

# SAUDI ARABIA: 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.”