



# Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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## Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Eighty-ninth session

### Summary record of the 2093rd meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 9 October 2024, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Ms. Peláez Narváez

## Contents

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention  
(continued)

*Fifth periodic report of Saudi Arabia*

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*The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.*

**Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (continued)**

*Fifth periodic report of Saudi Arabia (CEDAW/C/SAU/5; CEDAW/C/SAU/Q/5; CEDAW/C/SAU/RQ/5)*

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Saudi Arabia joined the meeting.*
2. **A representative of Saudi Arabia**, introducing her country's fifth periodic report (CEDAW/C/SAU/5), said that Saudi Arabia had engaged fully with the Committee and had provided support for its efforts to uphold the Convention, notably through a donation of \$120,000 to facilitate the preparation of draft general recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems.
3. The periodic report had been prepared on the basis of broad multi-stakeholder consultations by the standing committee for the drafting of reports, which had followed up on the Committee's previous concluding observations (CEDAW/C/SAU/CO/3-4), in cooperation with the relevant national authorities. As was evident from the report, most of the Committee's recommendations had been implemented.
4. Significant legislative and other reforms had been introduced during the reporting period to promote women's empowerment, which was among the key objectives of the Saudi Vision 2030 programme. Since the adoption of the programme, some 150 reforms and qualitative developments had been brought about in the field of human rights, of which more than 50 were related to women's rights. The reforms had included amendments to the law on travel documents to enable women to be issued a passport and travel abroad on an equal footing with men, and changes to the Civil Status Law, thus ensuring gender equality when it came to obtaining identity cards and family records and to reporting births, deaths, marriages and divorces, and to the Social Insurance Law, setting the retirement age for both sexes at 60 years. The Labour Law had been amended more than any other domestic law, including to eliminate labour discrimination against women in all areas, from job advertisements and recruitment, to benefits and training. The Law on Protection from Abuse had been amended, enhancing the assistance provided to victims of violence, enabling them or a proxy to recover identity papers and personal belongings from their place of residence and doubling the penalties for the perpetrators of abuse in serious cases.
5. The Anti-Harassment Law, promulgated in 2018, was consistent with the purpose and intent of the Convention, as it helped to create a safe environment for women and girls. The new legislation, which included the Law on Evidence, the Personal Status Law, the Civil Transactions Code and the draft Criminal Code, represented a historic leap forward that would improve the predictability of judgments, boost the integrity, efficiency and performance of judicial bodies and increase the reliability of judicial procedures and oversight mechanisms. The new Personal Status Law had advanced the rights of women and girls by restricting the discretionary power of judges, who had traditionally relied on differing interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, and by setting a minimum age for marriage, giving mothers priority in child custody arrangements and removing the right of a guardian to prevent a woman from marrying her partner of choice.
6. During the period under review, Saudi Arabia had ratified the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), the Protection of Wages Convention, 1949 (No. 95) and the Hygiene (Commerce and Offices) Convention, 1964 (No. 120) of the International Labour Organization. Pursuant to Supreme Order No. 33322 of 18 April 2017, women were no longer required to obtain the approval of a guardian to access government services and procedures. The National Policy to Promote Equality of Opportunities and Treatment in Employment had been approved in January 2023 with the aims of promoting the labour market integration of disadvantaged groups and eliminating discrimination against them.
7. Vision 2030 was a comprehensive programme designed to build an ambitious nation, a vibrant society and a prosperous economy. One of its strategic goals was to increase women's participation in the labour market by improving the availability of childcare and

transportation services, supporting self-employment and part-time and remote work and providing employment opportunities to women in rural and remote areas. The Gender Balance Centre had been established to contribute to increasing women's labour market participation. According to figures from 2024, around 45 per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises in the country were owned by women.

8. During its G20 presidency in 2020, Saudi Arabia had made women's empowerment a priority and had launched the G20 Empower initiative, under which reports had been commissioned on women in private-sector leadership roles and on best practices for the promotion of women's career advancement in the private sector. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of women holding senior government posts had increased by 38 per cent and the number holding senior and middle management positions in the private sector had increased by 282 per cent. Thanks to efforts to promote women's entrepreneurship, the number of registered commercial entities owned by women and the number of women partners had risen to 103,315 and 155,608, respectively.

9. In 2023, the Ministry of Finance had unveiled an initiative to reduce the gender gap by ensuring that policies to promote women's empowerment were taken into consideration in the preparation of the State's general budget. Women currently accounted for 20 per cent of the members of the Shura Council and 50 per cent of the members of the Human Rights Commission. There were also six women ambassadors.

10. Thanks in part to an initiative launched by Prince Mohammed bin Salman, women's participation rate in the information and communications technology sector had increased to 25 per cent, from 7 per cent in 2017. In 2020, Saudi Arabia had received a global award for empowering women in that sector, from the International Telecommunication Union. In the judicial field, 250 employees of the Office of the Public Prosecutor and 3,538 employees of the Ministry of Justice were women, including over 100 who had supervisory responsibilities, and there were 2,136 women lawyers and 3,165 female trainee lawyers. Women had also participated actively in the security and military sectors and had played an important role in the evacuation of civilians of various nationalities from the Sudan since the start of the conflict in that country in mid-April 2023.

11. In 1961, there had been only four women university students. In 2024, almost half of graduates were women, 49.12 per cent of the 6 million public education students were female and over 50 per cent of the 1.5 million students enrolled in higher education courses and 40 per cent of the 51,000 students who had been awarded scholarships to study abroad were women. Saudi universities worked to create a supportive and stimulating learning environment for women, who were encouraged to study advanced scientific and technical disciplines. The Human Capability Development Programme had been launched in 2021 to promote equal access to education at all levels, from early childhood education to lifelong learning, with the participation of government agencies and the private and non-profit sectors. More than 1,000 educational projects had been set up across the country for the benefit of some 700,000 students, and efforts to increase the kindergarten enrolment rate continued apace. In the 2022 World Competitiveness Yearbook, published by the International Institute for Management Development, Saudi Arabia had ranked seventh among the G20 countries.

12. The Government had stepped up its efforts to ensure that women had access to comprehensive healthcare. The proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel had reached 99.8 per cent, while 99.7 per cent of mothers-to-be had at least one antenatal appointment. The 2024 Hologic Global Women's Health Index had ranked Saudi Arabia forty-fourth out of 143 countries. A hotline had been set up to receive reports of domestic violence, and government agencies and civil society organizations worked together to provide rapid response and victim referral services, conduct studies on violence against women and girls and develop strategies and policies to combat such violence.

13. Saudi Arabia used its leading role in the region to promote and protect women's rights by highlighting Islamic values that enhanced women's standing in society and by correcting misconceptions about the status of women in Islam. In 2023, it had hosted the International Conference on Women in Islam, convened by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the outcome document of which would serve as a road map for legislative reforms and initiatives to confront challenges related to women's rights in Islam. The Government believed that

women were important contributors to peace and security. Accordingly, it had invested close to \$700 million in 1,011 projects to boost women's participation in that sphere.

14. Saudi Arabia continued to fulfil its obligations under the human rights instruments to which it was a party, including the Convention. The Government was committed to pursuing reforms that empowered women and that enabled them to be active partners in development and to benefit from development on an equal footing with men.

*Articles 1–6*

15. **Ms. Haidar** said that, while the Government was to be commended for the significant legal and policy reforms it had undertaken in recent years to improve the situation of women, there was a need to ensure that those changes were effectively implemented and rooted in society. Challenges to gender equality persisted. They included the ill-treatment of women human rights activists and the failure to respect their freedom of expression; the guardianship system; the lack of protection for women migrant workers; the prevalence of domestic violence; and the continued imposition of the death penalty.

16. She wished to know whether the Government intended to amend the Basic Law of Governance of 1992 to explicitly guarantee equality between men and women and non-discrimination on the basis of gender, in line with article 1 of the Convention; whether it would reconsider the State party's reservations to articles 9 (2) and 29 (1) of the Convention; and whether it planned to establish a national human rights institution that was fully independent, compliant with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles) and accessible to all women who wanted to report human rights violations.

17. She would welcome information on the number of women judges; on any measures planned to ensure that women could access all judicial services without male guardians and could receive effective support from the authorities; on how the Government guaranteed that law enforcement and judicial officers handled cases in a gender-sensitive manner; on whether training was provided on gender-specific defences; and on any reforms envisaged to ensure that women's testimony in court was afforded the same weight as that of men.

18. It would be interesting to know whether the Government intended to repeal the Law on Countering Terrorism and the Financing Thereof and the Anti-Cybercrime Law. Failing that, did it intend to amend the two laws to bring their definitions of terrorism into line with international standards and ensure that the legitimate activities of women human rights defenders and all forms of peaceful activism were excluded from their scope?

19. She would be grateful if the delegation could provide data about women on death row, disaggregated by age, crime and nationality, and if it could indicate whether the Government intended to abolish the death penalty, particularly for women acting in self-defence against abusers. It would be of interest to the Committee to hear whether in December 2024 the Government would vote in favour of the General Assembly resolution for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. Details of any plans to enhance transparency in judicial proceedings and to make trials public in order to increase the accountability of judges would also be appreciated.

20. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that article 8 of the Basic Law made it clear that the law rested on the principles of transparency, justice and equality between all men and women. The Health Law, the Law on Persons with Disabilities and the Labour Law all contained provisions countering gender-based discrimination. The Convention had been incorporated into the law of the country. In 2016, a Cabinet decision had reaffirmed the State party's commitment to the observance of international law, and the country's legislation was aimed at protecting human rights in accordance with the international conventions and instruments to which it was a party. The definition of discrimination against women that figured in the Convention was thus already adopted in practice.

21. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the country currently had seven women judges and that the legal training required to be a judge was open to women.

22. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the State party ensured access to justice on an equal footing, in particular through article 47 of the Basic Law. Instructions on

affirmative action gave women access to the courts in matrimonial and divorce matters. Under article 36 of the Law on Criminal Procedure, defendants could give testimony from their homes. The family courts devoted a session to considering cases involving divorce, child custody, alimony and marriage documents, and both spouses were able to consult the court documentation. Judicial documents and submissions could be shared electronically through an app.

23. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the possibility of holding court proceedings online had resulted in improved access to justice for women, in particular for women in remote areas. The Government was considering whether to establish a national human rights institution based on the Paris Principles. The Human Rights Commission was independent; it was not subordinate to the executive branch, and its work was consistent with the principles of international human rights treaties. Its reports were submitted directly to the King. The Commission included a president, a vice-president and 24 members, from various sectors of society, all of whom were highly qualified in human rights. Its field offices in 13 provinces could receive complaints every day, around the clock, through a hotline and by telephone, but the delegation was unable to provide statistics on the exact number of complaints that it had handled. If the Commission found that a complaint was well-founded, it referred it to the competent authority. It advised the Government on all aspects of human rights and prepared an annual report on the human rights situation in the country. The Commission closely monitored the activities of government bodies to ensure the observance of human rights principles and expressed its opinion on draft legislation and existing laws. While the setting up of an organization representing civil society might be useful, past experience had shown that the Commission provided sufficient protection of human rights.

24. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that there were thousands of defenders of human rights, including women's rights, who were members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community associations. The peaceful exercise of their activities was guaranteed by law, provided that they did not disrupt public order, jeopardize public hygiene and health or impinge on the rights of others. It was not true that some persons had been imprisoned because they had exercised their freedom of expression or had advocated for human rights. If they had been incarcerated it was because they had committed criminal acts.

25. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that capital punishment was imposed only for the most serious crimes. Sentences passed by a first instance court could be referred to a court of appeal and subsequently reviewed by the Supreme Court. Such cases were thus examined by 13 judges at the various stages of the legal procedure. The Kingdom's laws were being continually revised to ensure that they contained guarantees consonant with international standards. That also applied to the Law on Juveniles. Databases were being compiled on domestic workers, hardly any of whom had been sentenced to capital punishment. In fact, in 2023 there had been only two female domestic workers on death row, and just one in 2024. All of them had committed murder.

26. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that, as far as legal testimony was concerned, men and women were equal before the law. The recently adopted Law on Evidence had been a big step forward in that it had abolished the requirement for a female's testimony to be supported by testimony from a male. Modern technology was used to prove identity.

27. **Ms. Haidar** said that she wished to know how many of the complaints received by the Human Rights Commission concerned discrimination against women. The Committee had received reports that Saudi women could not leave a care centre without the permission of their legal guardians. She would appreciate information on any plans to abolish the capital punishment of women whose acts had been committed in self-defence.

28. **Ms. Akizuki** said that she would urge the Government to review the State party's reservation to the Convention in light of the wording of article 27 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which stated that "A party may not invoke the provisions of its internal law as justification for its failure to perform a treaty".

29. **Ms. de Silva de Alwis** said that she noted that the State party had acknowledged that international treaties took precedence over domestic law by virtue of article 81 of its own Basic Law of Governance.

30. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the State party had not entered any reservations to the aim and purpose of the Convention. As for the reservation to article 9 (2), a child born in Saudi Arabia had Saudi nationality, and the children of Saudi women enjoyed full rights, including the rights to be covered by social insurance and social protection and to employment in the private sector.

31. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the reservation entered by the Kingdom on ratification of the Convention had been precautionary.

32. **Ms. González Ferrer** said that she wished to know whether the Family Affairs Council had the necessary status and budget to operate successfully. She would appreciate a description of the programmes it had undertaken and of their outcomes, and she was keen to learn of any mechanisms that had been put in place to supervise its activities and ensure its accountability. She would also like to know how the budgetary appropriation to advance the empowerment of women and take the gender perspective into account in public policy was allocated, whether it was sufficient and if it had resulted in any progress. The Committee would be grateful if the delegation could provide up-to-date information about women who had been sentenced for their advocacy of women's rights and on whether the Government intended to lift the travel bans on those activists. She further wished for clarification on whether it intended to amend the Law on Countering Terrorism and the financing thereof and the Law on Cybercrime, to exclude peaceful activism from the definitions in those laws. The Committee would appreciate it if the delegation could comment on whether the rights of women engaged in the media were not hampered by the fact that, under the Act concerning Audiovisual Media, government permission was required in order for media outlets to operate.

33. **Ms. Mikko** said that she wished to know whether the State party was prepared to increase the quota of seats on the Shura Council that were allocated to women and, if so, by how much. Temporary special measures to improve the substantive equality of women did not discriminate against men. She would therefore like to know what real steps were being taken by the State party through temporary special measures to collaborate with various stakeholders, including NGOs and civil society, to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of women as an objective of national development. The Committee would be grateful for confirmation that Vision 2030 included plans for the appointment of more female judges and prosecutors. She urged the Government to ensure that all women could have access to training that would prepare them for high-level positions in the Government, the judiciary and the private sector. She would like to hear about any educational and training programmes that were in place to support women pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Lastly, she would welcome information on the number of Saudi women who were in leadership positions in the energy sector.

34. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the Family Affairs Council, which in 2023 had a budget of 49 million riyals, was a governmental body under the Ministry of Culture. It had legal status and was financially independent. The Council had introduced a 24-point strategy to empower women and provide support in the health and social sector. It sought to enhance economic opportunities for women, for example through vocational training in information and communications technology. One of its aims was to foster effective partnerships with the public and private sectors, as well as with civil society.

35. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the budget of the Family Affairs Council to which the previous speaker had referred was the operational budget. A number of other bodies had budgets for other initiatives benefiting women. To date, the budget of the Ministry of Finance had been sectoral, with no clear division showing appropriations for the empowerment of women, but it was working on a coding system to show exactly how much money was allocated for that purpose. Vision 2030 placed emphasis on the advancement of women and the empowerment of civil society.

36. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the partnership between civil society organizations and the government authorities had led to the adoption of many measures that had given a substantial boost to the protection and promotion of human rights, including the rights of women. Civil society organizations played a supervisory role, receiving complaints and reporting any abuse. They also had a consultative role and conducted awareness-raising

campaigns, for example disseminating the Convention. In November 2021, a number of them had taken part in a workshop which had produced a shadow report.

37. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that restrictions on the right of movement of any individual could be imposed only by a judicial sentence if a crime had been committed, with the aim of ensuring public safety and preventing repetition of the crime.

38. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the National Plan for Women served as a road map for all stakeholders and that it enhanced mechanisms to improve the status of women and increase opportunities for them, including in leadership positions, with the use of a detailed database. The National Observatory of Women's Participation in Development had introduced an indicator to gauge the progress achieved, which showed the number of women who were occupying senior and middle management positions in the public and private sectors in the 13 administrative districts. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of women in higher positions had risen by 38 per cent. In the private sector there had been a three-fold increase compared with 2019, as 282 women currently held senior positions.

39. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that Vision 2030 reinforced the empowerment of women, including in the petroleum sector, which had been one of the first to employ Saudi women. Women participated in all engineering and administrative sectors.

40. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the gender gap in leadership positions was a challenge faced by all countries. Saudi Arabia was a rather special case because women had begun entering the labour market a mere five or six years previously. It was unrealistic, so soon, to expect to see a large number of women in leadership positions in every sector. True representation must be based on women's experience and skills, which in turn required professional development.

41. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the Kingdom's legislation, including its legislation on capital punishment, was constantly under review. As to the latest legislation on terrorism, it built and improved on previously existing texts, among other things establishing legal guarantees for accused persons. Recalling that there was no commonly agreed definition of terrorism at the international level, he drew the Committee's attention to the fact that the new law did include a definition, which was a very positive development.

42. Acts committed in exercise of the right to self-defence could not incur the death penalty, as they were not deemed criminal offences.

43. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that legislation providing for a national policy to encourage equal opportunity and equal treatment in employment and occupation had been passed in 2023. The policy had a 10-year horizon, divided into two phases of 5 years, to allow for revisions. Special measures to encourage women's participation in the labour market included the provision of childcare in centres close to the workplace, a measure that had benefited more than 117,000 women, and an initiative launched in 2017 providing for cheaper transport to work for women in the private sector, which had benefited more than 210,000 women.

44. One of the objectives of Vision 2030 was to better align the education system with the needs of the labour market, in part by giving university students and people undergoing vocational training a wider choice of specializations. In the secondary school system, too, there were specialist tracks available to both girls and boys. More than 1 million schoolchildren had benefited from a skills-improvement programme put in place with the support of the Ministry of Education.

45. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that, from the outset, women had been constantly involved in the formulation of the objectives of Vision 2030 and the associated programmes, which demonstrated that women played an effective part in decision-making. Gender parity had been achieved in the Human Rights Commission, and it was hoped that it could be reached in the Shura Council as well. A goal of 30 per cent participation had been set for 2030, but that had already been exceeded, and a new target would be set.

46. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the quality of life component of Vision 2030 included a programme to transform and improve the services provided to all citizens, both men and women, through the system of social services. One of the aims was to increase

the participation of women in the labour market, in part by encouraging the economic activity of small and medium-sized enterprises and family businesses.

47. Vision 2030 supported the empowerment of women: Saudi women had a crucial role to play in its implementation and in national development, as they were involved in the cultural, economic and social sectors. Their role was being strengthened as efforts were made to provide a supportive environment for trade and business that promoted equal opportunity and greater creativity.

48. The female participation rate in the labour market currently stood at 37 per cent, which was 1.8 percentage points higher than in 2017, and already surpassed the targets set in Vision 2030. Vision 2030 had also opened up new work opportunities for women, as female entrepreneurs had moved into emerging sectors, and it had encouraged their participation in cultural and sporting activities. The Vision thus improved the quality of life for every individual.

49. **Ms. González Ferrer** said that she would appreciate it if the delegation could clarify the status and workings of the Family Affairs Council. As it was a part of the Ministry of Culture, she wondered how it was able to carry out its mission without coming into conflict with the other ministries, institutions and programmes that it was required to monitor and evaluate.

50. **Ms. Mikko** said that she would appreciate it if the delegation could comment on the fact that the State party appeared to have thousands of female lawyers, but only a handful of female judges. Did Vision 2030 include plans to appoint more women judges and prosecutors?

51. **Ms. Haidar** said that she too was interested to learn why the machinery for women had been placed under a sectoral ministry rather than, for example, under the Office of the Prime Minister, where it could take a cross-cutting approach. She would like to know the reasons for choosing specifically the Ministry of Culture, given that “culture” was sometimes used as an excuse for not taking certain actions to improve the situation of women. She wondered whether the State party had considered instituting temporary special measures in order to accelerate the training of women judges. The travel bans against certain women human rights defenders who had been exercising their rights had apparently been imposed in accordance with court orders. The question was whether the preceding proceedings had been fair. In the interests of transparency, and indeed as a means of strengthening the judiciary, might it not be possible to reopen some of their cases?

52. **The Chair** said that she had taken note that the Government was constantly reviewing the State party’s legislation, including the legislation on capital punishment. It would be interesting to know what was preventing it from introducing a moratorium on the death penalty. She would appreciate it if the delegation could provide written information giving the number of death sentences handed down to women since the Committee’s consideration of the State party’s previous periodic report, in 2018, and details of the offences committed.

53. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the Family Affairs Council was in fact not part of the Ministry of Culture and that it was answerable to the Council of Ministers. It had originally been part of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development but had been moved in 2021. As it now answered directly to the executive branch, it was able to fully carry out its role of oversight, coordination and monitoring of all government bodies concerned with family matters and to propose initiatives to the various ministries.

54. The rulings on the travel bans had been handed down by the judiciary, which was completely independent. The persons in question had the right to appeal against the rulings. The Human Rights Commission, as the national human rights institution, had received numerous complaints on the matter and followed cases closely, giving advice as appropriate.

55. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that, under the legislative reforms announced in February 2021, amendments had been made to the laws guaranteeing individual rights and consolidating the principles of justice and transparency, in order to protect sustainable development and human rights. The reforms comprised a range of legislative instruments establishing offences and penalties, in compliance with international human rights standards,

consolidating due process guarantees for accused persons with a view to ensuring a fair trial and introducing alternative forms of sentencing.

56. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the measures taken for the advancement of women covered all sectors, including the judiciary. The prosecution services had been in the vanguard of the promotion of women's participation. Women were now also represented in the security sector.

57. Her delegation was aware that there was still a long road to tread before women would be participating in all sectors under the best possible conditions, as the Committee understandably wished. However, her country needed to introduce reforms at its own pace.

58. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the national human rights institution paid close attention to the matter of fair trials and ensured that all guarantees set out in law were respected. The judiciary was completely independent, which helped to ensure its neutrality and prevent interference. Moreover, freedom of expression was protected.

59. Saudi Arabia cooperated fully with the special procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council, answering all questions on individual cases, backed up with detailed information. In those cases, the individuals concerned had benefited from all guarantees, from the time of arrest, during investigation and right through to trial. Those replies were available in the database of the special procedures.

60. **Ms. de Silva de Alwis** said that, in the context of Red Sea security, a key component of domestic and foreign policy under Vision 2030, she would like to know whether the Government planned to develop a national action plan on women and peace and security that would call for women's equal participation in leadership, with a view to preventing conflict. She would also like to know how many women had taken part in the recent talks held in Geneva to negotiate a ceasefire in the Sudan.

61. It would be important, in combating cybercrime, to incorporate a feminist perspective. At the same time, the Government should address the need to prevent the misuse of legislation on cybercrime to restrict the rights of women's rights advocates.

62. She commended the State party for its groundbreaking new Anti-Harassment Law and in particular the Law's application to new technology, including social media. She noted that the Crown Prince had described the 2022 Personal Status Law as a qualitative leap in the Government's efforts to protect human rights. However, there was a fundamental contradiction in trying to empower women while at the same time entrusting their protection to male guardians. Not only did the guardianship system make women perpetual minors, it also represented a structural challenge that facilitated domestic violence, since women could be controlled by their guardians and had limited ability to make use of legal services or file police reports. Under the Personal Status Law, husbands could make financial support for their wives contingent on obedience, while disobedience could be punished by imprisonment. She would therefore like to know when the Government would abolish male guardianship and make it illegal to invoke such authority in private and public affairs. Would it grant women legal capacity in civil matters identical to that of men and give them the same opportunities to exercise that capacity?

63. She would like to find out whether the Government would revise the provision of the Personal Status Law requiring a "legitimate excuse" for a wife to refrain from having sex with her husband. The Committee would be interested to know whether the Government would revisit the laws on child marriage. Although the legal age of marriage was 18, courts could authorize the marriage of a child under 18 if, in the court's opinion, the child had reached puberty or the marriage would provide an established benefit for the child. Those were vague criteria, open to a variety of interpretations.

64. The absence of a penal code meant that women were vulnerable to arbitrary treatment and systemic violations of due process. She would like to know whether the new draft penal code would strengthen access to justice. In the light of the severe punishments and psychological trauma that had been suffered by several women's human rights defenders, the Committee would also like to find out whether the draft code would take account of the new understanding of what constituted violence, including a recognition of physical, sexual,

economic and psychological violence. She wondered whether the text would include a definition of rape that was based on the lack of affirmative consent.

65. **Mr. Safarov** said that the Committee noted with concern that, despite the great efforts made by the Government to combat trafficking in persons, and although the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act prohibited all forms of trafficking as defined in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, the Act still did not fully comply with international standards. Domestic workers continued to lack adequate labour protections; there were problems with the screening process to identify persons vulnerable to trafficking; victims risked being penalized for immigration or prostitution offences that might be a direct consequence of being trafficked or exploited; and the hotlines of the anti-trafficking committee and of the Human Rights Commission were available in only two languages.

66. He would be interested to know how the Government ensured that complaints brought by migrant workers and other vulnerable persons were proactively screened for trafficking indicators and that potential trafficking victims were not themselves penalized for unlawful acts they committed as a direct result of being trafficked. He would like to hear the delegation's views on ways of avoiding the penalization or deportation of potential trafficking victims. The Committee would appreciate information on the State party's implementation of the Trafficking in Persons Protocol, including information on the problem of victim identification, as well as any statistics the delegation could provide on victims of trafficking in Saudi Arabia.

67. He would welcome statistics on the numbers of places available in government and NGO victim shelters. It would be useful to know how State agencies ensured that everyone in shelters and detention centres was screened for trafficking indicators. Did the State party have any plans to increase the number of shelters or to support NGOs wishing to create such shelters?

68. The Committee would appreciate it if the delegation could provide more information on the prohibition against employers confiscating workers' passports and charging recruitment fees. Lastly, he would appreciate an explanation of how the authorities identified victims of trafficking and perpetrators and how it protected women from forced prostitution and forced labour.

69. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that, as a founding member of the United Nations, Saudi Arabia was committed to supporting all efforts to realize international peace and security. The Kingdom implemented all resolutions of the United Nations, including Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security. It endeavoured to empower women in all walks of life, engaging them in peace and security efforts, conflict and dispute settlement and involving them in political affairs, including as ambassadors. Women were also involved in implementing the initiatives of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre.

70. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that, under Supreme Order No. 33322 of 2017, State institutions and services, including the police, had been instructed not to seek permission or instructions from any person as a prerequisite for the provision of services to women. Thus, although the concept of guardianship had never been a system, but rather a set of social practices, it was now effectively obsolete. Legislation on matters such as the issuance of passports and access to education had been reviewed and revised in accordance with that order.

71. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the Law on Protection from Abuse not only prohibited all forms of abuse; it also sought to reduce behaviour characteristic of environments that enabled abuse in society. Since abuse was a crime that required urgent intervention in view of the physical, psychological and social damage it caused, the Law provided for the creation of a centre with the power to receive complaints 24 hours a day via an emergency phone number. It also provided for victims to receive assistance, treatment, shelter, healthcare and psychosocial care and for perpetrators to be held accountable for their actions.

72. Under the Anti-Harassment Law, harassment was defined as any utterance, act or gesture of a sexual nature which impinged on another person's body, honour or modesty by any means, including through the use of modern technologies. It was also stipulated that public and private sector organizations must take the measures necessary to prevent and combat harassment in the workplace and to hold any employees who violated the law to account. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development monitored the implementation of the Anti-Harassment Law and had the power to receive complaints of workplace harassment via a hotline and on its website.

73. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that women were not assigned guardians and enjoyed full independence in the management of their affairs. They were free to marry the person of their choosing, and any woman who was a victim or potential victim of forced marriage could report her situation to the authorities. Since marriages should always be based on a healthy relationship and equal rights, the law did not allow a husband to demand absolute obedience from his wife.

74. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the Personal Status Law allowed courts to approve the marriage of a person under the age of 18 only when a number of restrictive criteria were met, including the presentation of a medical report indicating that the marriage did not pose any danger to either the bride or the groom. Those procedures were being reviewed. However, in practice, there were already very few cases in which a person under the age of 18 was given permission to marry.

75. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that, owing to the restrictive conditions set out in the Personal Status Law, the practice of early marriage had become increasingly rare and was gradually dying out.

76. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the national referral mechanism for trafficking victims provided the framework for cooperation in the fight against trafficking in persons. It established the respective roles and responsibilities of all competent bodies at every stage of a trafficking case, from the detection of the crime and protection of the victim to the prosecution of the perpetrator.

77. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that the main aims of the National Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons 2024–2027 were to enhance preventive measures, address the root causes of trafficking, put in place special measures for the protection of victims, strengthen prosecution of perpetrators and improve coordination at all levels. The measures taken for its implementation included the development of a national referral mechanism, the production of statistics to feed into the review of regulations on migrant workers, capacity-building for front-line responders, the strengthening of support services for child victims and the sharing of experiences and best practices.

78. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that all measures to combat trafficking in persons were implemented in cooperation with international organizations and bodies, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The Government also held regular consultations with the authorities of the countries of origin of migrant workers with the aim of ensuring that all persons arriving to work in Saudi Arabia were aware of the complaints procedures and remedies available to trafficking victims.

79. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that 141 people had been convicted of trafficking offences between 2020 and 2024. They had each been fined and sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. New legislation strengthening the protection of domestic workers had come into effect earlier in the month. Under the new legislation, employers were forbidden from confiscating their employees' passports, and it was stipulated that domestic workers should not work more than 10 hours in a single day and should be paid a monthly salary. Awareness-raising activities were conducted for domestic workers, and a hotline had been set up to receive complaints of trafficking or other abuse. The number of domestic workers identified as trafficking victims had stood at 76 in 2021, 90 in 2022 and 158 in 2023.

80. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that one of the aims of the national referral mechanism for trafficking victims was to ensure access to justice in a prompt and timely manner. The police, the Office of the Public Prosecutor and the Ministry of Justice had

therefore all put in place special procedures to ensure that trafficking cases were given priority.

81. The Government had established regulations governing conduct on the Internet and online platforms. The Crown Prince had also launched two global initiatives, one to protect children against cyberbullying and the other to empower women in cybersecurity. A number of women had participated in a recent international conference on cybersecurity held in Saudi Arabia, where there had been discussions on the measures that could be taken to increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions in that sector.

*Articles 7–9*

82. **Ms. de Silva de Alwis** said that she would like to know how many Saudi women had participated in the recent peace talks held in Geneva between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, in which Saudi Arabia had taken part as a mediator. It would also be interesting to know what measures the Government intended to take, in line with the aims of the Global Digital Compact, to support women in other countries who faced obstacles preventing them from effectively participating in the technological revolution and the development of artificial intelligence. Lastly, although progress had been achieved through the issuance of Supreme Order No. 33322 and the passing of the Personal Status Law, women still required the permission of their guardian to marry. Further measures were required to remove the last vestiges of the system of male guardianship from the domestic legal order. The Government should take appropriate action to ensure that Saudi society would not live in the shadow of that system.

83. **Mr. Safarov** said that he would like to know what steps the Government intended to take to strengthen the participation of NGOs in identifying and preventing cases of trafficking in persons and providing victims with shelter and rehabilitation services.

84. **The Chair** said that she wished to know when the Government planned to abolish substituted decision-making regimes for women with disabilities and replace them with supported decision-making regimes.

85. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that a number of projects had been launched to strengthen the participation of women in all digital sectors, not least the initiative of the Crown Prince to empower women in cybersecurity. Women's participation in the telecommunications sector had increased from 7 per cent in 2017 to 25 per cent, and some 40,000 women had received training in artificial intelligence. The Government had also launched a programme for women digital pioneers, which was aimed at training female public sector employees in the latest technologies to enable them to lead the digital transformation.

86. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that a number of women had contributed to the country's involvement in the peace talks held between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. Women accounted for 60 per cent of staff members at the Permanent Mission of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations Office in Geneva and held leadership roles in the departments for human rights, family and children's affairs and migration at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Saudi women also represented their country on the Human Rights Council, at the World Health Assembly and at the Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunication Union.

87. **A representative of Saudi Arabia** said that NGOs were already actively involved in detecting trafficking cases, receiving complaints and providing shelter for victims and that the Government continued to foster closer collaboration with civil society in that area. Women with disabilities were not assigned a guardian as a matter of course. The system of guardianship for persons with disabilities only applied to individuals who were unable to make decisions for themselves owing to an intellectual disability.

88. **Ms. Ameline** said that she would like to know whether the Government intended to take action to ensure that, in practice, women participated in political and public life on an entirely equal footing with men, including by increasing the proportion of Shura Council seats allocated to women from 20 per cent to 50 per cent. It would also be useful to know what steps the Government planned to take to increase women's participation in the justice

system and all activities relating to innovation, such as space engineering and cybersecurity. The delegation was invited to explain what measures were envisaged to ensure that the Anti-Harassment Law was fully enforced and, more generally, to combat the sociological obstacles and cultural resistance that prevented women from achieving true equality with men. It would also be helpful to the Committee to know whether the impact of the work on women's participation in development carried out by the National Observatory of Women's Participation in Development and the Sarah Al-Sudairi Centre for Women's Studies had been the subject of an evaluation. Lastly, she would be interested to learn whether the Government had a plan to increase the number of women in decision-making roles in the diplomatic service, particularly in relation to the issue of women and peace and security.

89. **Ms. Leinarte** said that she wished to know whether Saudi citizens and foreign nationals had access to free higher education. It would also be useful to learn whether children born to a Saudi mother and a foreign father, and who thus did not automatically acquire Saudi nationality, had access to free healthcare. The Nationality Law had been amended in January 2023 to give the Prime Minister the power to grant citizenship to persons born to a Saudi mother and a foreign father. The Committee would be interested to find out how many people of such parentage had been awarded citizenship by the Prime Minister in the previous 12 months. In general, she would like to know whether the Government intended to amend the Nationality Law to enable Saudi women to pass on their nationality to their foreign spouses and their children on an equal basis with Saudi men. In addition, she would find it useful if the delegation could provide an explanation as to why foreign mothers of Saudi children did not have the right to register their children's births or obtain official documents for them. Lastly, it would be helpful to hear what action was being taken to improve the situation facing stateless Bidoon women, including any measures to facilitate their naturalization, strengthen their legal protection and provide them with greater access to services.

*The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.*