

Spotlight



Women have always played an integral role in our country's development, and they will continue to do so moving forward on equal footing with their male counterparts.

Princess Reema bint Bandar
Saudi ambassador to the US



According to the latest royal decrees, any Saudi above the age of 21 is allowed to request a passport without a guardian's consent. Photos/Supplied

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Saudi women hail axing travel restrictions, welcome steps toward equality

Royal decrees strengthen women's labor, travel and civil status rights

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Many Saudi women have hailed the recent changes and expressed their joy at the series of amendments that empower them.

Soon after it was announced that Saudi women would no longer require permission from a male guardian to travel or obtain a passport, Princess Reema bint Bandar, the Saudi ambassador to the US, posted a message on Twitter in which she said the amendments were "designed to elevate the status of Saudi women within our society, including granting them the right to apply for passports and travel independently."

"These developments have been a long time coming. From the inclusion of women in the consultative council to issuing driving licenses to women, our leadership has proved its unequivocal commitment to gender equality," she said.

"These new regulations are history in the making. They call for the equal engagement of women and men in our society. It is a holistic approach to gender equality that will unquestionably create real change for Saudi women."

"Women have always played an integral role in our country's development, and they will continue to do so moving forward, on equal footing with their male counterparts," Princess Reema added.



The amendments reflect the Kingdom's efforts to establish gender equality.

The changes, which were announced in royal decrees, include amendments to labor, social-insurance and civil-status laws. Under the legal reforms, women have also been given the right to register births, marriage or divorce.

The amendments reflect the Kingdom's efforts to establish gender equality, campaigners say.

Following the reforms, women over the age of 21 will be able to apply for a passport without authorization, putting them on an equal footing to men.

Dr. Majed Garoub, lawyer and chairman of the Garoub law firm, explained the amendment in the travel document law to Arab News.

"The issuance of the latest royal decrees means that any Saudi above the age of 21 is allowed to request a passport without a guardian's consent. This is

specifically with regard to women, as the law does not state that a male guardian should be present at the passport control center or receive the passport on her behalf; the law never enforced a male guardian's presence, but it was a common occurrence accepted by society."

Other changes to labor law and social insurance law have unified the retirement age and employment opportunities for both sexes, and given both parents "head of family" status.

Previously the retirement age was 60 for men and 55 for women, with establishments and employees signing an agreement to allow workers to continue working after the age of retirement.

The newly amended law dismisses the age limit, allowing employees to work past the age of retirement, while also smoothing the transition from the government

sector to the private sector.

"This amendment highlights the important and necessary role played by employees with decades of experience," Garoub said. "It also provides stability for workers close to retirement age who can continue to be supported in the private sector after leaving a government one since their expertise will be valued."

"This also means that government entities will no longer need to issue end-of-service bonuses and the employee can simply continue working."

Under an amendment to civil status law, mothers will be able to report births and deaths in their family to the Civil Registry, a role that previously was possible only for the father or a male guardian.

Similarly, wives can now report the status of marriage and divorce as well as request a copy of the family register, while the responsibility lies on the husband to do so within 60 days after marriage registration.

Changes to labor law are also more inclusive of women, dismissing all forms of discrimination based on sex, disability and age, and reflecting the view that all citizens are equal in their right to work.

Amendments have also made it illegal to fire a woman during pregnancy or while on maternity leave. The law stipulates that an employer may not terminate a female's contract or warn her of termination during pregnancy or while on maternity leave.

HIGHLIGHTS

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- Both parents have been given "head of family" status.
- Under an amendment to civil status law, mothers will be able to report births and deaths in their family to the Civil Registry.
- Wives can now report the status of marriage and divorce as well as request a copy of the family register.
- Changes to labor law end all forms of discrimination based on sex, disability and age.
- Amendments have made it illegal to fire a woman during pregnancy or while on maternity leave.
- The law covers illnesses caused by pregnancy or resulting from childbirth, as long as that does not exceed 180 days of leave per year.
- The new amendments will take effect by the end of August.

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Nora Al-Rifai, 27, an HR assistant at a Jeddah car dealership, praised the legal amendments, saying that

any society's prosperity depends on both men and women having equal rights.

"I feel very content this morning knowing that a basic human right has been restored to us. This is a glimpse of hope for a brighter future for women," she told Arab News.

Al-Rifai said that women have suffered the limitations of the guardianship law in pursuing educational and occupational ambitions, and she commends the Kingdom's efforts in giving Saudi women greater choice.

"Women will do wonders in all fields now that they have more access," she said.

Al-Rifai's sister, Sara, who teaches at a university in Jeddah, said: "The scope of the reforms is not only about allowing women to travel freely without constraint, but also to help those disadvantaged by male guardianship to live decently in a humane society."

Sara believes that other aspects of the royal decree will empower separated and divorced women.

"They will be able to issue family documents for themselves and their children. This will ease and expedite the process of registering a marriage, divorce and birth without waiting for a male guardian to do it."

The new amendments will take effect by the end of August, following the series of reforms and initiatives led by the government to empower women, and modify and develop existing laws to suit society's needs.