

+41 225934701

[info@genevacouncil.com](mailto:info@genevacouncil.com)

<http://genevacouncil.com>

Rue du Pré-de-la-Bichette, Nation Business Center,  
6ème étage, Genève-Switzerland

UN Special Rapporteur on the right to physical and mental health

OHCHR-UNOG

8-14 Avenue de la Paix

1211 Geneve 10, Switzerland

Tel: +41(0) 22.917.90.06

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## **The right to mental health for Saudi women**

Dear Ms. Tlaleng Mofokeng,

The Geneva Council for Rights and Liberties (GCRL), is a non-governmental organization based in Geneva, that seeks to promote human rights in the Middle East and works to stimulate international decision-makers to focus on violations and help stop them.

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that there are currently many barriers related to the socio-economic status of Saudi women that prevent them from accessing mental health services.

Mental health is an integral part of health and well-being, as reflected in the definition of health in the Constitution of the World Health Organization. It is like other aspects of health, can be affected by a range of socio-economic factors that need to be addressed through comprehensive strategies for promotion, prevention, treatment and recovery in a whole-of-government approach. Mental health services in Saudi Arabia are highly impacted by the particular culture of the Kingdom with its strong religious and social characteristics. It has been demonstrated by several studies that Saudi women are among three main groups that are at high risk of having mental disorders in KSA. Several studies suggest higher prevalence of mental disorders among females compared to males due to several factors: socio-cultural norms and guardianship system, gender inequalities, socio-economic status, physical inactivity, unemployment, etc.

### **The male guardianship system is a major barrier for accessing mental health services.**

Every Saudi woman, regardless of her economic or social status, must comply with the guardianship system and have a male guardian (father, husband, brother, son, uncle) who has the power to make a range of critical decisions on her behalf. In 2012, the ministry of health approved a regulation to allow female patients over 18 years old the right to sign the admissions or release forms from health facilities without a male guardian. In 2017, Saudi Arabia started loosening some social restrictions on women. However, problems in implementation still exist, women continue to face numerous restrictions under the guardianship system and officials in certain facilities continue to require the signature of male guardians for women to access medical services. The male guardianship system represents a serious impeding barrier for Saudi women to access basic human rights, including access to mental health services.

## **Women's Socioeconomic Status**

Women's health depends on their health literacy status and their ability to access health services. Women with low socioeconomic status or low level of education generally lack knowledge about their mental health status and unable to identify adequate healthcare resources for their mental health symptoms. Another barrier related to socioeconomic status of Saudi women preventing them from accessing mental health services is their financial dependence on men. In Saudi Arabia, the contribution of women to the labor force is very limited as they represent less than 20 percent of the Saudi labor force, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from the International Labor Organization database.

## **Saudi women are underrepresented in policy-making**

In 2015, women were allowed to vote and run in Saudi elections for the first time. Despite this unprecedented progress, Saudi women are still deeply underrepresented in political decision-making which represents another barrier preventing women from meaningfully contributing to changing health policies and serving the interests of women's health. Another barrier preventing Saudi women from accessing mental health services is the social stigma around mental disorders.

Mental health illnesses have always been surrounded by social stigma, leading to reluctance to seek health care from the patients. Psychotherapy is considered as a great disgrace to its users, due to poor awareness of the importance of psychotherapy. For instance, Saudi women avoid reviewing psychiatrists for 3 main reasons, according to the director of a Mental Health Hospital in KSA: community view, fear of disclosure, and men refusing to take them to psychiatric hospitals.

## **Women's Health Care Providers**

In an ultraconservative country such as Saudi Arabia, it is considered as inappropriate for Muslim women to be examined by a doctor of the opposite gender. In addition, their male guardians can impede or delay their access to healthcare by claiming female health care providers. Considering that women constitute only one third of the Saudi doctors, it can be very challenging for women to consult female doctors within a reasonable timeframe. Women's mental health in KSA is compromised due to several factors and different barriers impede access to mental health care for Saudi women. Most importantly, the inequality between men and women, exacerbated by the guardianship system, makes women under the total control of men. Men can also deny access to mental health care for women when the health care provider is from the opposite gender. Thus, tackling this issue in order to allowing Saudi women access mental health care requires short- and long-term actions. An inclusive public health strategy is required on a short-term basis to raise awareness among men and allow women to access mental health care when needed. Abolishing the guardianship system represents a more challenging action to ensure gender equality and allow women to access mental health care when needed. Similarly, ensuring equal education opportunities between men and women grants to women a better knowledge of their health, improves their health literacy and limits the stigma around mental health diseases. This leads to better access to mental health care for women.

THERE IS NO HEALTH WITHOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Sincerely,

Nour Hamada,

Vice President, Geneva Council for Rights and Liberties