

UN Grills Saudi Arabia on Women's Rights

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Saudi Arabia, appearing for the first time before a UN watchdog for women's rights, faced tough questions on Thursday and was challenged to grant gender equality.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has 23 independent experts monitoring adherence to a 1979 international bill of rights for women.

The world's biggest oil exporter ratified the pact in 2000, with the proviso that Islamic Sharia law would prevail if there were any contradiction with its provisions.

At a one-day debate on its record, the Saudi delegation came under fire for failing to meet international norms guaranteeing women's political, economic, social and civil rights.

'Only when women are free to make their own decisions on all aspects of their life are they full citizens,' committee member Maria Regina Tavares da Silva told the Geneva session.

Heisoo Shin, another committee member, said that a system of male guardianship 'governed virtually every aspect of a women's life' in Saudi Arabia.

'Without a man's consent, a woman cannot study or get health service, work, marry, conduct business or even get an ambulance service in an emergency,' she said.

A report submitted by Riyadh on its compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women said that there was 'no discrimination against women in the laws of the Kingdom.'

The Saudi government said while women's rights outlined in the Convention could be invoked before the courts or state authorities, Sharia law must ultimately prevail.

The application of Sharia law in a rape case last month drew international criticism and fanned concerns about the status of women in the conservative Islamic state where powerful clerics demand the strict seclusion of females.

In that case, King Abdullah pardoned a 19-year-old woman who was sentenced to flogging for being in the company of a man she was not related to.

Her indiscretion came to light because she and her companion had been abducted and gang-raped by seven other men.

Zeid Bin Abdul Mushin Al Hussein, vice president of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, told the experts: 'Human rights in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia are based on Sharia law.'

Saudi officials emphasised progress for women in terms of greater employment and education in the country, where women may now study both law and engineering.

The UN experts are expected to raise further questions on women's rights in Saudi Arabia

before issuing conclusions on the kingdom and seven other countries at the end of their three-week session on Feb. 1.