

The Saudi Association for Women's Development

Forum on Minority Issues

Guaranteeing the Rights of Minority Women

Geneva, 29th-30th November 2011

Article 5 of the Agenda:

Minority women and their effective participation in economic, social and cultural life

Introduction by: En'am Abdul Jalil El Asfour, the Saudi Association for Women's Development, DOAA, Qatif.

Thank you Madam President for giving me the opportunity to speak.

Also, thank you High Commissioner for including us in our colleagues' programme on minority rights.

Madam President: The Eastern province, which has a Shia majority, is the largest natural reservoir for petroleum in the world. The Kingdom's reliance on this region should give it exceptional importance within the economic and the national security system. However, it has given rise to a lot of suffering. The political elite feel that the presence of the country's main source of wealth is in an area which is controlled by a "different denomination" is a serious cause for concern. Instead of the region experiencing a renaissance in growth and construction due to the pollution left by oil plants, Shia women experience systematic discrimination in economic, cultural and social life, which prevents them from being effective citizens in society. This discrimination is not documented in government files and is practised on a daily basis by all the official organisations in the country. Thus women belonging to the Shia minority are unable to prosecute the perpetrators, which makes matters even more complicated. This discrimination consists of:

- Excluding the Shia region from sustainable development since its administrative borders are being reduced, which lessens the scope for development.
- Failure to build housing units which would reduce housing pressures that forces the inhabitants to build on garages.

- Failure to build maternity and paediatric hospitals to accommodate the birth rate of the province where currently there is one general hospital with a capacity of 365 beds for a region whose inhabitants number more than 500,000 people.
- From another angle, there is pressure on Shia women wanting to establish legal and developmental organisations. There is also pressure in the field of publishing and printing Shia books.
- There are also delays in issuing private licenses for practicing work out and extra obstacles are put in their way.
- There is blatant discrimination in job procedures in governmental departments and national institutions.

In striving to realise full citizenship for Shia women we advise the Saudi government to:

- Implement a principle as rule of law whereby it is only possible for existing public authorities to practise their power according to laws written and issued in line with constitutional procedures.
- Establish regulatory institutions for jobs to fight discriminatory practices inside governmental organisations.
- Establish governmental organisations which deal with individual complaints with a regulatory mechanism to check its work.
- Build housing units in Shia areas like those in the rest of the country.
- Distribute land grants to Shia inhabitants in their areas to protect their identity, customs and traditions and do not compel them to migrate domestically fragmenting their identity and preventing them from pursuing their religious rituals as has happened to the Shia in Al Khobar.
- Enact a law that criminalises early marriage and take a firm stance against those who perpetrate it. This has negative effects on young girls economically, culturally and educationally.
- Providing a larger space for Shia women to participate in opening civil society institutions like those in the rest of the country.

Thank you.

