I should like to take this opportunity to raise the issue of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, and to pay tribute to Wajeha al-Huwaider, a remarkable woman—author, journalist and human rights campaigner—who has done so much at great personal cost to raise the profile of women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

Women in Saudi have the status of perpetual minors and are denied the most basic human rights. Those abuses stem from the male guardianship system and the strict gender segregation in Saudi. A 2008 Human Rights Watch report spells out what that means in practice. Every Saudi woman must have a male guardian—normally a father or husband—who is tasked with making the most basic decisions on her behalf. An adult woman will sometimes have her son appointed as a guardian.

Fully competent adult women are treated as legal minors, with little or no authority over their lives, bodies or well-being. Every Saudi woman is affected, regardless of her economic or social status. Adult women must obtain permission from their guardian to study, work or travel, and many are denied the right to make even the most basic decisions on behalf of their children. All hon. Members know that whenever women are hidden away, with few rights, the risk of domestic violence is increased, but the male guardianship system makes it almost impossible for those women to gain access to justice even when they are subject to violence.

Officials may—and frequently do—demand a guardian's consent even when no law or guideline requires it. Many women have been asked to produce written consent from a male guardian for medical treatment. The Saudi authorities insist that the rules are being relaxed, but in practice, I am afraid that they are not. In theory, a woman—only over 45, mind you—may travel without permission. In practice, however, many women without written permission from their guardian are turned away at airports.

Wajeha al-Huwaider first came to international attention on international women's day in 2008, when—rather shockingly—she drove her car on her own. Subsequently many Saudi women tried to follow her lead, and one woman was seriously injured after being forced off the road. Following that, women were so ostracised for such actions that they ceased.

This was not always the case. Wajeha al-Huwaider described how in her grandmother's day women had much greater freedoms: they were allowed to work in markets, travel freely and go abroad without permission; there were not the same dress restrictions; and they could divorce and remarry easily without being ostracised. I am afraid, however, that that is no longer the case in Saudi Arabia.

As women in this country and across the world look forward to the Olympics, women in Saudi Arabia are banned from the Olympic team, and have no access to public sport at all. Not only is it impossible for a Saudi woman to participate in a football match, for example, but she is banned from attending one as a spectator. That is truly shocking. From a letter of support from both sides of the House to Wajeha al-Huwaider last year and subsequent
correspondence, we know that she is not seeking to westernise Saudi society; she is seeking fundamental human rights. Women must be free to travel, study and access medical care, and to escape from violent and abusive relationships without the consent of a male guardian.

Saudi Arabia has vast wealth and vast opportunities to spread that wealth, but half of its population are among the most deprived people in the world. As we move towards the Olympics, I ask the Minister to use this opportunity to highlight the fundamental right of women to take exercise—a right denied to Saudi women. Will she join me in calling for all countries participating in the Olympics to allow women not just to sit in the spectators’ gallery, but to take their rightful place on the starting line?

They Work for You

Hansard