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Saudia Arabia agrees to let women drive

By Ben Hubbard

The New York Times (26.09.2017) – <http://nyti.ms/2ysOJ0Q>– Saudi Arabia announced on Tuesday that it would allow women to drive, ending a longstanding policy that has become a global symbol of the oppression of women in the ultraconservative kingdom.

The change, which will take effect in June 2018, was announced in a royal decree read live on state television and in a simultaneous media event in Washington. The decision highlights the damage that the ban on women driving has done to the kingdom's international reputation and its hopes for a public relations benefit from the reform.

Saudi leaders also hope the new policy will help the economy by increasing women's participation in the workplace. Many working Saudi women spend much of their salaries on drivers or must be driven to work by male relatives.

"It is amazing," said Fawziah al-Bakr, a Saudi university professor who was among 47 women who participated in the kingdom's first protest against the ban — in 1990. After driving around the Saudi capital, Riyadh, the women were arrested and some lost their jobs.

"Since that day, Saudi women have been asking for the right to drive, and finally it arrived," she said by phone. "We have been waiting for a very long time.

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites, is an absolute monarchy ruled according to Shariah law. Saudi officials and clerics have provided numerous explanations for the ban over the years.

Some said that it was inappropriate in Saudi culture for women to drive, or that male drivers would not know how to handle having women in cars next to them. Others argued that allowing women to drive would lead to promiscuity and the collapse of the Saudi family. One cleric claimed — with no evidence — that driving harmed women's ovaries.

Rights groups and Saudi activists have long campaigned for the ban to be overturned, and some women have been arrested and jailed for defying the prohibition and taking the wheel.

In 2014, Loujain Hathloul was arrested after trying to cross the border from the United Arab Emirates into Saudi Arabia and detained for 73 days.

"@LoujainHathloul I'm so proud of you," Fahad Albuteiri, her husband and a well-known Saudi comedian, wrote on Twitter.

Ms. Hathloul tweeted a simple reaction to the news: "Thank god."

The ban has long marred the image of Saudi Arabia, even among its closest allies, like the United States, whose officials sometimes chafed at a policy shared only by the jihadists of the Islamic State and the Taliban.

The decision won near universal praise in Washington. Heather Nauert, the State Department's spokeswoman, called it "a great step in the right direction for that country."

The momentum to change the policy picked up in recent years with the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the king's 32-year-old son, who has laid out a far-reaching plan to overhaul the kingdom's economy and society.

Increasing numbers of women are working in a growing number of professions, and in 2015, women were allowed to vote and to run for seats on the kingdom's local councils.

Ending the ban on women driving is expected to face some resistance inside the kingdom, where families are highly patriarchal and some men say they worry about their female relatives getting stranded should their cars break down.

But in a small news conference at the Saudi embassy in Washington, an exuberant Prince Khalid bin Salman, the Saudi ambassador, said women would be able to obtain driver's licenses without having to ask permission of their husbands, fathers or any male guardian — despite so-called "guardianship" laws that give men power over their female relatives.

Under these laws, women cannot travel abroad, work or undergo some medical procedures without the consent of their male "guardian," often a father, a husband or even a son. While the enforcement of guardianship laws has loosened in recent years, there is little to stop Saudi men from greatly limiting the movements of their wives or daughters.

The ambassador, who is a son of the king, said that women would be able to drive alone but that the Interior Ministry would decide whether they could work as professional drivers.

He said he did not expect the change in policy to face significant resistance.

"I think our society is ready," he said.

That remains an open question. Many Saudis remain deeply conservative, and social strictures like the driving ban have been reinforced over the years by the kingdom's top clerics, many of them on the government payroll.

But there was little public dissent on Tuesday, likely because the Saudi government often exerts pressure on prominent voices to make sure they either back the government line or keep quiet. In recent weeks it has arrested more than two dozens clerics, academics and others, accusing them of being foreign-funded dissidents.

After the change on the driving ban was announced, an anonymous text circulated through What's App in the kingdom calling on the "virtuous ones" to work against its implementation, to protect against epidemics, adultery and other disasters.

At the news conference, the ambassador insisted that the decision would not be reversed or seriously opposed.

Beyond the effects it could have on Saudi Arabia's image abroad, letting women drive could help the Saudi economy.

Low oil prices have limited the government jobs that many Saudis have long relied on, and the kingdom is trying to push more citizens, including women, into private sector employment. But some working Saudi women say hiring private drivers to get them to and from work eats up much of their pay, diminishing the incentive to work.

In recent years, many women have come to rely on ride-sharing apps like Uber and Careem to gain some freedom of movement.

Many of the kingdom's professionals and young people will welcome the change, viewing it as a step to making life in the country a bit more like life elsewhere.

Manal al-Sharif, a Saudi women's rights advocate who filmed herself driving in 2011 and posted the footage to YouTube to protest the law, celebrated the announcement on Tuesday.

Ms. Sharif was instrumental in organizing groups of women for collective protests to demand an end to the ban on female drivers. She was arrested at the time for taking part in the actions, and later wrote a book about her experience. She now lives in Australia.

But despite celebrating the success for female drivers, she said the next campaign would be to end guardianship laws.

The royal decree, read by an announcer of state television and signed by King Salman, said traffic laws would be amended, including to allow the government to issue driver's licenses "to men and women alike."

The decree said a high-level ministerial committee was being formed to study other issues that needed to be addressed for the change to take place. For example, the police will have to be trained to interact with women in a way that they rarely do in Saudi Arabia, a society where men and women who are not related have little contact.

The committee has 30 days to provide its recommendations, the decree said, so that the new policy can be carried out starting on June 24, 2018.

The decree said that the majority of the Council of Senior Scholars — the kingdom's top clerical body, whose members are appointed by the king — had agreed that the government could allow women to drive if done in accordance with Shariah law.

How cycling is keeping the fight for women's rights moving in Saudi Arabia

Baraah Luhaid is determined to cycle freely, and she is encouraging other women to join Spokes Hub, her gender-inclusive cycling community.

By Sophie Hemery

The Guardian (11.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2wVXBwz> - Saudi Arabia remains one of the world's most repressive countries for women, where a man's consent is obligatory for women to access human rights, and feminist activists risk arrest. Some changes are creeping in: King Salman has loosened the grip of male guardianship, and is encouraging women to work. But they are still not allowed to drive.

There are, however, women who refuse to be still. Twenty-five-year-old Baraah Luhaid has always loved cycling. But although women's cycling was legalised in 2013, it is only allowed in parks or on beaches, and only with a male guardian present. Luhaid is striving to get women – and the fight for women's rights – moving. She founded Saudi Arabia's first gender-inclusive cycling community and business, Spokes Hub, last year, and now runs the kingdom's only cycling shop, with a cafe and workshops, for women.

As a Saudi woman peddling counterculture, Luhaid has long known that she would have to embrace the spirit of "I'll do it myself". After graduation, she longed to work in a bike shop – but no one would hire a woman. So last year, she went on a cycling trip to China with her brother. She returned to Riyadh determined to ride freely, but met with roadblocks. For one, her abaya – a traditional long, black robe – kept getting caught in the chains of her bike.

"But that wasn't the most challenging part," she says. "It's the cultural barriers." People regularly roll down their windows and shout insults and she is routinely stopped by the police. "Last week I was stopped because someone complained I was causing offence," she laughs.

"When I started cycling, my best friends said: 'Baraah, if we see you, we're gonna Snapchat you, and we're gonna laugh – you're a girl, you're not supposed to do this,'" she says. And, apart from her sister and brother – "one of very few male Saudi feminists" –, her family have been cautious. "My parents have a different mentality, and were worried about how the more conservative family would react," she says. Her dream is for all Saudi women to cycle freely, but she has had to tread carefully. "Originally, I was confronted with aggression and negativity," she says. Some women feared she would lead their daughters astray. Lacking allies, she decided to lead by example, and soon found that people came to her.

Since opening a women's cycling centre was untenable, both legally and socially, Spokes Hub originally catered exclusively for men and remains located at the university her brother attends. As such, Luhaid is barred from her own business. She has found workarounds to include women and girls – such as offering Spokes Hub services from the back of a van. She has even designed a cycling abaya with legs, which is about to be patented.

In order to attract support, Spokes Hub can not be described as being "for women", and her brother often has to represent the business. "Investors chuckle when they hear 'female CEO of a sports business'," says Luhaid. But while having to dilute her feminism can be disheartening, Luhaid finds comfort and inspiration in those who came before her. She devours books like Sue Macy's *Wheels of Change*, which charts the role that cycling has played in the women's rights movement.

Spokes Hub has recently won a kingdom-wide prize for start-ups, and Princess Reema – deputy president of Saudi Arabia's Women's Sports Authority – has publicly endorsed the project.

"I'm standing against something bigger than I originally thought," says Luhaid. "When I advocate for women's cycling, I'm advocating for women's independence. Changing core beliefs requires slow, consistent work," she says. "It's challenging, but someone has to start."

Saudi Arabia Women's Day: Saudi women fight against the odds to celebrate first Women's Day

The three-day gathering for the celebration was held at the King Fahd Cultural Centre in the capital of Riyadh.

By Namrata Tripathi

International Business Times (06.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2k627Fz> - Saudi Arabia celebrated its first Women's Day during a three-day gathering at King Fahd Cultural Centre in the capital of Riyadh. It comes as a big surprise from an Islamic kingdom that's ultra-conservative and where women are not allowed to have many liberties like driving a car.

The three-day gathering featured speakers, who talked about women's rights in the Saudi kingdom and advocated an end to the prevalent male guardianship system in the country.

Reports state that the female members of the Saudi royal family also attended the event and Princess Al-Jawhara bint Fahd Al-Saud hosted a discussion on women's roles in education.

"We want to celebrate the Saudi woman and her successful role, and remind people of her achievements in education, culture, medicine, literature and other areas," Mohammed Al-Saif, a spokesman for the centre, told Arab News.

The country has a bad reputation when it comes to women's rights. Saudi Arabia ranked 134 out of 145 countries for gender equality last year, according to World Economic Forum's 2015 Global Gender Gap report. It is the only country in the world where women are not allowed to drive any vehicle and cannot get a driving licence.

The law says that all women must have a male guardian who can give them permission to travel abroad, to study and even to marry. They cannot do any of these things without male guidance.

According to a Human Rights Watch report on male guardianship, woman's life is controlled by a man from birth until death in Saudi Arabia. Women have fought long and hard in the country for their rights and there have been limited reforms to the outdated laws over the years to reduce the male control over women.

The reforms from 2009 to 2013 allowed women to work without seeking any male's permission and made domestic abuse an offence, the report stated.

A twice-divorced Saudi mother of six reinterprets Islamic law

Fox News (07.11.2016) - <http://fxn.ws/2fPPbBH> - When Souad al-Shammary posted a series of tweets about the thick beards worn by Saudi clerics, she never imagined she would land in jail.

She put up images of several men with beards: An Orthodox Jew, a hipster, a communist, an Ottoman Caliph, a Sikh, and a Muslim. She wrote that having a beard was not what made a man holy or a Muslim. And she pointed out that one of Islam's staunchest critics during the time of Prophet Muhammad had an even longer beard than him.

The frank comments are typical of this twice-divorced mother of six and graduate of Islamic law, who is in many ways a walking challenge to taboos in deeply conservative Saudi Arabia. Raised a devout girl in a large tribe where she tended sheep, al-Shammary is now a 42-year-old liberal feminist who roots her arguments in Islam, taking on Saudi Arabia's powerful religious establishment.

She has paid a price for her opinions. She spent three months in prison without charge for "agitating public opinion." She has been barred by the government from traveling abroad. Her co-founder of the online forum Free Saudi Liberals Network, blogger Raif Badawi, is serving a 10-year prison sentence and was publicly lashed 50 times. Her father disowned her in public.

None of it was enough to keep her quiet.

"I have rights that I don't view as against my religion," says al-Shammary. "I want to ask for these rights, and I want those who make decisions to hear me and act."

Across the Arab world, female Islamic scholars and activists have long been pushing for interpretations of Shariah law that allow women more freedom. They hold that Islam considers men and women as equals before God, but centuries of selective interpretation have twisted its spirit.

"Discrimination came from a reading of the religion, not the religion itself," says Olfa Youssef, a professor of Islamic studies in Tunisia and member of the Musawah global movement of Muslim feminists.

Al-Shammary is one of the most vocal and high-profile religious and women's rights activists within Saudi Arabia. Advocates here are demanding an end to so-called male guardianship rules that essentially treat women as minors, and recently sent a petition to King Salman that garnered about 14,700 signatures.

"She's very sure of what she's saying — she doesn't hesitate," says Sahar Nassief, a friend and fellow Saudi activist. "She literally comes from a Bedouin environment, a desert environment. She's very proud of her background, but this makes her a bit blunt with everyone and very blunt in what she says."

The boldness is evident in how she looks and carries herself.

At a little past 10 p.m., al-Shammary arrives at a relaxed rooftop restaurant in the coastal city of Jiddah in a multi-colored abaya, the loose robe all women in Saudi Arabia must wear in public. But unlike the black abayas of most, hers is a rainbow of gold, beige and bronze stripes. Her auburn-dyed hair, infused with subtle but trendy streaks of blue, purposefully and willfully peaks out from under a loosely wrapped tan headscarf. Her pink lip gloss is shiny, her nails painted dark red.

She counters what she calls the views of some women that all of life is just for "worship, worship, worship."

"You can wear lipstick and take care of your looks," she says. "I would say to them: This isn't forbidden."

Al-Shammary grew up the daughter of a peasant farmer in Ha'il, a landlocked province north of the capital, Riyadh. As the eldest of 12 children, she was in charge of the sheep.

She was not just religious but a practicing Salafi, a Muslim who adheres to a literalist interpretation of Shariah. She even had leanings toward Sayyid Qutb, whose books are banned across much of the Arab world because extremists use them to justify killing Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

She was deeply affected by the wars in Afghanistan and Bosnia, where Muslim men and boys were massacred. It was also at this time that the Sahwa Movement, or Islamic Awakening, was reaching its peak in Saudi Arabia. Conservatives demanded a bigger role for the clergy in government, and students no longer sang folk songs or performed traditional dance in schools. Women began wearing the full face veil even in communities where it wasn't the custom. Segregation of the sexes became more entrenched.

Al-Shammary had little exposure to the outside world in Ha'il. There were no malls, no satellite television receivers and no movie theaters in sight. Her hobby was listening to the news bulletin on the radio, writing it out and reading it back to her father. She also listened to conservative sermons on tapes shared among neighbors and friends.

"Around the world, stars are artists, actors, comedians, musicians. Our stars were religious men," she says.

She graduated from the University of Ha'il with a degree in Islamic studies and became a public school teacher. She spanked girls if she heard them singing, and worked closely with other women to raise money for Sunni jihadis in Afghanistan fighting Communist Soviet forces.

At 17, she married a man twice her age from the same tribe, who offered her financial stability. She had a girl, Yara, and was divorced at 20.

She re-married, to the chief judge in Ha'il who'd overseen her divorce proceedings, a man of prominence and religious stature as head of the Shariah courts there. He had other wives and children, even grandchildren. Most importantly, though, he had no objections to her daughter staying with her.

"He was older than my father," she says. "It wasn't love but a feeling of security."

In the end, it did not protect her.

Al-Shammary's journey to activism began on the day her daughter was taken from her.

Almost as soon as Yara turned seven, her ex-husband gained custody. Since al-Shammary had remarried, the court ruled that the girl should live with her father rather than in a house with another man.

"When they took her and said, 'this is Allah's will' and 'this is Islam', this is when my internal rebellion was sparked," says al-Shammary. "There is no way that there is a God in this universe that would accept this injustice and this pain on the basis that I am a woman."

Her ex-husband rejected tribal mediation as an alternative. Her husband, the judge, refused to interfere and wouldn't allow her to appeal, citing Shariah law. Her parents backed the court's decision and told her to be patient; it was the path to heaven.

During long walks in Ha'il's hills and farms, al-Shammary stood under the open sky, refusing to believe that God could want a mother separated from her child.

For eight years, she fought her parents, her community and anyone who stood between her and Yara, whom she wasn't able to see. She talked about the case in television interviews. She tried several times to whisk her daughter away after school, but was always stopped by authorities. Her ex-husband moved Yara to a farm outside the city to live in isolation with her grandmother.

"I became crazy, but in front of my parents and my husband the judge, and the tribal community around him, and because of my position in the community and my name, I was expected to just sit like this and be a hero," she says, making an expressionless face and clasping her hands.

She had five children from her second marriage, but it wasn't long before she was divorced for a second time. And nothing made up for the loss of Yara.

"I prayed for a miracle to come down from the sky," she says. "I'd open the Quran. From the first verse on the first page to the last verse on the last page, there isn't a single thing that says, keep a daughter from her mother."

When Yara's father fell ill and the grandmother passed away, he finally allowed her, then 16, to live with her mother again. Al-Shammary relocated to the more liberal city of Jiddah with all her children finally under one roof.

She used her knowledge of Shariah by trying her hand at being a legal adviser for women in need, whom she had power of attorney to represent in court. She grew impatient with the judicial system, certain that it came down to personal connections or the whims of male judges.

Sometimes her advice was more Machiavellian than pious. Once she told a friend of hers to wear some make-up, find out which judge was slated to oversee her case, and then cry in front of him and plead for her court date to be moved up. It worked.

She shared her thoughts online on how Islam sees people, including women, as born free and equal. She began reading about liberalism. Although many in Saudi Arabia equate liberalism with heresy, al-Shammary began describing herself as a liberal, saying it was "a translation of the spirit of Islam."

So began a war of words — and of images.

After she posted the pictures of men with beards, she was called a hypocrite, a disbeliever, wicked and evil. Sheikh Abdullah al-Manee, a member of Saudi Arabia's highest religious council, described her as "malicious" and called for her speedy trial. He told the state-linked Sabq newspaper that "Souad al-Shammary is a criminal and she will be held accountable for her transgressions against the prophet."

Her outspokenness and her appearances on television talk shows without a face veil were not easy on her family in Ha'il. Her younger brother, Fayez, recalls being told by a community elder: "You aren't a man. How can you allow your sister to behave like this?"

Fayez says he left Ha'il for about seven years because the comments became unbearable. His marriage proposal to a girl from another tribe was rejected because of his sister's reputation. He also came to blows with one of his younger brothers who cursed her flagrant disregard for social norms, with the two ending up in the hospital.

He describes the moment she posted pictures online with her hair showing.

"She opened a door that I couldn't defend," he said.

Even Yara opposed her at first.

"I was somehow against the idea. Like, mom, you are an activist? You are a human rights activist? You are women's activist? What does that even mean?" Yara asked. "I was so, so scared."

Kids at school would taunt her sons. In turn, they sometimes lashed out against their mother, says Fayeze. Yara said they support their mother but also question how far she has taken her activism.

Despite prominent figures calling for al-Shammari's arrest and trial, she didn't think it could happen. She was sure she had not committed a crime.

"I hadn't crossed the line of Shariah," she says. "I am a graduate of Shariah."

The authorities thought otherwise.

After several rounds of interrogation, she was detained at the women's section of Jeddah's Briman prison on October 28, 2014. She was accused of agitating public opinion. She was never tried or convicted.

In prison, al-Shammari continued her advocacy behind bars, telling women that music is permissible and explaining their legal rights. She says female Muslim missionaries began appearing in prison more often, telling women their time there was the will of God. The television was always turned onto the religious Majd channel.

Al-Shammari wondered what would come first: Her reading the Quran front to back, or her release from prison.

She was released from detention on January 29, 2015 — before she could finish reading the Quran. She had to sign a pledge to reduce her activism. And a male relative, Fayeze, had to sign for her release.

She continues to tweet to her more than 207,000 followers, though she says she weighs her words more carefully than before. She acknowledges being brash and unwavering by nature, first as a conservative Salafi and then as a liberal. Her brazenness, she says, is a part of her character.

It has also helped her succeed in her goals. Fayeze notes that the right of women to have their own identity cards, for example, would not have happened without people like his sister speaking out, at a cost.

Yara supports her mother's activism, although she still wishes al-Shammari would not give others ammunition against her by arguing about the hijab or with influential religious figures.

"She is so encouraging to me," Yara says. "She survived stuff that you can't survive."

Thousands of Saudis sign petition to end male guardianship of women

Protest movement seeks to end Saudi Arabia law requiring women have permission of a male guardian to travel, marry or do other fundamental tasks

The Guardian (26.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2dmQGWN> - Thousands of Saudis have signed an online petition calling for the government to abolish the country's guardianship system, which prevents women from engaging in fundamental tasks without the permission of a male relative.

"Women should be treated as a full citizen," said activist Aziza Al-Yousef who, along with other activists, has been fighting against the guardianship system for a decade.

"This is not only a women's issue, this is also putting pressure on normal men ... this is not an issue for women only," she told the Guardian.

Under Saudi law, women require the permission of a male guardian to travel, marry, or exit prison and it may be needed to be granted employment or access to healthcare.

A guardian is typically a woman's father or her husband if she is married; a widow may have to seek permission from her son if she has no other men of age in her life.

But in recent years, a growing protest movement has sought to end the system. Yousef and other prominent activists started holding workshops and performing studies on the religious validity of the guardianship system five years ago. The campaign picked up steam this summer after Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a blistering report on the system.

The report gave birth to a hashtag #IAmMyOwnGuardian, which spread awareness on the issue.

Hala Aldosari, researcher in women's health, who wrote the petition and worked on the HRW report, said the hashtag gained support among women of all ages and backgrounds.

On the two days leading up to the petition, an estimated 2,500 women sent direct telegrams to the Saudi King's office imploring him to end the guardianship system. The petition racked up 14,682 signatures after promoting it on Twitter, Aldosari said.

Saudi Arabia's government agreed to abolish the guardianship system twice – in 2009 and 2013 – after a review by the United Nation's Human Rights Council. It instituted some reforms by, for instance, making it easier for women to work, appointing women to the King's advisory board, and allowing women to vote and run as candidates in municipal elections. However, these reforms had limitations and stopped short of providing women basic rights.

Earlier this year, the government outlined its Vision 2030, an economic plan to reduce the country's dependency on oil, which called for more involvement of women in the labor market. However, the guardianship system runs counter to that, as some employers require women to submit permission from their guardians. Engaging Saudi women in the economy is vital as they currently outnumber men in higher education and will be key to weaning the country off oil.

According to Hamid M Khan, deputy director of The Rule of Law Collaborative at the University of South Carolina, many members of the Saudi royal family are open to the idea of reform but senior clerics in the country – whose approval would likely be needed to deconstruct the system – are averse to change.

“Many in the royal family – not all but there is a significant number in the royal family – actually view this as a bit exhausting,” Khan said.

According to Khan, the law stems from an understanding of the Qur’an which dictates classes of males which one is forbidden to marry. Some Islamic jurisprudence scholars have made the case that any woman should be accompanied by a guardian when in the presence of any man not on that list.

“This notion of guardianship is not necessarily embedded in the Qur’an but it’s based upon the jurist view that there are certain patriarchal understandings about the necessity of guarding a woman from these men,” Khan explained. Beyond laws dictating marriage contracts, no other Muslim majority country employs guardianship laws similar to Saudi Arabia’s.

Yousef said some prominent Saudi clerics have also signed the petition, to indicate their belief that the system is not derived from Islamic law. Aldosari said that many more clerics came out after the 26 October 2013 movement, where Saudi women pushed for the right to drive.

“They all declared that this is not religion, this is all government rules and it should be changed,” Yousef said.

The women tweeting for their freedom in Saudi Arabia

By Donie O'Sullivan

CNN (16.09.2016) - <http://cnn.it/2ddAYcR> - *Editor's note: The names of the women featured in this report have been changed to protect their identities.*

"I'm a dead soul in a living body and I hope that doesn't happen to my little sister," Sara, a Saudi woman, tells CNN.

Sara is one of a growing number of Saudi women who are challenging the country's male guardianship system using social media.

In Saudi Arabia, every woman has a male guardian -- often a father or husband, sometimes a brother or son -- who has the power to make a range of critical decisions on their behalf.

After speaking to dozens of Saudi women, Human Rights Watch found in July that the system is "the most significant impediment to realizing women's rights in the country."

Tweeting for change

The HRW report, which detailed how women must obtain permission from a male guardian to travel, marry, and sometimes to work or access health care, was followed by a social media campaign, #TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship.

By September, the Arabic version of the hashtag had taken on a life of its own, with women across the country risking the wrath of their guardians, or even persecution.

Some, dressed in abayas, post selfies holding signs with short messages like, "Slavery comes in many shapes and forms: Male guardianship is one." Others post pictures of the cover of their Saudi passport with statements like, "I'm a prisoner and my crime is that I'm a Saudi woman."

Getting noticed

The women are being noticed. The country's most senior religious authority, at the start of September, the Grand Mufti, called the social media campaign a "crime targeting the Saudi and Muslim society," and said the guardianship system should stay.

'Women here are trapped'

"Women here are trapped, they can't do anything. It depends on your guardian, if he is OK, and if he is a good man he'll let you work, or let you study, which is a basic right. If he's not, he's going to prevent you from that," said a Saudi woman who spoke to CNN on the condition of anonymity.

Her comments reflect those of others and the findings of the HRW report. A woman's fate, regardless of her socioeconomic status, rests in the hands of her guardian, rendering adult women legal minors who cannot make decisions for themselves.

The Saudi government did not respond to CNN's requests for comment.

Women are initially under the guardianship of their father, until they marry and guardianship transfers to the husband.

Breaking free

Breaking free from an abusive guardian is very difficult, HRW found. Filing a police complaint against a guardian can be difficult, and on some occasions when a woman went to file a complaint, police called or sent the women back to their guardians.

Guardians must also approve the issuing or renewal of passports, restricting a woman's ability to travel.

Jana, a Saudi woman who spoke to CNN, was studying outside Saudi Arabia for several years. On a recent visit home her family informed her that she would not be allowed to leave to complete her studies.

"They took my passport from me, they took everything from me, even my documents," she said.

Salma, a Saudi woman now living in the West and seeking asylum, said she wouldn't feel safe if she returned home.

"Nobody takes you seriously unless you are male, legally. I can't do anything no matter how old I am. So if my father doesn't approve it, it's not going to happen."

"I gave up many of my dreams because I know for sure my father won't approve them. And the system is on his side, so why fight him, right? One of them was being a horse rider and learning the piano. These are simple wishes for a girl living in the West, but in my culture these hobbies are provoking our conservative culture," she said.

But even thousands of miles away, Salma still feels the impact of the guardianship system. A recent visit to the Saudi embassy to renew her passport required a notarized signature from her father, her guardian. Luckily for her, he obliged, something he wouldn't have done had he known she was seeking asylum, she said.

Pressure on men

Myriam, another woman in Saudi Arabia who spoke to CNN, said she came from what was considered an "open-minded" family there. Myriam's guardian, her father, allows her to go to college, and is privately supportive of a change in the country's law.

"My father thinks that [the guardianship system] is really a problem, he acknowledges that and he always tells me 'If I did anything wrong, if I treated you wrong, just because you are a female, tell me so,' she said. "He knows that the way that we live is not the right way."

However, Myriam's father doesn't express his views openly because he fears backlash from others in the community.

Another woman told CNN that her father felt pressured into not letting her study abroad.

"My dad isn't really very conservative himself but social pressures sometimes get the best of him," she said.

Attempts at reform

Saudi Arabia has made limited attempts at reforms in women's rights in recent years. Last year's local elections were the first in the country's history in which women were allowed to run as candidates and vote.

"The practice of male guardianship in its many forms impairs and in some cases nullifies women's exercise of a host of human rights," Human Rights Watch said, including violating the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, which the country ratified in 2000.

"Saudi Arabia is lying to the world," said Jana, one of the Saudi women who spoke to CNN. "Nothing is changing."

She said the country's attempts at reforms have been piecemeal and only to keep the international community off their backs.

Calls for change from home and abroad

A print, designed in 2012 by a Saudi artist who goes by the name "Ms Saffaa," has re-emerged, becoming one of the most shared images of the current social media campaign.

"I am not at all surprised to see my work gain so much attention since the campaign was launched," said the artist, who lives outside the country.

"It is a work that reflects a deeply personal position informed by a personal history and this intimate connection to the topic."

Saffaa described the current grassroots social media campaign as "unprecedented" and "unparalleled," and said it is "not going to stop unless the Saudi government abolishes male guardianship laws."

Here's why Saudi Arabia is loosening its restrictions on women

By Yu-Ming Liou and Paul Musgrave

The Washington Post (27.06.2016) - <http://wapo.st/29J7KSI> - Why is Saudi Arabia — a highly conservative state where very little changes — suddenly embracing various kinds of reform, including loosening its repressive gender policies?

Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has launched a media offensive to sell [Vision 2030](#), which *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* [called](#) “the \$2 trillion project to get Saudi Arabia’s economy off oil.” At the same time, the monarchy is loosening restrictions on social policy. The religious police have been [stripped](#) of the power to arrest. In December, Saudi women [cast their first-ever votes](#). Last month, the Justice Ministry [announced](#) that women would be allowed to view their marriage contracts. And the deputy crown prince has hinted that women [may soon formally be granted the right to drive](#).

Conventional wisdom says Vision 2030 [is driven by low oil prices](#) and soaring military expenditures caused by [Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen](#). The moves to liberalize Saudi society, by contrast, are often explained as springing from generational turnover or a gradual evolution in social attitudes.

Separating fiscal and social policies in that way, however, overlooks how the kingdom’s finances and its policies toward women are linked.

In [a forthcoming article in *International Studies Quarterly*](#), we argue that autocrats in oil-rich states strike bargains with important societal interest groups. Rulers impose repressive social policies to secure the backing of key groups — as the Saudi royal family has done with the Wahhabist religious authorities. If those social policies are being withdrawn, it means that the monarchy is trying to rewrite that bargain.

How Saudi Arabia restricts women’s rights – even though doing so is unpopular

Recent reforms to Saudi social policy may seem small, but they are important in the context of Saudi Arabia’s [many harsh and restrictive social policies](#). Such restrictions touch almost every aspect of Saudi life. Some are reported in the West as frivolous examples of Saudi strangeness, like when a cleric issued [a fatwa against snowmen](#). More seriously, the kingdom enforces harsh constraints on women (see, for instance, the Week’s list of [“eleven things women in Saudi Arabia cannot do”](#)).

Observers often describe these policies as reflecting the country’s religious heritage. But that’s not quite right.

As [Madawi al-Rasheed](#) and others have argued, for many Saudi subjects these policies represent a radical, state-sponsored program aimed at transforming their culture. Many restrictive Saudi social policies derive from specific religious traditions that originated in [the Najd region](#), the center of the Arabian Peninsula and the heartland of the royal house. Those policies have been imposed on other, more cosmopolitan regions of the country (such as the Red Sea and Persian Gulf coasts), requiring major changes such as [rebuilding vast parts of cities like Mecca](#). These policies aim to enforce not only Hanbali-Wahhabi religious orthodoxy but also prescribed uniformity in behavior, what [Nabil Mouline calls “orthopraxy.”](#)

Moreover, there is little evidence that a conservative Saudi public has demanded these policies, which can be [quite controversial](#). True, many Saudi women support at least some of these restrictions, but many would also like much greater autonomy than they currently possess. Indeed, public opinion surveys show that Saudis hold similar views as citizens of other Muslim-majority countries that adopt far less restrictive policies toward women.

Measuring the Wahhabists' influence by looking at whether women can work in lingerie shops

One recent debate over [whether women could work in lingerie shops](#) illustrates the divide between the kingdom's women and the religious establishment. Religious authorities argued against letting women work in these stores, insisting that it gave them too much independence and power. But, as a result, the stores had to be staffed by foreign male workers — which many Saudi women saw as both immodest and economically threatening.

The monarchy issued royal decrees directing the Labor Ministry to insist that the lingerie shops' foreign male sales clerks be replaced by Saudi women. When women took those jobs, however, the religious police harassed and threatened them. The kingdom's highest-ranking cleric, Grand Mufti Sheik Abdulaziz al-Sheik, called the policy "[a crime and disrespectful](#)." And when the labor minister refused to rescind the policy, a group of leading clerics threatened to [pray that he develop cancer](#) (like his predecessor).

Many Saudis are unhappy with the gender restrictions in part because they're so costly. They don't just constrict women's lives, they also force Saudi families to pay billions of dollars (or, rather, riyals) every year — and impose costs on Saudi society as a whole.

For instance, at the personal level, because women can't drive, many Saudi families have to employ a driver, requiring them to hire foreign workers instead. At the macro level, because women can't work, much of the kingdom's labor force is idle, which may reduce per capita GDP by up to 38 percent.

Saudi social policies are the regime's survival strategies — because they "pay off" powerful interest groups

Using government funds to regulate women's lives isn't very popular, isn't very traditional and is tremendously expensive. So why do Saudi rulers pursue such inefficient policies?

Because of the bargain that the Saudi state makes to trade oil revenue for the support of politically powerful groups. This bargain comes at the expense of women's economic, social and political development. (This theory builds on earlier work by UCLA professor Michael Ross, summarized here by Chris Blattman.)

Like the other oil-rich governments of the region, the Saudi regime rests on two simultaneous bargains.

The first is between the government and the population at large. In exchange for giving up formal representation in their government, Saudi citizens get a raft of state-subsidized goods, ranging from housing to health care to subsidized gasoline. It's the inverse of the U.S. Revolutionary War rallying cry of "no taxation without representation." In democracies, representation brings taxation. In rentier states,

freedom from taxation — and the presence of subsidies — buys acceptance of a lack of representation. That's one reason Saudi subjects pay no income tax.

The second bargain connects rulers and other powerful interest groups. Rulers want to remain in office as long as possible, both because they receive large sums from staying in office through stipends, forced loans and other forms of corruption, and because losing office would mean exile or death. Such were the fates of other monarchs of oil-rich Middle Eastern countries: The last Iraqi king was killed, along with his family, in a 1958 revolution, while the shah of Iran died in exile in Cairo.

For their part, powerful interest groups want as large a share of the oil revenue as possible. Rulers know that if these groups withhold support for the government, a successful coup might result. If potential rebels offered them a larger piece of the pie than the incumbent, such a coup might be profitable for them. To buy their loyalty, oil-rich governments make sure that powerful businessmen, the military and intelligence services, and (especially in Saudi Arabia) religious authorities receive constant and large payouts from oil revenue.

Many agree that the astonishing political stability of the oil-rich Arab monarchies stems from these bargains. We think, however, that this picture overlooks one big thing: Some elite groups demand policy changes in addition to extracting money from the incumbents.

In Saudi Arabia, the regime's response to such non-monetary demands includes supporting religious education, hiring religious police, the international export of Wahhabi beliefs, and imposing strictly monitored behavior codes based on gender. Saudi Arabia is not the only nation to make such a bargain. Iran and some other oil-rich Arab states display similar tendencies. To be sure, Saudi Arabia is an outlier in how closely religion and the state are integrated, as well as in the vast amounts of its oil revenue, which OPEC puts at \$285 billion.

Lower oil prices mean that Saudi Arabia can no longer "afford" its strict social policies

This system worked as long as the monarchy could underwrite both bargains. When oil prices were high, rulers could afford to provide costly policies to satisfy ideological interest groups — such as idling half of the workforce and imposing costs on families — while also tossing out the largesse of subsidies and social benefits to maintain the first bargain with the people as a whole.

Now oil prices are expected to remain low for years. And so the monarchy can't afford to keep paying for both bargains.

In other words, just like Vision 2030, changing Saudi policies toward women and society spring from fiscal challenges, not moral evolution. And that suggests the Saudi monarchy faces tough times politically. It's tricky to take benefits away from groups that have become used to demanding and getting what they want. Rewriting the basic bargains that underpin the regime carries the obvious risk that another potential regime might offer better deals — and take power.

Those factors are why even tentative and limited reforms change the relationship between the monarchy and the religious establishment. An accretion of seemingly trivial changes, such as enabling [movie theaters to return to Saudi Arabia](#), may add up to the Saudi version of [perestroika](#). But, as Tocqueville wrote and the Soviets learned, the most dangerous moment for an authoritarian regime is when it starts to reform.

No tight 'abaya' in Saudi soon

HRWF Statement: The proposed law presents several challenges to the advancement of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. If the reason for further restricting women's dress is the bad behaviour of men, then clearly there is a problem within Saudi society regarding the treatment of women with respect. The Saudi government would do much better to sanction the offenders than to punish the victims. Women should not have to hide themselves in order to be safe in society and free from harassment. This legislation is ill-conceived, misdirected and vaguely-worded. It should be vigorously opposed in the forthcoming debate in the Shura.

Emirates247 (30.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1oBe0jO> - Saudi Arabia is set to ban women from wearing tight abayas (gowns) in public places following a surge in harassment incidents, a newspaper reported on Wednesday.

The Shura (appointed parliament) in the conservative Gulf Kingdom will debate the decision shortly at the request of a female member, Sada said.

It quoted "informed sources" as saying the decision would authorize the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the country's feared religious police, to arrest woman who violate the new rule.

"The decision follows a large increase in incidents involving harassment and molestation of women," it said.

"According to the sources, the Shura is expected to unanimously vote in favor of the new rule which bans women from wearing tight abayas in shopping malls and other public places in the Kingdom."