

Human Rights Council

Forum on Minority Issues

Guaranteeing the rights of minority women

Geneva 29th-30th November 2011

Article 4 of the agenda : minority women and effective political participation

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

Thank you Madam President for giving me this opportunity.

Also, thank you to the High Commissioner for Human Rights for including us in our colleagues' programme on minorities, giving us the opportunity to participate in this valuable forum.

The Shia minority in Saudi Arabia has Arab roots and the pure spiritual connection between the Saudi Shia and their religious ancestors abroad binds them together. In spite of the Shia representing 2% of the total population in Saudi Arabia, they face unique challenges and various forms of discrimination due to their faith.

Politically, in spite of a resolution having been issued which grants Saudi women participation in public affairs, an objective analysis indicates that Shia women are not participating in this field. This is due to the existing reality of the Shia man, which is exemplified by:

Lack of official representation in the cabinet and paucity of representation in the consultative assembly; disqualification from entering military, security, and diplomatic services; and suffering from a lack of equality of opportunity in administrative, management and political jobs. Clearly, Shia women suffer from discrimination based firstly on gender and secondly on belief.

Inasmuch as the principle of lack of discrimination and the principle of equality constitute the basis of all treaties on fundamental human rights, all rights mentioned in the Minority Rights Declaration also applies to women.

We advise the Saudi government to:

1. Recognise the Shia presence in the key system of government (the constitution) and create legislation giving them special attention and protection.
2. Speed up the participation of women in the political sphere and in administrations of state institutions and their involvement as effective members in the consultative assembly and assign ministerial portfolios to them via the quota system in the interim. Do not exempt Shia women from the Shia minority but treat them in the same way as the men.
3. Lift the wide restraints on judicial agreements on all forms of discrimination against women, ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women with its implementation.
4. Annul the state system, which severely limits women's ability to behave as independent and equal as other members of Saudi society in as much as it limits their legal capacity and their personal status such as being able to choose a place of residence, means of transport and work.

We also advise the United Nations to:

1. Let the independent expert on minority issues undertake a visit to Saudi Arabia and look closely at the reality of Saudi Arabian women's lives in general and women belonging to the Shia minority in particular.
2. Exert international pressure on Saudi Arabia to follow international treaties and other international agreements which protect the rights of minorities in general and of women in particular.

Thank you for attention.