

Joint statement highlighting the ongoing persecution of Saudi women human rights defenders by the Saudi authorities

29 November 2021

On International Women Human Rights Defenders Day, we, the undersigned Parliamentarians, express our solidarity and support for Saudi women human rights defenders (WHRDs) who have been released from detention yet continue to face harsh persecution for their peaceful activism.

In 2018 the very women leading the fight for women's rights in Saudi Arabia were systematically rounded up, arrested, tortured, and portrayed in the official media as traitors and spies. Following sustained international pressure, all of the WHRDs arrested in 2018 have now been conditionally released from prison, most recently including Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Loujain al-Hathloul in 2021. However, since their release they have remained subject to heavy restrictions and curtailment of their basic rights. Loujain al-Hathloul, for example, faces three years of probation and a five-year travel ban.

In the past few years, the Saudi authorities have reduced some of the restrictions which women face under the country's repressive male guardianship system, for example by allowing women to apply for their own passports as well as granting them more control over family matters. These efforts, however, are insufficient, and the male guardianship system as well as disobedience laws continue to negatively affect all aspects of women's lives. Meanwhile, WHRDs continue to face systematic persecution, even after being released from detention.

Typical conditions placed on WHRDs released from prison have included bans on travelling abroad, bans on working, and severe censorship of their social media activity. These measures constitute further violations of their fundamental rights, including free movement and association and free speech, and ostracise activists at the critical threshold of starting a new life after release from prison.

Several of the WHRDs were targeted through state-led smear campaigns in the media branding them as traitors and enemies of the state, and they were tried under the Counter-Terrorism Law on charges construed as terrorism against the state and social fabric. This perpetuates their isolation from the rest of society following release from prison and deters others from socialising or engaging with the WHRDs or their families for fear that they too may become targets of state suspicion and persecution.

Families of WHRDs are also often subjected to arbitrary travel bans without a legal basis, a tactic the Saudi authorities use to collectively punish WHRDs and their families, deliberately impairing activists' reintegration into society.

We therefore reiterate our call on the Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally free all women targeted for their human rights activism, to drop all charges against them and to provide them appropriate compensation. We further ask that the released WHRDs are fully granted their right to free movement, that their travel bans and those on their family members are overturned, and that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights work without fear of reprisals.

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