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United Nations Human Rights Council: 25th Session (3rd to 28th March 2014)
Universal Periodic Review Report – Saudi Arabia, Wednesday 19th March 2014

Speaker: Cfi Representative, Josephine Macintosh

Mr President,

Saudi Arabia recently donated US\$1million to the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women¹, yet the situation of women in the country remains deplorable and the lack of implementation of recommendations² from the 2009 UPR makes the ones before us particularly urgent.

Saudi Arabia is suffering gender apartheid. The cornerstone of this patriarchal abuse is the male guardianship system.

Guardianship removes women's ability to make decisions, thus ensuring their subjugation. The male guardian – whether the father, brother, husband or even son – undertakes the decision-making regarding matters of body, health, marriage, and travel. This violates fundamental human rights³ and enables violence against women⁴.

In a state where judges and clerics are granted license to interpret cases, often to fit their own patriarchal prejudices, women remain unprotected and without a voice.

Removing male guardianship would have far-reaching positive ramifications, including greater access to healthcare and greater economic productivity⁵. Indeed, nearly 2 in 3 women are unemployed in Saudi Arabia⁶, due in part by the guardianship system that impedes applying for jobs and commuting to work⁷.

We welcome progress in women's rights and gender de-segregation, such as the co-educational King Abdullah University for Science and Technology. However, it is clear that this, along with the recent inclusion of women in the Shura Council⁸, will be in vain if male guardianship is not overturned.

We thus urge the Saudi government to move towards abolishing the system of guardianship and for the OHCHR and states⁹ that have submitted this recommendation to strictly monitor the process.

Thank-you, Mr President.

¹ Page 5, "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – Saudi Arabia". Available at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session25/Pages/ListReports.aspx> [Accessed 15 March 2014]

² Recommendations 18, 19, and 20 of the 2009 UPR. Available at: http://www.upr-info.org/IMG/pdf/Recommendations_to_Saudi_Arabia_2009.pdf [Accessed 15 March 2014]

³ Such as the right to movement, expression, healthcare, assembly, and justice.

⁴ "Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming from Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia", Human Rights Watch. Available at: http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudiArabia0408_1.pdf [Accessed 15 March 2014]

⁵ "Empowering women is smart economics", Ana Revenga and Sudhir Shetty, Finance & Development, March 2012, Vol. 49, No. 1, IMF. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2012/03/revenga.htm> [Accessed 15 March 2014]

⁶ Page 16, "Manpower research bulletin 2013 Round 1", Central Department of Statistics and Information. Available at:

http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=86&Itemid=113 [Accessed 15 March 2014]

⁷ "Saudi Arabia: Unfulfilled promises", Amnesty International. Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE23/018/2013/cn/bbe98d3b-81ed-4486-a535-3ba406861a16/mde230182013cn.html> [Accessed 15 March 2014]

⁸ Source: "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – Saudi Arabia". Available at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session25/Pages/ListReports.aspx> [Accessed 15 March 2014]

⁹ Denmark, Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Costa Rica, Greece, Italy, Sweden, Senegal, Uruguay, United Kingdom. Source: "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – Saudi Arabia". Available at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session25/Pages/ListReports.aspx> [Accessed 15 March 2014]

