



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 August 2022]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **The Case of Salma Al-Shehab Sentenced to 34 Years in Prison and Women's Rights In Saudi Arabia**

CAP Liberté de Conscience (Paris) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) are deeply concerned about the sentencing of a Saudi PhD student to 34 years in prison and the deterioration of women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

A 34-year old PhD student sentenced to 34 years in prison and a 34-year travel ban afterwards, a cynical and cruel game with this number

At mid-August 2022, Salma al-Shehab, a Saudi 34-year old PhD student from the University of Leeds, was sentenced under the kingdom's counter-terrorism and cybercrime laws to a heavy penalty: 34 years in prison and a 34-year travel ban after her release for following and retweeting messages from Saudi women's rights activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul ranked third in the "Top 100 Most Powerful Arab Women 2015" and the winner of the Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize in 2020.

The ruling is the longest prison sentence given to a Saudi women's rights defender, marking an escalation in MBS crackdown on dissent.

She was arrested in January 2021 while on holiday in Saudi Arabia, having been targeted by the authorities. She was held in prolonged solitary confinement for 285 days before she was brought to trial, which violates international standards and Saudi Arabia's Law of Criminal Procedures. She was also denied access to legal representation throughout her pre-trial detention, including during interrogations.

Salma al-Shehab, who was a postgraduate researcher in the final year of her PhD studies in the School of Medicine at the University of Leeds, had used her Twitter account -- of around 2,700 followers -- to follow, like, and share posts from Saudi activists or dissidents in exile.

Initially, the mother of two young sons (six and four years old) was sentenced by a special terrorist court to serve six years in prison -- three of which were suspended -- for "causing public unrest and destabilising civil and national security". But prosecutors requested that she face new charges, including for "spreading false and malicious rumours on Twitter" and on 15 August, an appeals court handed down the new sentence of 34 years in prison.

Salma al-Shehab comes from the Shia Muslim minority, who has long been discriminated against in Saudi Arabia.

CAP Liberté de Conscience (Paris) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) consider that

The verdict is a mockery of justice and a message of threats and intimidation from Crown Prince Mohamed Bin-Salman

The ruling is an egregious violation of freedom of thought and freedom of speech

Her case is being instrumentalized to frighten women's rights activists and human rights defenders

The judgement sets a dangerous precedent for female activists in the country, who are already subjected to unprecedented arrest campaigns, severe torture, and sexual harassment

and ask for the immediate and unconditional release of Salma al-Shehab.

Home detention and male guardianship

A group of Saudi women activists has launched a campaign on Twitter to raise awareness about and protest against the violence many of them still endure amid timid attempts at reform.

Using the #HomeDetainees (1) hashtag, the Twitter campaign is aimed at raising awareness about the conditions of women "who languish at home", targeting the male guardianship system (husband, father or brother). Women inside and outside the country share experiences of suffering. For many, the home is "a woman's grave and man's paradise".

The heavy restrictions on women's movements, personal development and professional fulfillment – the legacy of an archaic and patriarchal society favoured by a reactionary vision of Islam – are embodied in the male guardianship system, which denies women their freedom.

The initiative allows women to share on social media their personal experiences as “prisoners” in their own homes and highlights the limits imposed on their social life.

The campaign's goal is to abolish altogether the male guardianship system, which places women's lives under men's control, be they fathers, husbands or brothers, who can decide their fate in terms of “education, work and healthcare”.

The campaign is also demanding that Saudi women be granted the right to “movement, independence and decision-making” so that they can be free in their personal life and not feel “trapped” in their homes.

"My prison suffocates my passions and aspirations," wrote one user of the hashtag who did not use her real name. "It chokes off my desires, capabilities, ambitions," and “rendered me severely depressed and obsessive, as well as afflicted me with thousands of psychological ailments”.

Another user described life as a woman in Saudi Arabia as akin to being "assaulted with all forms of violence on the psychological, physical, and material level”.

The constant monitoring denies women “the privacy of closing the door of the room with a key,” said another, making some feel like an “immobile piece of furniture in a living room”, seeing “their age and youth passing while they are trapped between four walls”.

The reforms that the controversial Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has introduced since 2019 have touched social and religious life, allowing for example women to drive and go to stadiums (albeit under certain restrictions), and boosting the entertainment industry.

However, the arrests of senior officials and businessmen, the crackdown on activists and critics and the Khashoggi affair have raised questions about the extent of change.

CAP Liberté de Conscience (Paris) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) support the #HomeDetainees (2) hashtag movement and urge the international community to press the Saudi authorities to abolish the male guardianship.

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Human Rights Without Frontiers, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

(1) [https://twitter.com/hashtag/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%84?src=hashtag\\_click](https://twitter.com/hashtag/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%84?src=hashtag_click)

(2) [https://twitter.com/hashtag/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%84?src=hashtag\\_click](https://twitter.com/hashtag/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%84?src=hashtag_click)