



violence is not our culture

the global campaign to stop violence against women in the name of 'culture'

SAUDI ARABIA: WE SAY “YES” TO WOMEN’S FULL ENJOYMENT OF THEIR RIGHTS

The Violence is Not our Culture (VNC) Campaign welcomes long awaited and recent reforms announced by King Abdullah Bin-Abd-al-Aziz Al Saud, that promise to give Saudi Arabian women the rights to vote and run for office in municipal council elections, and to become full voting members of the next Shura council.¹ The promise to increase women’s participation in civic life is a tribute to women’s efforts on the ground who have been campaigning inside the country, despite strict and rigid opposition.

However the measure remains, in King Abdullah’s own words, a “cautious reform”. Women’s right to vote will not take effect until the next elections in 2015, and women will become full voting members in the Shura council as members only from the next term. Furthermore, women’s rights to autonomy and broader public participation remain precariously restricted in Saudi Arabia.

Just one day following King Abdullah’s announcement, a Saudi woman named Shaima Jastaina was sentenced by religious court to 10 lashes for defying the country’s ban on female drivers. Shaima was found guilty of ‘driving without permission’ in Jeddah last July.

There are no written laws that restrict women from driving alone in Saudi Arabia. Rather, the ban is rooted in conservative religious and cultural interpretations that promote a system of male guardianship and control over women. These systems deny women the full enjoyment of their basic human rights, especially the rights to freedoms of movement, speech and association.

The driving ban, for example, is claimed to be a form of ‘women’s protection’. Though framed as a religious obligation, many groups – from women’s rights defenders to religious clerics – say the religious ‘justification’ is irrelevant, citing the Prophet Muhammad’s wives who rode camels and horses alone, the only transportation in their day. Saudi Arabia is the only country – Muslim or otherwise – that bans women from driving. The ban on Saudi women’s right to drive is part of a larger problem faced by Saudi women in their daily lives. Conservative guardianship actively criminalizes women’s autonomy, and cruel and degrading forms of punishment such as stoning and lashing continue to pose threats to women for alleged ‘crimes’, especially those that relate to their ‘moral conduct’ and sexuality.

¹ The Shura Council is an appointed consultative body which can review and oversee legislation in the country, but has no binding authoritative power in and of itself. For more information, see: <http://www.shura.gov.sa/wps/wcm/connect/ShuraEn/internet/Historical+BG/>

While the sentencing of Shaima to lashing is the first time a corporal punishment has been handed down for a violation of the driving ban, and was overturned by King Abdullah soon after, it underscores challenges and opportunities to ending gender-based discrimination and violence that lie ahead.

The sentence has been widely perceived by the public and progressive sectors within Saudi Arabia as a reaction by ultra-conservative religious forces to the increasing numbers of Saudi women defying the driving ban and asserting their rights to public participation. Yet it is precisely the popularity of the campaign calling for an end to the driving ban, along with the overturned sentence, which speaks to growing public and political support for women's autonomous rights. Even the Shura Council is now thoroughly reconsidering the ban, according to human rights advocates in the country.

VNC fully supports the sentiments expressed by many Saudi women's rights activists and allies, both within the country and abroad, who have welcomed these recent developments, but emphasize that broader reforms are necessary. In demanding an end to all violence against women 'justified' in the name of religion, culture or tradition, we renounce policies that continue to promote violent punishments and impose restrictions on Saudi women's enjoyment of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Such policies contradict Saudi Arabia's obligations under the international treaties by which it is bound, especially the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

We welcome the assurance by Saudi Arabia's representatives at the 2008 CEDAW Committee review that there is no contradiction in substance between CEDAW and Islamic Shari'a.² We call upon King Abdullah Bin Abd-al-Aziz Al Saud to pursue the reforms he introduced in line with Saudi Arabia's obligations under international law, particularly the [key reforms urged by the CEDAW Committee](#).³

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² See <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/CEDAWSR815.pdf> for the CEDAW Committee Review of Saudi Arabia's country report in 2008.

³ See the accompanying document on "Key Measures to End Gender-Based Discrimination and Violence Against Women in Saudi Arabia" here: <http://www.violenceisnotourculture.org/files/CEDAW-KeyMeasures-Saudi%20Arabia.pdf>.