

# Girls' and Women's 'Care Institutions' in Saudi Arabia (Dar al-Re'aya)

Dar al-Re'aya, literally 'care homes' in Arabic, are detention facilities in Saudi Arabia that house young women and girls who have become delinquent or have been accused by their male guardians of disobedience. In the absence of independent refuges they are also the only national institutions that female victims of domestic abuse can turn to. Women can be detained in these institutions for long periods, at the mercy of their male guardians without whose consent they cannot be released. Despite their name, these state-run institutions neither care for women nor provide them adequate shelter from domestic violence. On the contrary, in most cases they deprive women of their liberty, control them, and punish them for 'disobedience'.

## Male guardianship system far from dismantled

Over the past few years the Saudi authorities have lifted some of the restrictions women face under the country's male guardianship system, including allowing women to apply for their own passports and granting them more control over family matters, as well as relaxing strict gender

segregation in public spaces and allowing women to drive. While these are all steps in the right direction, they are by no means enough. The male guardianship system – a legal framework that treats adult women as minors – continues to negatively affect all aspects of women's lives and severely restrict their fundamental liberties.

Reforms have been announced supposedly to protect women from abuse, but they lack adequate means of enforcement, leaving many women trapped in abusive relationships. 'Disobedience' by a woman towards her male guardian (father, husband, brother or even son) also remains a crime, effectively rendering her new freedoms null and void if her male guardian objects. While a woman may now be legally entitled to apply for her own travel document and study abroad, she can be stopped by her male guardian from leaving the country if he files a case against her for disobedience or 'absconding'.

## About Dar al-Re'aya

Such a complaint by a male guardian can lead to a woman being detained in Dar al-Re'aya. As explained in ALQST's detailed [prisons report](#), these government establishments for girls and young women are purportedly tasked with providing care and social discipline, strengthening religious affiliation, and delivering education, training and healthcare for delinquent girls and women up to the age of 30 who are detained pending investigation or trial, or who a judge decides should remain in one of these facilities. [The reasons](#) for which girls and young women are referred to Dar al-Re'aya include *taghayub* (being absent, 'absconding' or running away from home), engaging in an act of moral indecency such as extramarital sexual relations, committing murder, or *'uquq* (disobeying a parent or male guardian).

## Conditions inside the 'care homes'

ALQST has documented several causes of concern for the well-being of young female prisoners in women's care institutions, including cases of abuse and neglect such as malnutrition, poor health and hygiene conditions, mistreatment and brutality, excessive use of solitary confinement, and denigration. Concerns over conditions in these institutions for young women have periodically surfaced in Saudi media and online. Several cases of suicide or attempted suicide have been reported.

## Being discharged

Girls and women can only be released from Dar al-Re'aya into the custody of a male relative. If no such person is willing or available to collect them on discharge the authorities will transfer them to a similar women's 'guest' facility, from which women also require a male guardian or relative to collect them. Women who reach the age of 30 while still in Dar al-Re'aya are also transferred to a 'guest' facility.

In September 2018, a member of the Shura Council requested that the Ministry of Justice stop accepting cases of *'uquq* and *taghayub* (disobedience and absconding), but the recommendation was [rejected](#). Saudi women's rights activists have long campaigned for abolition of the male guardianship system, and have tried in the past to establish shelters for victims of domestic violence as an independent alternative to the state-run care homes. They were never granted a permit to open such a shelter, and instead the leaders of the project were later arrested.



## Conclusion

Contrary to the Saudi authorities' claims to be empowering women and promoting their rights, the continued use of so-called care homes as detention facilities, underpinned by the rules of the oppressive male guardianship system, demonstrates the lack of genuine will to address the issue of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. ALQST regards any reforms to improve women's rights in Saudi Arabia as insufficient so long as civil society actors cannot be part of the reform process, and while the state maintains the legal mechanisms that facilitate patriarchal practices.



## Recommendations:

- ✓ Immediately and fully dismantle the male guardianship system, repealing laws and ending practices that discriminate against women;
- ✓ Abolish all provisions that require a woman to have her male guardian's permission to leave a detention or care facility;
- ✓ Eliminate all charges on which a woman can be prosecuted for disobedience and absconding; and
- ✓ Allow the establishment of independently run shelters for victims of domestic abuse.