheeky student who would knock on my office door just to say hello disappeared from one day to another. Her marriage precludes her from continuing her education as she is now expected to prioritise domestic duties. This 14 year old girl is under pressure to learn to be a "good wife", meaning she must quickly master the skills to keep a clean home and satisfy her husband's appetite, as well as learn not to flinch when he makes sexual advances. Sarah's own desires and thoughts no longer matter; her position in society limited by the four walls of her modest home, where she is expected to remain while her husband is at work.

Child brides are often told that the more compliant and submissive they are, the easier the transition will be. They are the ones who must adapt, not their husband. They are the

ones who must sacrifice, who must accept hardships and who must, all of a sudden, become women. Sarah's imagination and fiery stubbornness were once assets in the classroom, where they could be put to good use. Now these traits are a risk to her; she must lose this part of herself if she is to fit into the mould her father has set for her. She has no real choice in the matter, as if she were to end up discarded by her husband, she would not have the option to start again, she would be tainted.

Her friends, who are still in school, tell me that Sarah's father threatens her with more violence should she seek to continue contact with any of our staff members. If she is isolated there is much less risk of her rejecting her conditions and, as time goes on, the combination of aloneness and intimidation will numb Sarah into accepting a reality she would otherwise never have chosen for herself.

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# ARGENTINA: Lawmakers in marathon abortion debate

*Lawmakers in Argentina spent Wednesday afternoon and the entire night debating whether to allow women to have abortions in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy.*

BBC (14.06.2018) – <https://bbc.in/2MrAvoU>– A vote on a draft bill is due to be held in the lower house later on Thursday.

Deputies have been split almost evenly in the highly divisive debate and the result could go either way.

If approved, the bill will still have to go to the Senate.

President Mauricio Macri is strongly opposed to the bill but has said that he would not veto it if it was passed by Congress.

Abortion is currently illegal in Argentina, except in cases of rape or when the life or health of the woman is at risk. Women seeking abortions also have to apply to a judge for permission, which critics say can unnecessarily delay the procedure.

*Divided, but not along party lines*

Lawmakers for and against the bill had five minutes each to outline their position and try to sway deputies from the other side.

President Macri had told members of his party to vote according to their conscience.

The debate was rare in Argentine politics in that it was not divided along party lines, but that there were opponents and supporters both on the left and the right.

Before the session started at 11:30 local time on Wednesday (14:30 GMT), more than a dozen lawmakers had said that they were still undecided.

It is these that the lawmakers speaking are trying to convince. More than 200 took to the podium in the first 19 hours of the debate.

Axel Kicillof of the Justicialist Party urged his colleagues to “give women the right to decide over their bodies”.

But Mario Horacio Arce of the Radical Civic Union argued that the bill would be unconstitutional.

“The national constitution does not distinguish between different phases of pregnancy, it protects life from the



moment of conception,” he said.

Silvia Martínez, also of the Radical Civic Union, disagreed: “This is a great opportunity. I ask you to reflect, let’s not tell women making these demands ‘no’.”

The divisions inside the chamber were mirrored on the streets outside, where opponents and supporters gathered for all-night vigils.

Police had earlier erected barricades to keep the two sides apart but that did not prevent the occasional shouting match.

### ***Growing momentum***

The vote comes a year after lawmakers in neighbouring Chile approved lifting that country’s total ban on abortions.

The momentum in favour of a change in the law in Argentina has grown over the past months and was further boosted by the overwhelming vote for overturning the abortion ban in Ireland.

There have been huge marches backing the bill led by #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess), a movement first created to fight violence against women but which has since expanded across much of Latin America to stand up for women’s rights.

Tens of thousands of people have shown their support by wearing green handkerchiefs but there has also been stiff opposition led by the Catholic Church.

Non-governmental organisations say an estimated 500,000 abortions a year are carried out clandestinely, often in conditions which pose a health risk for women and girls.

In most of Latin America there are tight restrictions on abortions and in some countries such as the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Honduras there is a total ban.

If Argentina were to pass the bill it would be the most populous nation in the region to lift restrictions on abortions.

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# South Africa: The women of Waqf are claiming their right to pray in the mosque

*What began as a means for women to form a spiritual community and pray their salaah in congregation during the holy month of Ramadan has exposed a deeply rooted patriarchy and toxic masculinity in the Johannesburg Muslim community.*

By Shaazia Ebrahim

The Daily Vox (06.06.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2JBBmW8>– A group of local women were, on Friday and again on Monday, rebuked for praying at Masjid Siratul-Jannah also known as the Gold Mosque in Ormonde, Johannesburg.

Many Johannesburg mosques don't have provision for women at all while others have small allocated areas that are often locked.

On Monday, a video showing a man trying to stop women from getting close to listening to the Quran being recited at the Gold Mosque went viral.

[See video](#)

Women were barred from praying in a section of the mosque that evening. A woman in the congregation, Sumaya Hendricks, posted a video of the incident on Facebook, which was recorded by Tazkiyyah Amra. Hendricks said a group of praying women were insulted and called “morons”. In the video, a man is heard saying that women cannot be in view of men during prayers.

This was not the first time the women had been barred from prayer at the mosque.

The women claiming the space to pray have become known as the Women of Waqf (WOW). Shameelah Khan and her friend Noorjaan Allie decided at the beginning of Ramadan to pray at different Johannesburg mosques. “My friend and I decided we wanted to spend one night, every night, at a different mosque so we could get to know the different mosques in Johannesburg,” Khan said in an interview with The Daily Vox. Both had previously lived in Cape Town and frequented the mosque regularly with friends. She speaks of the sense of community she felt there where the congregation would pray for those who were ill or writing exams.

The first mosque they attended was the Gold Mosque because they were aware that it had women’s facilities. Khan, who grew up in the mosque where she attended Madressah (Islamic school) as a child, had never prayed there as an adult.

When they arrived at the mosque, they saw an older woman leaving frustrated because the women’s facilities did not have a speaker for her to follow the taraweeh prayer in

congregation. In the women's facility there was a sign saying that women are not allowed to use the speaker unless it is to hear adhan (call to prayer) because women need to pray alone.

Khan and Allie struggled to get a speaker that night but eventually managed to attain a small radio speaker to follow the taraweeh prayer. They prayed there for a week and a half and a few other women started joining them as well. The speaker had altered the dynamic and allowed women to pray taraweeh instead just wait for hours for their husbands.

The two decided to host a small iftaar on Friday, 31 May and distributed a poster asking women from the area to join and meet them. They tried to contact the mosque management but were brushed off.

Everything went awry when the mosque management caught wind of the iftaar. They were met with extremity and harsh demands where mosque authorities called this gathering bidah or an innovation in religious matters and said the women had not obtained permission to host an event.

Both Allie and Khan who furthered their Islamic Studies at the Medinah Institute in Cape Town knew this was not the way to respond. Besides, the men break their fasts there every evening.

The iftaar, with close to 30 women in attendance, went on smoothly until a man threatened the women to leave when they proceeded into the demarcated section for women, which has a

separate entrance. "Under no circumstances", he said, "are women allowed to pray here unless they are travelling". He said he was to lock the back room which had signs put up that we had to leave after maghrib (sunset prayers).

After performing maghrib, Khan and another woman asked the caretaker of the mosque to open a classroom for the ladies to finish eating and perform the evening prayers.

"We were sitting in utter darkness and we would not eat really, because we could not see. We said we would really like to be in a room with a [loudspeaker] so that we can read taraweeh and he said 'absolutely not'," Khan said to Voice of the Cape.

The women then sat in "a peaceful protest" in the courtyard of the mosque. Before the evening prayers were about to commence, a group of men approached them and demanded that the women not pray in congregation and leave the area. A man pushed a woman as she protected her daughter who was attempting to record the incident, Khan said.

"He charged at her and pushed the mother and one of the women and I tried to get him off of her and tried to calm the mom down, because at this point she was shaking," she said.

Another man eventually intervened and arranged for a room for the women to pray in where they completed the remainder of the evening prayers.

Khan said with both incidents she was so shocked at the way the men behaved at the mosque. "I'm still shocked because the men felt it was okay to lay their hands on us," Khan said. The worst part, she said, was that no one did anything.

"Men would stand back and know this is an act that is wrong and didn't take responsibility for it," she said.

When the Spur video went viral, and with the #MeToo campaign, men stood up to condemn their fellow men, she said. "In our Muslim community, we realise they are not vocal about gender-based violence even in the mosque space for women who want to pray," Khan said. She said this is deeply rooted in toxic masculinity and patriarchy.

Khan said mosque officials confirmed that the prayer room would be remain available to women after the incident on Friday, but on Sunday night the room was locked midway into evening prayers.

Khan and Allie were promised that they would be able to engage with mosque officials about the incident, but to date no communication has been received.

To pray at the mosque is sunnah, Khan said and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did not ban women from mosque.

“We live in a critical time where women are not empowered because we are kept behind closed doors,” Khan said. “The mosque is not just a place to pray, it’s a place to grow spiritually. It has nothing to do with men really, they’re just there. We really want to grow with each other,” she added.

At the end of the day women just want respect and love from our communities, Khan said. All Khan and Allie want is for women to be treated equally and for men to respect women equally. “Women need respect for their voices, their bodies, what they have to say and their minds,” she said.

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# NEW REPORT: Women's Rights & Religion

# Women's Rights & Religion

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A report on women's rights and Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

June 2018  
Human Rights Without Frontiers



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## ***Excerpt:***

In hopes to discover and highlight the powerful potential that

religion and religious leaders have to help guarantee women's rights around the world, this report examines current tensions that exist between women's rights and some interpretations of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish doctrines.

This report addresses early, forced and child marriages, female genital mutilation, violence against women, 'honour' killing, public dress codes, and reproductive rights. Through these various facets of women's rights, the report explores the ways in which religious texts, practices, cultural influences, and patriarchal systems influence or motivate violations of these rights.

The Abrahamic religions as organized systems have always been led by men and have perpetuated a patriarchal culture that can be questioned in the light of the current human rights culture. Women have the right to gender equality, and some women reject the dominance of men and patriarchal social systems over their persons, claiming autonomy over choices on issues exclusive to their sex.

Women's rights and freedoms are guaranteed under international law and should be protected over social, cultural, or even legal norms when they result in gender discrimination and prejudices.

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## **SAUDI ARABIA: First driving**

# Licences issued to women

*Saudi Arabia has issued driving licences to women for the first time in decades just weeks before a ban on female drivers is lifted.*

BBC (05.06.2018) – <https://bbc.in/2kPYFgd> – Ten women swapped their foreign licences for Saudi ones on Monday in cities across the country.

However, women's rights activists have complained of a new crackdown – with several being arrested.

A flood of applications is now expected in the run-up to 24 June when the ban will end.

Saudi Arabia's laws require women to seek male permission for various decisions and actions, and that extends to the ban on women driving.

Previously, that meant that families had to hire private drivers to transport female relatives.

But rights groups in the kingdom have campaigned for years to allow women to drive, and some women have been imprisoned for defying the rule.

Several activists, men and women, were arrested last month,

accused of being “traitors” and working with foreign powers.

Loujain al-Hathloul, a well-known figure in the campaign for women’s driving rights, was believed to be one of those held.

Rights group Amnesty International described the arrests as “blatant intimidation tactics”. On Sunday, Saudi prosecutors said 17 people in total had been detained, but said eight had been released “temporarily”.

Ms Hathloul has been detained previously, including once in 2014 when she attempted to drive across the border from the United Arab Emirates. She served 73 days at a juvenile detention centre as a result, and documented many of her experiences on Twitter.

### ***‘A dream come true’***

“Expectations are that next week an additional 2,000 women will join the ranks of licensed drivers in the kingdom,” a statement from the Saudi information ministry said.

It added that the 10 women who had collected their new Saudi licences had “made history”.

“It’s a dream come true that I am about to drive in the kingdom,” Rema Jawdat, who received a licence, was quoted as

saying by the ministry.

“Driving to me represents having a choice – the choice of independent movement. Now we have that option.”

The lifting of the driving ban was announced last September and is part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s programme to modernise some aspects of Saudi society.

He has spearheaded the Vision 2030 programme to diversify the economy away from oil and open up Saudi society.

But there are still limits on what Saudi women can do.

Saudi law enforces a strict form of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism and is known for its gender segregation rules.

Women have to adhere to strict dress codes, must not associate with unrelated men, and if they want to travel, work or access healthcare they must be accompanied by – or receive written permission from – a male guardian.

**Further reading:**

[Saudi women get driving licenses – but still can’t do these 8 things](#)

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## **EL SALVADOR: ‘Police never turned up’: The devastating epidemic of femicide**

*Pressure is growing to tackle the rising toll of violence in one of the world’s most dangerous places to be a woman*

The Guardian (06.06.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Lsjo40> – the day before she was found dead in a garden in a suburb of the El Salvadoran capital, Graciela Eugenia Ramírez Chávez had gone to buy shoes for her wedding. Her fiancé was later arrested and charged with her murder – she had been stabbed 56 times – in a case that briefly made headlines in a country where femicide is a grisly daily reality.

The death of 22-year-old Ramírez on 13 February came less than

a month after Dr Rosa María Bonilla Vega, 45, died in hospital after being found injured at the foot of the stairs at her home in the city of Santa Ana. Two months later Karla Turcios, a 33-year-old journalist, was found, strangled and suffocated, on a road near the western town where she lived. The partners of both women have been charged with their murders.

These were just three high-profile cases among 152 murders of women between 1 January and 1 May in El Salvador, according to the National Women's Development Institute (Isdemu). The statistics mark an increase from last year, when 123 women were murdered from 1 January up to 30 April in the Central American country, considered one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. As the rate of femicide has increased, so have demands for the government to act.

Last month the attorney general's office responded by launching a new unit to combat the crisis. Four officials will coordinate nationwide efforts to halt violence against women, children and adolescents, the LGBT community and other vulnerable groups. Graciela Sagastume, who led the investigations into the murders of Bonilla and Turcios, will head up efforts to stop violence against women.

"The goal of this new unit is the standardisation, creation and coordination of criteria, strategies and guidelines that permit the attorney general's office to pay integral attention to the process of investigation and victims of violence," said the attorney general, Douglas Meléndez, as he inaugurated the unit.

“We have confidence that this will get results and make a difference,” said Silvia Ivette Juárez Barrios of Ormusa (the Organisation of Salvadoran Women for Peace). “This integrated approach is what we asked for in the strategy we developed.”

She said the crisis was linked to impunity and tolerance by authorities and police. “When the authorities don’t react, that sends out a message that nothing will be done.”

Meléndez said that in the case of Ramírez, police had failed to act on warnings in the months leading to her murder. “On repeated occasions neighbours called the [emergency number] to report the victim was being attacked but the police never turned up.”

The main reason that women did not report violence was that they found it difficult to access public services, said Vanda Pignato, the secretary for social inclusion, adding that women were often disbelieved if they did manage to report it. Accounts of violence did not match surveys that found, for example, that four in 10 women had experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.

The new unit will focus on better allocation of resources and will prioritise prevention, including mobilising civil society to raise awareness, said Salvador Martínez, at the attorney general’s office. “We won’t just be working on cases where murders have occurred, but on prevention. We have found many women are not even aware they are being abused and schools and other institutions will be mobilised to educate people.”



He attributed the rise in femicide to “a total social breakdown – a lack of values, a lack of education, a lack of respect and tolerance”.

Pressure to tackle the femicide epidemic has been mounting. In March the UN office in San Salvador called for government action to strengthen special tribunals for women and specialist services at PNC (national civil police) branches. A month later women’s rights organisations protested outside the attorney’s general’s office, with banners reading: “It’s not a crime of passion, it’s a crime of patriarchy”, and “We demand the state guarantee the right to a life free from violence”.

According to the UN, Latin America and the Caribbean is the most violent region in the world for women, with femicide occurring on a “devastating scale” in Central America, where two out of three women who are murdered die because of their gender. In El Salvador 468 femicides occurred in 2017, one every 18 hours, according to the Institute of Legal Medicine.

For Graciela Ramírez, whose family released photographs of the wedding dress she planned to wear, her murder ended a life long marred by violence. She had fled to a new area of the country to escape a former partner who had abused her. Police had simply advised her to “take justice into her own hands” when she reported those attacks, her mother told reporters. “It never stops. People talk about violence against women, but when you look for help, nothing happens.”

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## **ITALY: Sicilian police charge five men over trafficking of women in Ragusa**

*Romanian men taken into custody after raids targeting criminal exploitation and forced prostitution on farms*

The Guardian (07.06.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2kVuswg> – Sicilian police have charged five Romanian men with human trafficking after a series of police raids targeted the criminal exploitation and forced prostitution of workers in farms across the Ragusa region.

Police said the arrests have exposed an organised inter-EU human trafficking operation between Romania and Sicily that is forcing men and women to live in conditions of modern slavery in one of Italy's largest vegetable producing regions.

The arrests follow an investigation by the Observer last year into the widespread forced labour and sexual exploitation of Romanian women employed as seasonal farm workers in Ragusa.

After a series of raids on farms across the region, Antonino Ciavola, chief of police in Ragusa, said he was shocked by the conditions in which dozens of workers – including a number of Romanian women – were being forced to live and work.

Ciavola said: “This is a first for Italy. We found that women are being recruited in Romania and promised good job opportunities in Sicily. But they all ended up being slaves”.

Police said they found women living in dilapidated houses who were given rotten food to eat, beaten, made to work without pay and forced into prostitution with locals. A number of children were with them. If they refused to work or tried to leave they faced extreme violence.

“It’s hard to imagine that a human being is capable of doing this to another,” said Ciavola. .

The five men arrested were charged with human trafficking, labour exploitation and exploitation of prostitution.

“We have been surveilling these men since last year, for about seven months. We wiretapped their conversations, we were assisted by some victims who were brave enough to collaborate. [During the course of the investigation] we discovered a world

where men and women are treated like animals.”

In March last year, the Observer revealed that up to 5,000 Romanian women working on farms in Ragusa were facing conditions of forced labour and severe labour exploitation. The women said in interviews that they had been subject to routine sexual assault and forced to work 12-hour days in extreme heat with no water. They also complained of non-payment of wages and being forced to live in degrading and unsanitary conditions in isolated outbuildings.

Ciavola credited the Observer investigation with kick-starting police inquiries into the abuse of Romanian women in Sicily. He said that police in Sicily have arrested more than 15 men and investigated a further 40 over the past 12 months as they step up their attempts to tackle widespread criminal exploitation on the island.

“I want to publicly thank the Guardian,” he said. “This operation is the result of your investigation”.

“We want to stop this,” Ciavola added. “We want to end the exploitation. We need to free these women”.

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## A lost childhood – Syrian refugees in Lebanon



*Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon*

By Jade-Leigh Tenwick, Communications and Development Officer  
at SB OverSeas

*This story is part of our child marriage series which aims to highlight this increasingly prevalent practice amongst the refugee community in Lebanon.*

SB Overseas (31.05.2018) – This article tells the story of Ream, an eighteen year old who attends one of our SB OverSeas centre. SB OverSeas has three centres in Lebanon where we run education and empowerment programs.

Ream left Syria at the age of twelve shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. A conflict which led her not only to lose her home, but also her childhood and education.

Ream, along with her family, followed the same path as many other Syrians escaping the conflict to Lebanon. She was enthusiastic to start her life in Lebanon and continue her education. She dreamed of being a human rights lawyer, giving a voice to those who had none.

This dream did not last long. Registration requirements and safety concerns of her family thwarted her educational opportunities.

Left at home. Without routine. The monotony and the hopelessness of the situation began to erode at the once happy and ambitious child. Her mental health deteriorated. Her mother charged her with more responsibility in the household in a bid to lift her out of her depression. This was her existence for two years.

At the age of fourteen, Ream was told about her impending marriage to a family friend. This was her chance to start a new life. Excited for the wedding day, she dreamed about wearing her white dress. After an idyllic day, she was filled of hope for a new life with her husband. A husband nearly double her age.

This story follows the same narrative as the other stories we have heard. Cracks began to appear and her feelings of hope shrunk. They were unable to register the marriage as Ream was too young. This legal status had consequences for her the child she was bearing. Without legal status, the child would be born statelessness – a life without clear rights or legal status.

Their problems also extended to the husband's family. Living in a small space caused tensions to heighten. She tried to ease this by shouldering more household responsibilities. This included not only household chores, but walking to retrieve water. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities and pregnancy, she would often find herself in tears.

With problems escalating, she felt more and more overwhelmed and asked for a divorce so she could return to her family. Her husband refused. He threatened her stating he would not register the marriage, renounce their child and marry another woman. The ramifications of these actions were sufficient to convince her to stay.

Things did not get better. Her husband began to beat her,

sometimes daily, and she worried about the physical affect of the trauma on her unborn child. She fled her family to seek their support. Yet, they were not as supportive as she had hoped. With over 70% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line in Lebanon, food is scare and hunger is rife. They told her to forget about her old family and to return to her new one.

Ream had to choose either to be vulnerable and alone on the streets or to return to her husband. She chose the latter. With her baby born, she had not only herself to worry about, but another human. With another mouth to feed, she was often hungry, barely able to provide for her child.

Her health deteriorated and her husband decided took her back to the family visiting her sporadically. After three months, her family decided it was time for her to fend for herself. Left out on the street, she begged her husband to look after her and her son. He rented a small room for her. This came at a cost. He appeared to only visit her when he wanted to have a target for his anger and frustration.

Her family realising the extent of the situation, took her back in. After three years of limbo, Ream is now trying to rebuild her life and find the girl who once dreamed of being a human rights lawyer. She comes to SB OverSeas centre four times a week and attends our courses. At our centre, she also speaks of her story with the other girls to raise awareness of her and many other girls' experiences with child marriage.

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