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MEDIA STATEMENT

We call upon Saudi authorities to release Manahel Al-Otaibi

The Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN UK) expresses deep concern over the 11-year sentence handed to Saudi female influencer and women's rights activist Manahel Al-Otaibi. Amnesty International suggests she is being penalised for her choice of clothing, whereas Saudi Authorities cite terrorist offences. If Ms. Al-Otaibi's punishment is linked to violating dress code norms, then the response is an excessively severe one. On the other hand, if her charges involve alleged "terrorist activities," it raises questions about the broad interpretation of such laws, which seem to encompass women's rights advocacy.

We therefore urge HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud to intervene and reform laws related to women's rights campaigning. We understand that the Crown Prince has already been instrumental in many reforms on women's rights. We also call upon him to release Ms. Al-Otaibi including other women who are also in prison for their activism.

MWN UK CEO Baroness Shaista Gohir OBE, said: *"Last year, I discussed Saudi women's rights with both HRH Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud, the Saudi Ambassador to the UK, and Dr. Hala Al Tuwajiri, the President of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, during her visit to the UK. I welcomed learning about the strides made in women's empowerment over the past several years, including increased female participation in the labour market, the lifting of the ban on women driving, and the relaxation of the male guardianship system - reforms which now allow women to independently register births, assume the role of head of the household, apply for passports, and travel without permission.*

However, it is disheartening to continue hearing about harsh punishments imposed on women for expressing themselves on social media, which undermines the progress that has been made. It is even more perplexing considering Saudi Arabia's efforts to strengthen women rights by amending laws. While I understand the pace of change can be challenging, particularly for religious scholars, I urge for continued momentum in the journey towards greater equality and justice for all Saudis."

Muslim Women's Network UK also calls the UK government's Foreign Secretary, Lord David Cameron and the Minister of State for Middle East and North Africa, Lord Tariq Ahmad, to use their influence and positive relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to secure the release of Ms. Al-Otaibi (sentenced to 11 years), Salma al-Shehab (sentenced to 27 years), Fatima al-Shawarbi (sentenced to 30 years), and Nourah al-Qahtani (sentenced to 45 years). Meanwhile, it is imperative that independent observers are also granted access to ensure the safety and welfare of these women during their incarceration.

Additional Information

- Media enquiries can be directed to: contact@mw nuk.co.uk or 0121 2369000
- Muslim Women's Network UK is a national charity, more info can be found on: www.mw nuk.co.uk
- MWN Helpline can be contacted on: Tel: 0800 999 5786 / Email: info@mwnhelpline.co.uk / Text: 07415 206 936 / www.mwnhelpline.co.uk