



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Consideration of reports submitted by States parties
under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**

**Replies of Saudi Arabia to the list of issues and questions in
relation to its fifth periodic report***

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* The present document is being issued without formal editing.



Introduction

1. This document contains the responses and comments of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the list of issues and questions in relation to the fifth periodic report of Saudi Arabia (CEDAW/C/SAU/Q/5) dated 14 November 2023. It should be noted that numerous legislative measures have been taken to strengthen and protect human rights, including those provided for in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.¹ These measures will be referred to in the course of the answers to the list of issues and questions. The following are the Kingdom's replies to the list of issues and questions in the order they were listed.

Reply to paragraph 1 of the list of issues and questions

2. Saudi Arabia took several measures in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, including various precautionary measures that were aimed at preventing the spread of the disease. It provided high-quality health care to person who contracted COVID-19. A committee that included all relevant government agencies was formed to serve as a national mechanism for addressing all issues related to combating and controlling the pandemic. It should be noted that from early on, the Kingdom took precautionary measures to control the pandemic, including the following:

- It temporarily suspended travel by citizens and residents, cancelling flights to and from a number of countries where the pandemic had spread. It suspended transit of travellers through several land ports while still allowing commercial traffic and shipping, and travel for humanitarian and exceptional cases.
- It arranged shelter for citizens stranded abroad and provided them with protective and medical care, living allowances and psychological support without discrimination and free of charge.
- It suspended religious, social and cultural gatherings and events, and workplace attendance.
- It closed markets and shopping centres, except chemists and food markets, while providing food, medicines, protective equipment and consumer goods.
- It applied home quarantine measures and isolated cities and regions.
- It took precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in prisons, detention centres and care institutions.
- It suspended studies in all regions of the Kingdom at all stages and switched over to remote learning.
- Alternative procedures were put in place to guarantee rights affected by these measures, notably through the provision of education, employment, and basic government services remotely. In order to reinforce these rights, several initiatives were launched, including the “We are all giving” initiative, which provided students with free SIM cards and tablets. Instalment payments were deferred for three months for all public and private health workers with credit facilities (real estate, consumer, rental financing), in consideration of their efforts. Municipal services fees for the private sector were deferred for three months. That covered over 1,400 economic activities. Expatriates whose

¹ To be referred to hereafter as “the Convention”.

residence permits expired were exempted from fees; their permits were extended for three months free of charge.

- In order to support the private sector in strengthening economic development to support Government efforts to combat COVID-19, a programme worth 50 billion riyals was financed by the Saudi Central Bank. It included funding for small and medium enterprises. It consisted of several components. The first was a deferred payment programme. A total of 30 billion riyals was set aside for banks and financing companies to allow a six-month deferral of payments owed by small and medium enterprises. The second was a loan finance programme. It provided 13.2 billion riyals in concessional financing for small and medium enterprises, in the form of six-month loans from banks and financing companies to small and medium enterprises. The third component was a finance guarantee programme. It provided 6 billion riyals to banks and financing companies so that they could waive fees owed by small and medium enterprises. The goal was to lower the cost of loans for the companies that benefited from those guarantees and support deferred financing for six months. In addition, the human resources and social development system allocated 17.3 [billion] riyals in government support to help private companies bolster economic growth and preserve jobs, as part of efforts to mitigate the impact of precautionary measures taken against the pandemic.
- Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development Decision No. 142906 of 13 Sha‘ban A.H. 1441 (6 April 2020) amended the implementing regulations of the Labour Code. A new paragraph 41 was added concerning contractual relations between workers and employers in cases where the State, acting on its own initiative or on the recommendation of a competent international organization, takes measures with regard to a situation or circumstance that requires the reduction of working hours, or takes precautionary action to prevent such situation.
- On 6 Sha‘ban A.H. 1441 (30 March 2020), the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, issued a directive to provide all citizens and residents, even those in violation of the Residency Act, with treatment free of charge and without discrimination. He also issued a directive obligating the State to pay 60 per cent of wages of private sector employees, in order to preserve jobs.
- On 10 Rabi‘ I A.H. 1442 (27 October 2020), the Cabinet issued Decision No. 168 approving the disbursement of 500,000 riyals to the families of health sector workers who died because of the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of whether the deceased worked for the Government or the private sector, was a civilian or member of the military, was a Saudi or non-Saudi, or was male or female.
- A Royal Order was issued suspending enforcement of sentences and judicial orders related to the imprisonment of persons convicted in civil cases and temporarily releasing persons imprisoned in enforcement of such sentences and orders.

3. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the National eLearning Centre did the following:

- It drafted a national education continuity plan.
- It collected and analysed plans from universities.
- It facilitated access to and sharing of electronic content.
- It designed and launched the education continuity portal.

- It followed up implementation of education continuity plans.
- It kept in touch with universities and provided recommendations and consultations.
- It provided numerous electronic platforms.

4. Numerous precautionary measures were taken to fight the COVID-19 pandemic in mosques. From the start of the pandemic, the Kingdom's mosques were sterilized, prepared, and provided with preventive instructions. Some 5,760 mosques across the Kingdom were assisted to hold Friday prayers during the pandemic in compliance with health requirements. Some 292,000 instructive and awareness-raising placards were printed in several languages to educate worshippers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. On 29 Sha'ban A.H. 1441 (22 April 2020), the Ministry of Interior launched the Awdah initiative, which allowed legal and illegal residents to submit requests to return to their countries.

6. During the pandemic, the Office of the Public Prosecutor ran a remote investigation and video interrogation project that allowed an accused person to be interrogated at the site where they were being held without being brought to appear in person before the interrogator. That safeguarded the health of detainees and prisoners by not requiring them to be in contact with others.

7. The Ministry of Justice continued to operate the justice system to allow users to continue legal and judicial procedures uninterrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, under the slogan "remote justice". A number of electronic services were initiated. A remote reconciliation and dispute-resolution service was launched on the Taradi digital platform. Parties to a dispute need not go to a physical reconciliation office. That facilitates user access to services and helps maintain public health by enhancing precautionary measures. Other remote services include electronic property titles, exchange of legal briefs and establishing power of attorney. There are remote training programmes, judicial authorizations, real estate transfers, and various court services amount to 120 services that users can access at home with needing to go to a physical court or enforcement agency.

8. At the regional and international levels, Saudi Arabia, in its capacity as President of the Group of 20 (G20), called for an extraordinary virtual summit meeting in order to discuss ways to consolidate efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the conclusion of the summit, which was held on Thursday, 26 March 2020, a final communiqué was issued that included pledges and commitments made by the leaders of the G20 countries aimed at responding to the epidemic and limiting its spread. The Kingdom provided \$121 million in financial support to the World Health Organization (WHO) in response to the urgent appeal to all countries launched by that organization to step up global measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also provided assistance to several countries in the form of medical devices and supplies through a number of international companies to help combat the pandemic. The efforts of Saudi Arabia culminated in the announcement that the Kingdom, in its capacity as President of the G20, had pledged to give \$500 million to international organizations in support of global efforts to respond to the pandemic. Saudi Arabia has called on States, non-governmental organizations, charitable institutions and the private sector to support international efforts aimed at closing the funding gap facing the COVID-19 response. According to the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, the funding gap is estimated to be more than \$8 billion.

9. Out of its belief that women are especially vulnerable to the repercussions of crises and its desire to protect and advance the rights of women and girls, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, together with several other countries, took the initiative

during the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly to submit a draft resolution entitled: “Strengthening national and international rapid response to the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on women and girls”, adopted unanimously, which urged Member States to ensure that the special needs of women and girls are better met, and called on the United Nations to adopt a gender-sensitive approach in its various plans and strategies aimed at coordinating international efforts in this regard.

10. The Kingdom also submitted a resolution to the eighth Ministerial Conference on Women of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on protecting and empowering women in member States to adapt and recover during pandemics and other exceptional circumstances. That resolution urges States to develop national policies and strategies for pandemic adaptation and recovery; to take legislative, institutional and procedural measures to ensure the protection of women’s rights and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against them, especially in times of emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic; to reduce the impact of such emergencies on women, especially the most needy groups; and to involve women and girls in the development and planning of policies and strategies to produce optimal results.

11. That stemmed from the Kingdom’s belief in the importance of protecting women’s rights in the context of confronting pandemics and recovering from global crises, nationally, regionally and internationally.

12. It should be noted that the Kingdom’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic was rooted in a multi-faceted human rights-based approach. All measures taken to combat the pandemic and reduce its economic and social effects were implemented on the principle of gender equality. As a result of this approach, women’s rights were not negatively affected by the pandemic or measures taken to confront it. Women took active part on an equal level with men in various measures aimed at combating and mitigating the effects of the pandemic.

Reply to paragraph 2 of the list of issues and questions

13. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has mutually reinforcing laws prohibiting racial discrimination or any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin, or on the basis of sex, which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms across all areas of public life. Article 8 of the Basic Law of Governance provides for the principle of equality. That Law explicitly provides for the protection of human rights. Article 26 states that the State shall protect human rights in accordance with the sharia.

14. Article 1 of the Civil Service Code provides that merit is the basis for selecting employees to fill public positions. Article 3 of the Labour Code provides that citizens have an equal right to work without discrimination on the basis of sex, disability, age or any other grounds, in the course of performing their job or during the hiring process. The Health Act, article 2, guarantees the provision of comprehensive health care for all residents in a fair and accessible manner. Article 5 of the Act concerning the practice of the health-care professions, promulgated by Royal Decree No. 59/*mim* dated 4 Dhu al-Hijjah A.H. 1426 (6 December 2005) provides that health practitioners shall practice their profession for the benefit of the individual and society with respect for the human right to life, safety and dignity. Article 16, paragraph 1, of that Act provides that a health practitioner may not be excused from treating a patient for reasons of difference in religion, colour, sex or ethnicity. The Act concerning

audiovisual media, article 5, provides against exposure to anything that might incite strife, division and hatred among citizens, provoke violence, or threaten social peace.

15. To ensure protection from discrimination in the labour market, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development launched an initiative to train monitors and raise awareness of regulations that prohibit discrimination in the labour market, and to take action to enforce penalties in the event that discrimination is observed in the labour market, under paragraph 43 of the table of violations and penalties, which deals with employers who commit any act that constitutes any type of discrimination against a job applicant that violates or dilutes application of the principle of equal opportunity. It also provided for channels for reporting such practices.

16. Working women are protected by the Labour Code. That includes wages, paid leave, end-of-service remuneration and so forth. Women also benefit, on the same basis as men, from the protection provided by the unemployment insurance programme (Sanid), as well as from programmes that support workers while they search for employment, including in respect of the amount of support offered and its duration, and training programmes offered to job seekers. In addition, women workers receive support from the Human Resources Fund and receive pensions through the social insurance system.

17. The issuance of Supreme Order No. 33322 on 21 Rajab A.H. 1438 (18 April 2017) was a practical application of the principle of gender equality in all procedures and services. That Order allows women to access all government services and conclude their business without being required to obtain the approval of a guardian. In July 2019, numerous legislative amendments were adopted to guarantee gender equality. That included amending the Travel Documents Act and its implementing regulations to ensure that women can obtain passports and travel abroad on an equal basis with men. The Civil Status Code was also amended to ensure full gender equality in obtaining civil status documentation and in reporting civil status events, thereby strengthening women's autonomy. Amendments were also introduced into the Labour Code to ensure equality for all in rights, duties and conditions of service. Specifically, the amendments affected article 3 – to prohibit workplace discrimination on grounds of sex, disability, age or any other grounds – and article 155 – to prohibit dismissal or threat of dismissal against a female worker during pregnancy or maternity leave, including during any illnesses arising during that time. Article 38 the Social Insurance Act was amended to ensure equality between men and women in retirement age by making 60 the retirement age for both sexes. Starting in 2018, women have also been enabled to take part in various cultural, sports and recreational activities on an equal basis with men.

18. The Council of Ministers issued Decision No. 416 on 17 Jumada II A.H. 1444 (10 January 2023) approving a national policy to encourage equal opportunity and equal treatment in employment and occupation. It aims to eliminate such discrimination by developing systems and policies that limit and prevent discrimination at work. It has launched a package of measures, programmes and initiatives to increase women's participation, enable groups with less opportunity to enter and remain in the labour market, and support implementation of the policy with effective measures.

19. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has launched a set of initiatives and programmes in the following areas: balance in the labour market, with an accompanying training programme; leadership guidance for women staff, with an accompanying training initiative; remote working; flexible work; and self-employment. It launched the National Saudi Women Leaders Platform. The Human Resources Development Fund has worked on support and qualification programmes for women, including the Qurrah programme to support working mothers by taking

care of their children during working hours, the Wusul programme to facilitate working women's commutes to and from work, and other programmes.

20. With regard to equal remuneration for work of equal value, the uniform model Labour Regulation prohibits any discrimination in remuneration between male and female workers for work of equal value. It should be noted that Saudi Arabia is a party to the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), of the International Labour Organization.

21. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology has also provided more job opportunities for women, including leadership positions. It has introduced training programmes in that connection, bringing women's participation to 30.49 per cent. Future initiatives have contributed to several modern, traditional and emerging technical fields, including the qualification of 30,232 women trainees and the employment of 15,311 women. The Ministry has launched several programmes to raise the percentage of female leaders, including the Women Leaders in the Digital World Programme and the Technology Leaders Award. Creative ideas have been encouraged through the Technology Pioneers Programme. In the second iteration of the Technology Pioneers Programme, which targets innovative entrepreneurs, some 1,806 ideas were submitted by women pioneers, who make up 40 per cent of participants. The Digital Giving Initiative was offered with the aim of eradicating digital illiteracy and spreading digital awareness among members of society; some 194,110 members are women. Several events have been held to highlight women's empowerment, including an "Empowering excellence" conference to showcase major inspirational female figures.

22. The General Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises has taken the initiative in disseminating a culture of women's entrepreneurship. There were almost 3 million beneficiaries between 2016 and 2021. The percentage of the women's establishments rose to 45 per cent in comparison with 2022.

23. Women's participation has also increased in the Ministry of Education. Women hold academic, administrative and leadership positions at the public education and university levels. Initiatives were launched for research, innovation and development for women academics. The result has been an increase of 91 per cent in academic publishing over the past three years, alongside an increase of 52 per cent in academic papers by women researchers.

24. The Ministry of Sports has promoted women's participation in various sports. It set up 36 first-time women's teams in various sports. It has launched women's tournaments and hosted several international competitions. There are some 14,787 registered women players in various federations and clubs. Women hold 69 leadership positions. That includes seven female presidents. There are a total of 913 women serving as president, director or board member across the athletic sector. Average weekly participation is 6,038, with a total of 135 women's clubs.

25. Several initiatives have been launched to support and empower women in the cultural pursuits and various trades. There are 584 women working at the Ministry of Culture, which is 45 per cent of the total staff. Some 25 per cent of leadership posts at the Ministry are held by women.

26. The Ministry of Culture and its agencies have supported women through the Abdi' cultural licensing platform, which was launched by the Ministry to license practitioners in all cultural fields without discrimination between the sexes. Fields include literature (literary agent), culinary arts (popular food licence), visual arts (gallery licence), bookstores (licence to provide bookstore services), antiquities (licence for archaeological survey and excavation) theatre and performing arts

(licence for a theatre and performing arts company), translation (licence to practice the profession of translation), and music (licence to perform music). There are numerous other licences in various fields. The latest figures show that some 3,099 women have been licensed through the platform.

27. As a result of these efforts, participation in the labour market increased from 17 per cent in 2017 (baseline) to 36 per cent in 2023. That exceeded the targets of the National Transformation Programme, which is part of Saudi Vision 2030.

28. Measures taken by the Kingdom over the past five years to improve women's health outcomes include the following:

- Premarital health services are provided through the Healthy Marriage Programme, which provides basic examinations for certain genetic, infectious and sexually transmitted diseases to reduce harmful effects on mother and fetus.
- A package of basic health services has been provided and expanded to cater to women before, during and after pregnancy and childbirth. These services are provided in all primary health centres and by mobile clinics covering remote and rural areas. They include early screening for certain diseases according to a monitoring protocol for pregnant women that includes basic visits, whatever vaccinations and treatments they need, and health advice and guidance according to stage of pregnancy. Delivery is carried out by qualified health staff, with follow-up of the health of the mother and newborn after birth.
- To protect mother and fetus, HIV screening has been adopted as one of the basic and mandatory examinations that must be performed for every pregnant woman to reduce the risk of infection for the fetus. The national AIDS control programme is committed to educating members of society, including mother and child, about the disease, while providing continuous awareness campaigns in order to reach global development targets.
- The Ministry of Health provides early screening services for breast and colorectal cancer to all targeted women to reduce morbidity and mortality.
- Early screening is also carried out periodically in all primary care centres for chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity, and for mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

29. The Personal Status Code issued on 8 March 2022 contains provisions regulating family relationships. It aims to maintain the stability of the family as the basic component of society; rein in the discretionary authority of the courts in order to make judicial rulings more consistent and minimize variation in rulings; provide a framework for relations among family members and protect their rights; and expedite the settlement of family disputes. The Code is based on provisions that promote complementary equality between the sexes or equality in outcomes, which takes into account the role of each partner within the family to ultimately realize justice. The Code does not contain any discriminatory provisions that might weaken or dilute recognition of women's rights and freedoms. Its goal is to realize justice and family cohesion.

30. Article 42 of the Personal Status Code specifies the rights and obligations of spouses in a manner that ensures equality and balance between responsibilities and duties. That article obliges spouses to cohabit amicably; respect each other's dignity in a way conducive to affection and kindness; avoid harming each other materially or morally; live in a marital home where the husband stays overnight and the wife remains with him; safeguard the interest of the family; and provide care and a proper upbringing for the children. The husband is obligated to pay reasonable expenses regardless of the wife's material circumstances. Article 44/1 of the Code provides that

every person should pay their expenses, except that a wife's expenses are her husband's responsibility, even if she is well off. Upkeep is one of her rights. Under the Code's provisions, the wife may sue if the husband refuses to pay for marital upkeep. The court (personal status court) will hear the case, and if it is proven that the husband has in fact refused to pay upkeep for illegitimate reasons, it will rule in favour of the wife and compel the husband to pay expenses. The court sets the amount and type of expenses, and decides if they should be in cash or in kind.

31. The Code does not stipulate that a wife's obedience to her husband should be absolute. It must be within reason. Obedience to the husband that would result in harm to the wife would not be within reason, and the wife is not obligated by it. The Code does not provide – even implicitly – for anything that gives the husband the right to coerce the wife into obeying him, let alone acquiesce in assault, abuse or any other damaging behaviour. Where that occurs, the wife and other persons affected have the right of recourse to the competent authorities, whom the law requires to take the measures necessary to protect them and hold the perpetrator accountable under the provisions of the 2013 Act on protection from abuse. All forms of abuse are considered harms that warrant dissolution of the marriage at the request of the wife in accordance with article 108 of the Personal Status Law. It should be noted that article 91 of the Civil Status Code has been amended so that when applying the Code, the head of the family is considered to be the father or the mother in relation to minor children.

Reply to paragraph 3 of the list of issues and questions

32. Article 47 of the Basic Law of Governance provides that the right to litigation shall be guaranteed equally for citizens and residents. Laws, decisions and instructions issued by the judicial authorities contain provisions to facilitate access to the judiciary and to promote the principle of equality before it. Instructions have been issued that fall under the description of positive discrimination. They include the empowerment of women with respect to marital matters and following the dissolution of the marriage contract. They allow women to file lawsuits in their domiciles or at the nearest court, as an exception to the rule contained in article 36 of the Law of Procedure before the Sharia Courts, which requires that lawsuits be filed in the defendant's country. Family cases before personal status courts are considered single-session cases. Consideration of such cases should not take longer than one week. The Code of Sharia Court Procedure governs all matters related to divorce proceedings, including custody, alimony and visitation. The goal is to expedite family cases. In addition, the issuance of two marriage certificates, one for the husband and the other for the wife, was made mandatory in order to promote women's right to access justice. The recent promulgation of the Personal Status Law has helped to accelerate the resolution of family cases and enhance the predictability, stability, consistency, quality and efficiency of judicial rulings.

33. Women's participation in the legal field has increased, with 3,538 female staff employed at the Ministry of Justice. Some 2,136 Saudi women lawyers have been licenced, 3,165 trainees have benefited from training programmes, and 703 regular women legal representatives have been empowered.

34. The Public Prosecutor has tried to attract qualified women to work as members of the Office of the Public Prosecutor (which is part of the judiciary) on an equal footing with male prosecutors starting in January 2018. The same goes for military jobs; application and registration have been opened for a number of military positions for women.

35. With regard to women and girls who are victims of sexual abuse, we note that they are not punished, as you state in your comment. On the contrary, they have recourse to legal remedy. The penalties set forth by law are imposed on the perpetrator, and the victims are given health care and social and legal assistance. Article 16 of the Code of Criminal Procedure provides that the victim or their representatives or heirs may initiate a criminal action in respect of all cases involving a private right of action and prosecute such a case before the competent court, and that in such a case, the court shall notify the public prosecutor.

36. The preceding shows clearly that women have the right of recourse to the courts and access to remedies on an equal footing with men. With regard to the comment about judges having discretionary power, His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister, announced that the Kingdom plans to adopt judicial legislation, including an evidence act, a personal status act and a civil transactions act. A draft penal code is in process. These laws will help make rulings more predictable, raise the level of integrity and efficiency of the performance of judicial agencies, and increase the reliability of procedures and oversight mechanisms. They will be a fundamental pillar of the principles of justice by setting clear limits for responsibility and standardizing legal principles to reduce idiosyncratic rulings.

37. The Judicial Training Centre, a government training centre affiliated with the Ministry of Justice, specializes in training and qualification in judicial and legal fields. The Centre tries to contribute effectively to achieving the goals of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 by improving the quality of outputs and training and qualification practices and making them more reliable. The Centre is increasing its interaction locally and internationally and improving the efficiency of institutional operations. As of January 2024, it had 6,866 training programmes and 39,450 trainees.

38. Legal provisions in force in the Kingdom do not discriminate against women. Men and women are equal before the law. Under the Islamic sharia, any legal testimony is subject to various rules and conditions, whether the witness is a man or a woman, and subject to the discretion of the court, like any other evidence.

Reply to paragraph 4 of the list of issues and questions

39. Saudi Arabia adheres to international standards regarding the application of the death penalty, which is imposed only for the most serious crimes on the basis of an explicit legal provision. It is handed down under a definitive ruling from a competent court, only in the presence of evidence that leaves no room for any alternative interpretation of the facts and only after all legal safeguards have been duly observed. These include the provision of legal aid and the fact that death sentences handed down by a court of first instance are subject to mandatory appeal before the Court of Appeal and then to review by the Supreme Court. This means that such cases are heard by 13 judges at different stages of the legal process, alongside other safeguards consistent with the relevant international standards.

40. Supreme Order No. 25803 of 29 Jumada I 1439 A.H. (15 February 2018) concerning legal assistance to women and children in cases of abuse, directs the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, in coordination with the Saudi Bar Association, to obtain a periodic list of the names and addresses of lawyers providing pro bono legal aid and to work with them, pursuant to paragraph 11 of article 13 of the statute of the Saudi Bar Association. The Association received numerous requests for legal aid submitted by women citizens and residents during 2023. They were all reviewed, and 68 requests submitted by women citizens and 30

requests submitted by women residents were referred to pro bono lawyers to provide them with assistance.

41. With regard to self-defence, it should be noted that self-defence is indeed grounds for negating the criminality of an act entirely where conditions are met. In such a case, there is no penalty whatsoever for the act, when conditions for self-defence are met by the person who committed it.

Reply to paragraph 5 of the list of issues and questions

42. The Family Affairs Council was established pursuant to Cabinet Decision No. 443 of 20 Shawwal A.H. 1437 (25 July 2016) with the task of overseeing family affairs. Article 6 provides that it shall establish such technical committees as are necessary, including one on childhood, one on older persons and one on women. Its statute was amended by Cabinet Decision No. 443 of 12 Sha‘ban A.H. 1443 (15 March 2022) to affiliate it with the Council on Economic and Development Affairs with a view to improving its independence and effectiveness. It has separate financing allocated to it in the State budget.

43. The Family Affairs Council is responsible for considering women’s issues and the formulation of strategies and laws to empower women in all aspects of life and eliminate discrimination against women. In coordination with the competent agencies, a draft national plan for women has been prepared as part of the National Strategy for Women in Saudi Arabia. The plan is consistent with Saudi Vision 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals, and global indicators for women.

44. The Council’s Board of Directors includes all ministries and government agencies involved with family affairs to create a common vision for the family. Its members are as follows:

- Minister of Human Resources and Social Development (Chair)
- A representative of the Ministry of the Interior
- A representative of the Ministry of Justice
- A representative of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development
- A representative of the Ministry of Economy and Planning
- A representative of the Ministry of Health
- A representative of the Ministry of Culture
- A representative of the Ministry of Education
- A representative of the Human Rights Commission
- A representative of the Media Regulatory Authority
- Two childhood affairs specialists
- Two women’s affairs specialists

45. The Council aims to strengthen and promote the status of the family and its role in society, and to maintain strong and cohesive families that take care of their children and adhere to religious and moral values and ideals. Its tasks include the following:

- Prepare a draft strategy for the family in coordination with the relevant authorities, submit it for legal procedures, and periodically follow up on implementation and assessment

- Help government and private family affairs agencies play their roles and achieve their goals, and promote coordination among them for a common vision for the family
- Raise awareness of the rights and duties of family members in Islam
- Identify problems and risks to which the family is exposed, and try to develop appropriate solutions
- Raise community awareness of the importance of family issues and how to address them
- Encourage civil society participation in addressing family issues and coming up with solutions
- Offer opinions to the relevant authorities on national reports on the family (childhood, women, and the elderly) in the Kingdom
- Express opinions and offer recommendations on reports, studies, inquiries and recommendations issued by regional and international bodies and organizations on activities and programmes related to family affairs, without prejudice to the competencies of the relevant authorities
- Make proposals for family-related legislation
- Generate a database on family affairs
- Cooperate with regional and international family affairs bodies and other relevant organizations, and take part in conferences and seminars held to discuss family issues through the competent committees
- Cooperate with local and international research centres to conduct studies on family affairs

Reply to paragraph 6 of the list of issues and questions

46. With regard to the establishment of a national human rights institution in accordance with the 1993 Paris Principles, the Human Rights Commission enjoys complete independence in the exercise of its functions. To reinforce its independence, the Council of Ministers issued Decision No. 237 dated 14 March 2016 which included several amendments to the Commission's statute. The most important was that the Commission was linked to the King directly after having been one of the organs of the executive authority. The Commission's board is the ultimate authority over the conduct of the Commission's affairs in accordance with Article 5 of its statute. The current board is made up of a chair, a vice-chair and 23 highly qualified members of proven integrity, competence and experience in the human rights field. They are from all segments of society. The Human Rights Commission provides the Government with advice, recommendations and proposals on all human rights-related matters. It prepares annual reports on the human rights situation in the Kingdom, monitors implementation of human rights laws and regulations by government agencies, and uncovers violations. It expresses opinions on draft laws, existing laws and international human rights instruments the Kingdom might accede to. It is the body that oversees preparation of reports submitted by the Kingdom to United Nations bodies and mechanisms.

47. In their respective areas of responsibility, the competent authorities uphold human rights without discrimination. They tackle discriminatory practices through such measures as monitoring and awareness-raising. The Human Rights Commission ensures that the competent government bodies implement human rights law, uncover discrimination and take the necessary legal measures. It monitors government

agencies' implementation of international human rights instruments to which Saudi Arabia has acceded and ascertains whether those agencies have taken necessary measures.

48. The National Society for Human Rights is a non-governmental organization that enjoys financial and administrative autonomy. It is not subject to the supervision or control of any governmental body. It ensures implementation of internal human rights provisions in the Basic Law of Governance and of the Kingdom's obligations under international instruments.

Reply to paragraph 7 of the list of issues and questions

49. The past few years have witnessed major developments in the field of increasing and protecting the role of civil society within the Kingdom's Vision 2030. The number of non-governmental organizations and institutions in the Kingdom has increased to over 4,000. In August 2022, the National Centre for the Development of the Non-Profit Sector issued regulations for the Associations Support Fund, to provide financial support to non-governmental organizations in various fields, including, but not limited to the following: family, women, children, orphans, youth, Hajj and Umrah pilgrims, consumer protection, housing construction, employment and training. The Centre is trying to develop resources, investments and partnerships to help the non-profit sector achieve financial sustainability, maximize social impact, and improve services for all segments of society. To date, financial support has been provided in excess of \$3,314,737.

50. Article 19, paragraph 2, of the implementing regulations of the Civil Society Associations and Organizations Act was amended to allow 15-year olds to take part in the non-profit sector by becoming members of the general assemblies of non-governmental organizations. The goal is to promote the values of solidarity among members of society. Girls under the age of 18 can also become members of the general assemblies of non-governmental organizations.

Reply to paragraph 8 of the list of issues and questions

51. Human rights awareness and instruction programmes organized by stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Information and the Human Rights Commission, are designed to address and correct negative stereotypes and false impressions that might entail or lead to discrimination against women. The Council of Senior Scholars strives to correct mistaken and misogynistic ideas connected with provisions of the Islamic sharia by publishing statements in the media and on its social media accounts. Its members frequently appear as guests on television and radio programmes. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Da'wah and Guidance plays an important role in this regard; its preachers and imams emphasize the need to correct such ideas. The King Abdulaziz Center for Cultural Communication organizes meetings and programmes to raise awareness of women's rights and help address stereotypes.

52. Curricula are continuously revised in accordance with domestic and international human rights standards. During the reporting period, numerous amendments were made to curricula across education levels, in an age-appropriate manner. The changes were made to strengthen the values of tolerance, coexistence and a positive attitude to life, and to ensure that none of the content can be misused or misconstrued to result in any form of discrimination, including discrimination against women.

53. Quantitative and qualitative indicators are used to measure the impact of training and awareness-raising programmes. For example, girls' enrolment in higher education has risen to 49.4 per cent of the total number. Some 54.5 per cent of Saudi Arabian teachers are now women.

54. The recommendations of the Human Rights Commission, which are set out in its annual reports on implementation, include qualitative statistics that can be used to assess the impact of training and awareness-raising. The Commission has made numerous recommendations on human rights, including women's rights and the elimination of discrimination against women. It follows up implementation of those recommendations in coordination with the competent bodies. The same applies to the recommendations submitted to Saudi Arabia under the universal periodic review mechanism, particularly in its third cycle. Numerous recommendations were made in connection with women's rights, eliminating discrimination against women, and empowering women. Most of those recommendations have been acted on. It should be noted that the indicators are connected with training and awareness-raising programmes. Various training programmes have been held within the framework of the memorandum of understanding concluded in 2012 between the Human Rights Commission, on behalf of Saudi Arabia, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). There are more than 100 programmes designed to provide information on the human rights conventions to which Saudi Arabia is a party, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and on international human rights indicators.

Reply to paragraph 9 of the list of issues and questions

55. As concerns early and forced marriages, the minimum age of marriage age under the Personal Status Code is 18. It is forbidden to register any contract of marriage involving a party under that age. Exceptionally, the Code does allow the court to approve the marriage of a person under the age of 18, subject to the following rules and conditions:

- No harm is caused to either of the marriage candidates.
- The candidate must have reached puberty and be of sound mind.
- The marriage should not cause harm to the male or female candidate.
- Consent must be expressly declared before the court.
- What the mother has to say about the marriage must be heard.
- The court must verify that the person wishing to marry has reached puberty and is physically and mentally sound.
- The marriage should not pose any danger to either candidate. That must be established by a medical report, a psychological report and a social report.

56. No cases of child marriage were observed during the reporting period.

Reply to paragraph 10 of the list of issues and questions

57. Violence in all its forms, particularly violence against women and girls, is criminalized under Saudi law. The Act on protection from abuse adopted in September 2013 prohibits all forms of abuse. The Act seeks to tackle behaviour characteristic of environments that enable abuse in society. Abuse is a crime that requires urgent intervention in view of the physical, psychological and social damage it causes. It often occurs in situations that are beyond control and where perpetrators cannot be

brought to account. The law therefore obliges anyone who knows of a case of abuse to report it immediately. An employee who knows of a case of abuse must inform his employer at once and the employer must inform the authorities or police as soon as he learns of it. The Act on abuse, the Child Protection Act and the Act on the crime of harassment together form a legal barrier to violence against women and girls.

58. Complaints are received by the complaint centre at the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development established in March 2016. The centre is open 24 hours and receives all reports at the emergency number 1919. The National Centre for Security Operations can also be contacted on 911 or the Kollona Amn application. Protection teams have been established in all areas and governorates to receive complaints. A report received by the centre is forwarded to one of the social protection teams. The centre completes the necessary procedures, provides assistance to victims and, if there is sufficient evidence of a crime having been committed, refers the case to the Police or the Office of the Public Prosecutor to carry out legal process in accordance with Act on protection from abuse. The Public Prosecutor has set up offices specializing in family cases. In 2022, a total of 29,991 reports of domestic violence were received, 70 per cent of them from females and 30 per cent from males. Disaggregated by age, 36 per cent of reports were from children under the age of 18, 61 per cent from persons aged between 19 and 60, and 3 per cent from persons aged 60 and over. Items appearing in the media or on social media about any cases of domestic violence is also followed up. Legal measures are set in motion and publicly announced.

59. Supreme Order No. 25803 of 29 Jumada I A.H. 1439 (15 February 2018) concerning legal assistance to women and children in cases of abuse, directs the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, in coordination with the Saudi Bar Association, to obtain a periodic list of the names and addresses of lawyers providing pro bono legal aid and to work with them, pursuant to paragraph 11 of article 13 of the statute of the Saudi Bar Association. Supreme Order No. 33322 of 21 Rajab A.H. 1438 (18 April 2017) allows women to access all government services and conclude their business without being required to obtain the approval of a guardian.

60. The Ministry of Justice holds numerous knowledge and enrichment events in several Saudi Arabian cities on a regular basis. The most recent round was on 3 Jumada II A.H. 1443 (6 January 2022). The events consisted of four platforms. The first, on electronic services, identified the main services provided by the Ministry. The second explained several laws related to women, the family and children. The third provided basic information to raise awareness of family status issues. The fourth highlighted the important function of reconciliation with a view to resolving problems amicably and without breakup or litigation. Those initiatives are part of the Ministry's activities under the National Transformation Programme.

61. Numerous training activities and programmes have been launched under a memorandum of understanding signed in 2012 between Saudi Arabia and OHCHR. More than 100 activities and programmes for judges, staff of the Office of the Public Prosecutor, lawyers, health practitioners and law enforcement officers have been implemented to raise awareness of the human rights conventions to which Saudi Arabia is a party and explore how best to implement their provisions.

62. A women's help line, 199022, has been launched. It receives calls from all regions of the Kingdom seven days a week and offers telephone counselling services on various difficulties and challenges that women may face, including problems related to violence. A Higher Diploma in Family Safety is now offered by King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences. It aims to develop the skills and

capabilities of workers in the field of family protection, including those involved in protecting women from violence.

63. The National Family Safety Programme plays an important role in this connection. This is a national programme designed to protect the family from violence by offering prevention and support programmes, raising awareness, and building professional partnerships with specialists, governmental and non-governmental institutions and international organizations in order to ensure a safe environment for families in Saudi Arabia. It administers the national registry of violence and abuse maintained by the health sector, which monitors cases of violence against persons, including women, received from health institutions and makes available data and reports.

64. The Family Safety Programme also offers the “Story of hope” rehabilitation programme, which is a free training programme aimed at rehabilitating and supporting battered women and empowering them for the future. More than 1,000 women were rehabilitated by 35 training programmes from 2016 to 2023. The “They are success” programme to prevent violence against women aims to educate community members about the importance of preventing violence against women.

65. Rape is a crime under the provisions of Islamic law. It warrants the most severe penalties, as it represents an assault on honour, which is one of the five necessities that Islamic law came to preserve. It falls within the major crime category.

66. The Office of the Public Prosecutor handles criminal cases in abuse crimes. Article 15 of the Code of Criminal Procedure provides that the Office of the Prosecutor, in accordance with its statute, shall bring criminal cases before the competent court. In cases where there is no complaint submitted by the competent authority from the victim or their representative or heir, the Office of the Public Prosecutor may initiate public interest criminal proceedings in crimes of abuse in accordance with article 17 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The Prosecutor interrogates the person accused of perpetrating the abuse crime. The Prosecutor is responsible for bringing a case against the perpetrator before a criminal court and demanding the prescribed penalty. Article 13 provides for more severe penalties for cases of abuse where the victim is a person with disabilities, is one of the perpetrator’s parents or is over the age of 60, or if the victim is pregnant and miscarries as result of the abuse. More severe penalties are also provided for if the abuse occurs in a place of work, study or worship, if the perpetrator is a person entrusted with the enforcement of the present Act, or if the abuse is perpetrated using a weapon.

Reply to paragraph 11 of the list of issues and questions

67. With regard to effective and unconditional implementation of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act and prosecuting and punishing perpetrators, the Act provides for imprisonment not to exceed two years or a fine not to exceed 100,000 riyals for anyone with knowledge of the perpetration or attempted perpetration of any of the crimes provided for in that Act, even if they are bound by professional confidentiality, or anyone who obtains information or indications relating to it directly or indirectly, and does not report it immediately to the competent authorities.

68. The Act prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons mentioned in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The Act defines different types of trafficking-in-persons offences and penalties, which may be up to 15 years of imprisonment and/or a fine of up to 1 million riyals. The Act provides for more severe penalties in cases where the victim is a woman or child, and it deems irrelevant the consent of victims in any of the

offences mentioned in the law. The most significant features of the Law are as follows: Trafficking in persons is prohibited in all its forms, including those involving coercion, threat, fraud, deception, abduction, exploitation of office or influence, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits, to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of sexual abuse, forced labour or services, begging, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, the removal of organs or the conduct of medical experimentation.

69. A national plan to combat trafficking in persons has been developed in coordination with international organizations and duly adopted. It focuses on four strategic areas: prevention, protection and assistance, prosecution, and partnerships and cooperation. A national referral mechanism for trafficking victims, launched in August 2020 to document instances of human trafficking and to identify victims, tracks cases from when they first emerge until they are definitively adjudicated by the courts. The mechanism also serves to guide staff in the competent bodies on the procedures they should follow at each stage, in accordance with the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act. Work is currently underway to develop an online system to connect all stakeholders. Saudi Arabia has ratified the 2014 Protocol to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29). For its part, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has set up a special department to receive and act on reports of suspected cases of trafficking in persons. The department receives the reports then provides protection and support to suspected trafficking victims.

70. It should be noted that paragraph 11 of the list of issues is incorrect when it states that the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act contains a clause that allows a judge in the competent court to exclude immediate family members from punishment for acts of physical force, threat or terror. The article in question has to do with reporting. It provides for imprisonment not to exceed two years or a fine not to exceed 100,000 riyals for anyone with knowledge of the perpetration or attempted perpetration of any of the crimes provided for in the Act, even if they are bound by professional confidentiality, or anyone who obtains information or indications relating to it directly or indirectly, and does not immediately report it to the competent authorities. The competent court may exclude parents, children, spouses, brothers and sisters from the provisions of this article (Article 7). The goal is to preserve the family entity, which represents the nucleus of society, without prejudice to its right to punish perpetrators. The crime may be reported by those not mentioned in the article (parents, children, spouses, brothers and sisters). Reporting is only one means of discovering the crime. There are other means to ensure that this is achieved without disturbing family harmony. In all cases, application of the provision is left to the discretion of the competent court.

71. Special criminal chambers have been set up inside the courts to hear cases of trafficking in persons. The Public Prosecutor has established branch offices to investigate such cases. The Ministry of the Interior has adopted protocols for arrest and deportation that conform to international standards, including the principle of non-refoulement and the detection of possible victims of trafficking in persons. In cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the standing committee to combat trafficking in persons has provided training to more than 4,000 persons.

Reply to paragraph 12 of the list of issues and questions

72. Every citizen of Saudi Arabia, male or female, has a right to participate in political and public life by participating in decision-making, voting or standing for office in institutions with an elected membership or management. As regards women's

participation in political life, article 43 of the Basic Law provides that every citizen, without discrimination, has the right to address the authorities on matters of concern to them. Saudi Arabian women have been participating in the Shura Council. Initially, six women were appointed as non-full-time advisors. By virtue of Royal Order No. 44 of 29 Safar A.H. 1434 (11 January 2013), women became members of the Council, with a minimum quota of 20 per cent. Women have become chairs and members of several Shura Council committees. There are now 97 women working at the Council. The Human Rights Commission has 12 female members, or 50 per cent of the total membership.

73. A Department for the Empowerment of Women has been established within the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. Its purpose is to develop and implement projects to support women in the Saudi Arabian workplace with a view to increasing female labour force participation and strengthening equal opportunities in public and private sector employment. The Women's Empowerment Initiative was launched by the Ministry with the aim of increasing the participation of women in the public and private sectors and at all job levels. It envisages women assuming senior structural leadership positions, taking advantage of their energy and capabilities, expanding their work options and increasing their participation in order to ensure equality of opportunity between the sexes and shrink the gender gap both quantitatively and qualitatively. The initiative's goal is to help women overcome the obstacles standing between them and human, economic and social development. Women's empowerment programmes have been expanded, most notably, the Qurrah programme to support childcare for working women. More than 14,200 working women have been supported through the Qurrah childcare services programme. The Wusul programme has supported commutes for over 184,700 working women. The Self-Employment Support programme has expanded opportunities for women to augment their incomes based on their skills. The part-time and remote-work programmes enable women to achieve a balance between work and family, and allow rural women to join the labour market. A Gender Balance Centre has also been established.

74. The Sarah Al-Sudairi Centre for Women's Studies has been created as part of Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University. The new Centre, which concerns itself with supporting the development of women within the framework of the Saudi Vision 2030, conducts studies into women's changing perceptions and values, and documents and highlights the role Saudi women play in building society. The Centre also conducts research related to women in the Arab world and the rest of the world and then compares their situation with that of women in Saudi Arabia. The Centre is working to create a digital library of academic research in women's studies.

75. The Gender Balance Centre was created to bridge the gender gap in all fields of work. It works to coordinate efforts within the Kingdom to achieve gender balance. It offers administrative advice and development recommendations to improve regulatory policies and procedures in all sectors of the State. It prepares studies and recommendations that support gender balance.

76. The National Observatory for Women was established to monitor the contributions of Saudi women to development at all levels, and their direct impact on society and development. It functions as a repository for decision-makers and civil society institutions and organizations by developing indicators that measure the role of women in development, and provides data and studies that support increasing women's participation in development.

Reply to paragraph 13 of the list of issues and questions

77. Despite the Kingdom's reservation to article 9, paragraph 2 of the Convention, it has made a number of arrangements for the children of Saudi Arabian women by non-Saudi citizens, which were approved by Council of Ministers Decision No. 406 dated 27 Dhu al-Hijjah A.H.1433 (19 February 2012). They included granting such children residing in the Kingdom permanent residence. Their mothers may request that such children be brought to reside in the Kingdom if they are abroad. The State covers residence fees for such children. They are treated the same as Saudi Arabians with regard to study, medical treatment and work. The goal is to remedy any ill effects resulting from their nationality being different from that of the mother.

78. The Saudi Nationality Act sets out the conditions for the acquisition, loss and revocation of nationality. The law does indeed take *jus sanguinis* through the father as the basis for birth nationality, as a general rule. However, as an exception on humanitarian grounds, *jus soli* can be recognized in the case of a child born in Saudi Arabia to two unknown parents. *Jus sanguinis* through the mother can be recognized, as an exception, if the woman is a Saudi Arabian citizen at the time of the child's birth and the father is of unknown nationality or stateless. The law has been amended several times. Articles 12 and 17 have been amended to strengthen the right of a Saudi Arabian woman to retain Saudi Arabian nationality if her Saudi Arabian husband acquires a foreign nationality, or if she marries a foreigner. Article 12, as amended, provides that when a male Saudi Arabian citizen acquires a foreign nationality – if he has been permitted to do so – and she is eligible for her husband's nationality under the law of the new State of nationality, she does not necessarily lose her Saudi Arabian nationality, unless she decides to do so and declares that she has adopted her husband's new nationality. Article 17, as amended, provides that a Saudi Arabian woman does not lose Saudi Arabian nationality by marrying a foreign man, unless she decides to do so and declares that she has taken her husband's nationality, and she is eligible for that nationality under the law of that country. Article 18 provides that a Saudi Arabian woman married to a foreigner may reclaim her Saudi Arabian nationality upon the termination of her marriage after she returns to reside in Saudi Arabia. The Act does not distinguish between the two sexes with regard to the acquisition of Saudi Arabian nationality through the normal and exceptional channels.

Reply to paragraph 14 of the list of issues and questions

79. The importance that the Kingdom attaches to education in Vision 2030 has resulted in a number of rapid developments and reforms, including providing educational opportunities for all; promoting free education; equality of opportunity; curriculum development; enhancing teacher performance, educational supervision, school buildings and equipment, and tools and methods of measurement and evaluation; strengthening educational guidance and counselling; giving due attention to persons with visual, auditory and intellectual disabilities and autism; and ensuring schooling for students with disabilities. In that connection, a lifelong learning initiative has been launched under the name "Istadama", which is just one of the initiatives envisaged under the programme of national transformation that has emerged from the Saudi Vision 2030. The initiative, which is aimed at adults between the ages of 15 and 50, aims to eradicate illiteracy and to empower individuals to benefit from education and training opportunities. In September 2021, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia launched a human-capacity-building programme, which is one of the programmes the intended to achieve Vision 2030. The goals of the programme include the development of an

integrated educational itinerary, improving equality of educational opportunity and enhancing the outcomes of basic education.

80. According to statistics, the literacy rate (reading and writing) in persons aged between 15 and 24 stood at 99.5 per cent in 2020. The net enrolment rate in primary education was 99.39 per cent in 2021 while, in 2020, the completion rate for primary education was 99.5 per cent. The net enrolment rate in middle-school education was 98.56 per cent in 2021 while the completion rate was 93.13 per cent. The net enrolment rate in secondary education was 99.37 per cent in 2021 while the completion rate was 98 per cent. The total enrolment rate in higher education was 71.41 per cent in 2021. As of 2021, the number of years students are expected to spend in education stood at 16.17.

81. As a result of the efforts it has made, Saudi Arabia has advanced eight places in the annual Global Competitiveness Index, which is issued by the World Competitiveness Centre of the International Institute for Management Development (IMD). Overall, it ranked 24 out of 63 countries and was the second ranking nation in terms of progress achieved. The report also highlighted remarkable developments in the country's performance under several sub-indicators, including education, where Saudi Arabia ranked third in terms of public expenditure out of 63 States. The Kingdom also advanced in the Global Talent Ranking, ranking thirtieth overall among 63 of the most competitive countries in the world. Moreover, under a number of sub-indicators, Saudi Arabia ranked among the top 10 States in the world, notably: government spending on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (third), graduate training (ninth) and language skills (twentieth). Since Saudi Arabia began participating in the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) in 2007, it has won 133 awards, including 92 major awards, and 41 special awards.

82. The Ministry of Education has worked to create specialized units on reproductive health in the Life and Family Skills curriculum that is taught to all students of the third year of secondary school in all tracks, in line with the reproductive health indicators of the World Health Organization. The Life and Family Skills curriculum is mandatory in public schools so that all students can access and benefit from it. Science curricula also include reproductive health concepts, and cover body organs and systems from a scientific point of view at both the primary and secondary levels.

83. The newly established National Curriculum Centre is working on an initiative that incorporates reproductive health awareness into the curricula at the intermediate and secondary levels. The goal is to raise awareness of reproductive health concepts, implement health education programmes, raise awareness of the importance of access to appropriate health care services, and raise awareness of the dangers of forbidden practices that threaten health safety. This initiative seeks to educate male and female students about reproductive health issues at an early age. That would have a profound impact on cultivating a physically, psychologically and social integrated character at all ages for both genders.

84. With regard to ensuring that pregnant girls and young women and mothers are reintegrated into and supported in continuing their education, it should be noted that no interruption of schooling has been observed for pregnant girls and young women in the Saudi Arabian education system. Pregnant girls and young women do not stop pursuing their education unless health conditions so require, like any other student.

85. The objectives of the Human Capacity Development Programme are taken into account during curriculum review and development, which is programmed to be conducted on a regular basis. The Ministry of Education has also made sure that its curricula combat gender discrimination. It has a set of periodic review criteria on the basis of which regular reviews are conducted and which are closely aligned with the

objectives of the Kingdom's Vision 2030. It also works with the agencies involved in women's empowerment, such as the National Observatory for Women. The National Curriculum Centre analyses school curricula to make sure that women are better represented and that their pivotal role in national development and contributions at the national and global levels are covered. The Centre tries to incorporate a positive image of women into educational curricula as part of a comprehensive development of educational curricula. The multiple roles of women in society are highlighted across subjects, including Islamic studies, Arabic language, mathematics, science, digital skills, English language, art education, life and family skills and special education. Instructional materials make sure to diversify the activities in which women come up, such as health, education, art, literature, sports, entertainment and reading. Women take part in exhibitions, forums and competitions, and have won prizes. Curricula make sure to highlight the role women play in serving their country and their passion for science and knowledge. They affirm women's right to own and dispose of assets, practice various professions and engage in business, as well as their contribution to social cohesion, community service and national identity. Educational materials are imbued with the idea that women should be included, that they should keep pace with technical developments, and that they should develop a global perspective in order to gain an accurate and broad understanding of various world cultures.

Reply to paragraph 15 of the list of issues and questions

86. Amendments were introduced to the Labour Code to ensure equality between men and women in rights, duties and conditions of service. Specifically, the amendments affected article 3 – to prohibit workplace discrimination on grounds of sex, disability, age or any other grounds – and article 155 – to prohibit dismissal or threat of dismissal against a female worker during pregnancy or maternity leave, including during any illnesses arising during that time. Further amendments focused on article 38 the Social Insurance Act to make 60 the retirement age for both men and women. In addition, Council of Ministers Decree No. 416 of 17 Jumada II A.H. 1444 (10 January 2023) was issued to approve a national policy to promote equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and work. The policy aims to eradicate all forms of discrimination in that field. To that end, laws and policies are being developed to identify and prohibit discrimination in the workplace. At the same time, a package of measures, programmes and initiatives is being rolled out to promote the participation of women and other groups least represented on the labour market.

87. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development issued Decree No. 1/2370 of 18 Ramadan A.H. 1431, which prohibits discrimination between male and female workers in respect of wages for work of equal value, as mentioned in paragraph 16 above.

88. The Ministry also issued Decree No. 4906 of 8 Muharram A.H. 1442, the Decision of the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, which concerns standard workplace regulations for private sector facilities. The regulations include rules – including discrimination-related rules – governing the employment of workers in all activities. They state that it is the responsibility of employers to prevent discrimination (on grounds of sex, disability, age or any other grounds) between workers in the terms and conditions of work, be it during the performance of their duties, during recruitment or in job postings. Employers are also prohibited from discriminating between male and female workers in respect of wages for work of equal value.

89. As was mentioned in paragraph 70 above, a Department for the Empowerment of Women was established within the Ministry of Human Resources and Social

Development. Its purpose is to develop and implement projects to support women in the Saudi Arabian workplace with a view to increasing female labour force participation and strengthening equal opportunities in public and private sector employment. The Women's Empowerment Initiative was launched by the Ministry with the aim of increasing the participation of women in the public and private sectors and at all job levels. It envisages women assuming senior structural leadership positions. Women's empowerment programmes have been enhanced, most notably, the Qurrah programme to support childcare for working women, the Wusul programme, the Self-Employment Support programme, and the part-time and remote-work programmes, which enable women to achieve a balance between work and family, and allow rural women to enter the labour market. A Gender Balance Centre has also been established.

90. As a result, the percentage of women in the total labour force during the period from 2017 to 2023 rose from 21.2 per cent (second quarter) to 34 per cent (fourth quarter). The rate of women's participation in the labour force increased during the same period from 17 to 36 per cent (fourth quarter). The percentage of women's participation in administrative positions (senior and middle) during the period from 2017 to 2022 increased from 10.9 to 20.1 per cent. The percentage of Saudi women in the civil service had reached 43 per cent by the end of the fourth quarter in 2023. The share of women in small and medium enterprises during the period from 2017 to 2022 rose from 22.5 per cent to 45 per cent. The percentage of women active in information and communications during the same period increased from 5 per cent to 29.8 per cent. The percentage of Saudi women's ownership in commercial registers increased to 40 per cent of the commercial registers of existing institutions.

91. With a notable acceleration of the pace of change and as a result of comprehensive economic reforms, women have entered new areas in the labour market, with women's employment in the industrial sector rising 93 per cent over the past three years. Some 63,800 women are working in factories.

Reply to paragraph 16 of the list of issues and questions

92. Numerous measures have been taken to strengthen and protect the rights of female domestic workers. Examples include the awareness-raising measures undertaken by the Ministry, the Human Rights Commission, the National Society for Human Rights and other civil society organizations. The anti-trafficking committee has taken action to monitor the underlying causes of, and responses to, offences involving economic and sexual exploitation. The Ministry and the Commission also fulfil an oversight role. In view of the fact that abuse, exploitation and violence against foreign female workers, particularly domestic workers, can take place with no accountability, a range of steps have been taken. The following are among the most significant:

- *Developing contractual mechanisms.* Relevant offices and companies are being trained in concluding contracts with migrant workers. Training is offered on the forms of trafficking in persons, and definitions of and standards for relevant activities. Care is taken to ensure that companies meet the required standards to obtain a licence, and that they coordinate with the embassies of countries with which cooperation agreements have been concluded.
- *Developing monitoring and oversight of practitioners.* A programme to support domestic workers has been launched. It consists of an electronic system which clearly and transparently sets forth employment procedures for domestic workers up until the time they leave Saudi Arabia after their contract ends. The programme is managed with input from the competent agencies in the Kingdom

and beyond. All procedures from the domestic worker's arrival in Saudi Arabia to the end of their contract are documented and automated. Care is taken to ensure that their rights are protected, transactions are monitored, contracts and wages are documented and rights are guaranteed. Support and protection are offered through the labour affairs agency of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development.

- *Developing mechanisms for support and protection.* As detailed above, complaints and reports are received on the consolidated number 19911. In addition, booklets and pamphlets are published informing domestic workers of redress measures that are available when their rights are violated. Such measures include a reporting mechanism and access legal aid and translation. Reports can be received from individuals, offices, companies and embassies concerning any violation of the rules in force. If violations of labour rights are identified, field teams are dispatched to address the situation in accordance with established mechanisms.

93. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development issued Decree No. 73945, under which it endorsed the Musaned online visa issuance platform. Musaned is a new and integrated online tool that facilitates procedures for entering into contracts with domestic workers while preserving the rights of all the parties involved. The platform aims to limit the black market and curb violators, and regulate and govern contractual relations among all parties. There are some 4,079,049 domestic workers in the Kingdom, of whom 74 per cent are male and 26 per cent female. The platform offers the following services:

- *Standard contract.* Mediation contracts and standard bilingual contracts have been adopted to preserve the rights of all parties. All relevant parties – employers, domestic workers, local offices and offices abroad – have a feature to view the mediation contract in detail. Embassies of countries that send domestic workers provide comprehensive particulars about their nationals coming to work in the Kingdom, including a certified contract and the name and location of the employer.
- *Contract renewal.* Full documentation is provided of the contractual relationship of domestic workers who have finished the contract period and wish to renew work residence. This is to ensure and document that all parties are aware of and have approved the renewed contract for reference in case of dispute.
- *Wage protection.* The quality of the domestic worker's environment has been improved by preserving their rights, providing an attractive work environment, ensuring that the domestic worker receives their salary on a monthly basis, following up on the employer's obligations to pay domestic workers on a monthly basis, and full review and governance of financial transactions.
- *Contract insurance.* Insurance is applied to employment contracts by insurance companies that are linked through the Musaned platform. That creates a stable work environment for both parties.

94. The service for reporting absenteeism from work has been abolished because it gave rise to exploitation and put pressure on workers. It has been replaced with a service for reporting interruptions in work and the termination of contracts while preserving the rights of both parties to the contract. As a result, workers can move to a different employer or be granted a final exit visa. A service has also been launched using the Quwa platform, which acts a single unified location for the registration of employment contract; as a consequence, the registration of contracts using the Madad platform has been suspended. The aim of this is to consolidate registration platforms,

to preserve the rights of the contracting parties (employers and workers), to create a work environment that promotes the stability of workers and boosts productivity, to ensure compliance with the Labour Code, to verify the accuracy of the data in the contract and to reduce labour disputes.

95. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has set up the unified telephone number 19911, which operates in several languages to receive complaints from foreign workers. This constitutes a significant development in the provision of means of redress. In addition, inspection visits to recruitment bureaus have been intensified with a view to detecting any violations concerning the misuse of visas. A total of 1,301,791 such visits were conducted in 2022. A number of violations were detected where employers were engaging workers in work other than that stated on their work permit or contract of employment, leading to the issuance of 5,523 warnings and the recording of 263 offences. Cases where employers were discovered to be practicing an activity other than that registered in the Ministry's records led to the issuance of 87 warnings and the recording of 5 offences.

96. The Minister of Human Resources and Social Development issued decision No. 40676 dated 17 Rabi' I A.H. 1445 (2 October 2023), which updates regulations for domestic workers and those in comparable jobs to provide for the rights and duties of both parties to the domestic worker relationship.

Reply to paragraph 17 of the list of issues and questions

97. The Social Development Bank provides a package of social funding products that are aimed at an important category of citizens, namely, low-income individuals. The Bank gives them the opportunity to obtain concessional financing that enables them to meet obligations arising from their basic needs, whether at the individual or family level, without discrimination on the basis of sex.

98. Relevant measures also include the establishment of an assistance programme to launch small enterprises for families in need, at a total cost of 2 billion Saudi Arabian riyals. A programme providing for family-run projects has been established, at a total cost of 1.5 billion riyals, to help garner capital, raw materials and other components that are needed to start the business. The Bank has concluded 13 agreements with the tertiary sector, for a total of more than 12 million riyals, so that family-run businesses can access financial and other services. The Bank has supported and empowered women through several programmes and services; it has provided more than 13 billion riyals to more than 300,000 women. Those initiatives have prompted a 400 per cent increase in the number of beneficiaries over the three years since 2019. Non-financial services include childcare, training and capacity building. These are provided by the Department of Empowerment and Development, business and output incubators and the Dulani business centre, in cooperation with entrepreneurship training centres. Some 60,000 women across the country have benefited from the programmes.

99. Social security benefits have been increased by raising the minimum benefit per family from 1,000 riyals per beneficiary and 28 per cent for dependents to 1,100 riyals per beneficiary and 50 per cent for dependents. Programmes are in place to support and shore up social security. The most significant include the productive families programme; the renovation, mattresses and furniture programme; the satchel and school uniform programme; the discounted purchasing programme; and the electricity and water bill support programme. Some 3.5 billion riyals have been allocated for that purpose. The Takaful charitable foundation and the Ministry of Education support programme for students in need have been shored up, and 476 million riyals per year have been allocated for that purpose.

100. A citizen's account programme has been launched to address the expected effects of the economic reforms under Vision 2030. Cash sums have been paid to male and female citizens on an equal footing, in accordance with established conditions of eligibility.

101. Various entities support women in business. Alongside material support, they provide advice, training, business development services and guidance. Such entities include Small and Medium Enterprise Authority centres, the Prince Sultan Fund to Support and Empower Women, and the Aramco business centres (Waed). The Saudi Industrial Development Fund finances projects in industry, energy and mining. The Agricultural Development Fund provides funding for agriculture and all types of crops, apiaries, fishing boats, agritourism and sustainable rural development programmes.

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102. The "Reef" Sustainable Rural Development Programme was launched to improve the rural and agricultural sector, raise the living standards of small-scale farmers and rural families, improve capacities and productivity, and reinforce their way of life and food security. The Programme also seeks to develop several other sectors, with a particular focus on the comparative advantages of particular areas.

103. Among the programme's strategic objectives are to contribute to social stability, contribute to food security, and preserve the environment and natural resources. It provides support in the following sectors:

- Honey sector support programme
- Milk sector support programme
- Rainfed crops sector support programme
- Rose cultivation sector support programme
- The rural families production support programme

Number of beneficiaries of the "Reef" Sustainable Rural Development Programme

Number of beneficiaries receiving support	29 456
Number of farmers receiving support	15 456
Number of productive rural households receiving support	14 000
Total assets subsidized	1.3 million assets (seedlings and honey boxes)
Total production subsidized	8.4 million kg

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104. As part of its approach to disseminating a culture of human rights, the Human Rights Commission conducts awareness-raising activities. It has held numerous conferences, seminars and training sessions to raise awareness of human rights. That includes women's rights. In March 2023, the Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Education signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation and coordination in human rights-related awareness-raising and education. The memorandum covers inclusion of human rights values and concepts in school curricula at all levels, educational activities, visual and print materials including

human rights guides, participation in research, and capacity-building in the human rights field.

105. A series of legislative amendments in July 2019 were aimed at enhancing gender equality. One of those amendments affected the Travel Documents Act and its implementing regulations under which women now have the same rights as men to obtain a passport and travel abroad. The Civil Status Code was also amended and now envisages full gender equality in obtaining civil status documentation and in reporting civil status events, thereby strengthening women's autonomy, as noted above.

106. Under the 2022 Personal Status Law, a mother has the capacity to participate fully in decisions concerning her child. The fact that guardianship belongs to the father or the fact that he has the right to appoint a guardian for his children does not limit at all her ability to care for her children and take part in decisions that concern them. The child's best interest is paramount over any other consideration. Article 138, paragraph 1, of the Personal Status Code provides that there is no interference between the powers of the guardian and those of the custodial parent. A custodial mother has full powers in the management of her children's affairs. That article speaks of "guardianship over the person", by which is meant general supervision of the person of the minor in a manner that does not conflict with the authority of the custodial parent to manage the affairs of the child in their custody. There is a distinction between "general supervision of the child" and "management of their affairs".

107. With regard to a female custodial parent traveling with a child, the Act takes into account what is most appropriate and in the best interest of the child. A child needs both parents in his upbringing and should grow up close to both. It takes into account established customs. That does not mean that the father has absolute authority in connection with this right. If it appears that he is abusing this right, his opposition is not accepted. The Personal Status Code, article 129, provides that a custodial parent may not travel with the child outside the Kingdom for a period of more than 90 days per year without the consent of the other parent, or of the guardian in the event of the death of that parent. This is an explicit provision that applies to both father and mother.

108. With regard to the registration of non-Saudi Arabian births, the Ministry's General Directorate of Passports adds non-Saudi newborns to their parents' residence permits when they are registered with duly issued birth certificates in accordance with regulations. Article 3 of the Child Protection Act provides that it shall be considered abuse or negligence for a child to be left with no family or for a child's identity documents to be unobtained, withheld, or unrecorded.

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109. The Personal Status Code is based on provisions that promote complementary equality between the sexes or equality in outcomes, which takes into account the roles of each partner within the family to ultimately realize justice. The Code does not contain any discriminatory provisions that might weaken or dilute recognition of women's rights and freedoms. Its goal is to realize justice and family cohesion. Here are some examples of the Code's fairness:

- The Code gives a man the right to separate from his wife. It gives the same right to women. However, the manner and mode of this separation differs, although it gives them an equal right. This is set forth in the Code.

- It provides that all personal status particulars and dates must be documented. That includes divorce and return. A husband is required to pay his wife fair compensation in the event that these procedures are not documented.
- With regard to inheritance, the claim that the Code makes the inheritance share of women less than that of men is absolutely incorrect. In fact, we find that the Code's articles provide for over 30 cases where women get the same or more than men, or where they inherit and their male counterparts get nothing.

110. Article 46 of the Code contains provisions governing separation between spouses. That includes divorce, khul', annulment of the marriage contract and other procedures. Looking at it as a whole, we find that both spouses are able to terminate the marital relationship. While the husband has the right to terminate the marital relationship through divorce, the wife also has the right to terminate this relationship in other ways. These are covered in articles 95 and 96, which deal with the khul' procedure. It is defined as separation between the spouses at the wife's request and the husband's consent in exchange for compensation made by the wife. Khul' is validated by mutual consent of the spouses with full capacity to terminate the marriage contract, without need for a court ruling.

111. Article 104 provides that either of the spouses may request dissolution of the marriage contract on grounds of harm to one of them or a defect that prevents marital cohabitation, whether such defect existed prior to or arose after the marriage contract, unless the person requesting dissolution was aware of such defect at the time the contract was concluded or found out about it after the contract was concluded but gave some indication in word or deed that they were accepting of it (Personal Status Code).

112. The Code steers clear of specifying the types of harm because it because it does not wish to limit them and because harm is relative from one case to another. The same approach has been adopted by other comparable laws, whether relating to personal status or otherwise. This is an approach conducive to justice. If the Code were to specify the types of harm, then a court hearing a case might find that harm has in fact occurred, but that it cannot treat it as such because it is not included among the types of harm specified under the Code. Even so, articles 108 and 109 of the Personal Status Code set forth a general criterion for damage in marriage-related cases, which is "inability to cohabit amicably". This is interpreted as the inability to continue the marital relationship in a way that guarantees each party's rights. It should be noted that all forms of abuse are considered to be harm that requires dissolution of marriage at the request of the wife, under article 108 of the Personal Status Code.

113. Women enjoy complete independence in the management of their affairs. They do not have guardians appointed, contrary to allegations made on the basis of incorrect interpretations. In Saudi Arabian law, guardianship applies only to a minor who lacks legal capacity, or has lost it completely or partially. That applies to anyone else in that condition in accordance with the relevant provisions. It includes any person who is unable to grasp the reality of things due to young age or a health condition making them unable to conduct their affairs properly.

114. On the other hand, other legislation, such as the Civil Transactions Code, is thoroughly rooted in the principles of gender equality in civil rights at all levels. That covers ownership, contracts, sale, purchase, mortgage, gifts, power of attorney, leases, apportionment, endowment, wills, transfer, and so forth. Women have the same legal personality as men when it comes to disposing of their affairs as they wish, both before marriage and afterwards. Married women have full civil capacity and their own personal assets separate from their husband's legal personality and assets.

Conclusion

115. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia hopes that it has provided answers that will pave the way for a constructive interactive dialogue with the esteemed Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Kingdom stresses that it has made progress towards high levels of human rights protection and advancement through legislative and other measures intended to realize that objective. It has benefitted from the recommendations and observations issued by the various treaty bodies, including the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
