

Tuesday, 5 March 2013

'History in the making' first mixed-gender shura session in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Shura Council, sworn in last week, held its first session on Sunday and appointed three of its female members as deputy heads of its specialized committees.

Dr. Zainab Abu Taleb was assigned as deputy chief of the commission of cultural and media affairs, Dr. Lubna al-Ansari was assigned as deputy chief of the commission of environmental and health affairs and Dr. Thuraya Obaid was assigned as deputy chief of the commission of human rights and petitions.

Last month, a royal decree amended two articles in the council's statute introducing a 20 percent quota for women, and the king appointed 30 women to join the consultative assembly.

The assembly, whose entire members are appointed by the king, works as the formal advisory body of Saudi Arabia. It can propose draft laws which would be presented to the king, who, in turn, would either pass or reject them.

Saudi Arabia is known for its conservative culture where women are not allowed to drive despite the absence of a law saying so.

The king's decision allowed women for the first time to be part of the kingdom's formal advisory body. The move however was criticized by some clerics who are against women participation in political life.

Meanwhile, Fahad Bin Moaataad al-Hamad, aide of the council's chief, said the Shura Council forms the necessary commissions to carry out its work at the beginning of its term.

He added that each commission's members, head and deputy are assigned following the approval of the majority of the members attending the meeting.

Hamad also said that the commissions' new formations met the aspirations of most of the council members who wanted to participate in commissions.

He also said that all the council members have equal rights and duties and that there is no discrimination between man and woman.

According to Hamad, the board's administration does not give orders to the council members but it clarifies for them the procedure of work.

He added that Article 23 of the board's regulations stipulates that all members have the right to submit suggestions and projects to amend the present system.

"The main challenge is to show that Saudi women are able to participate in the national responsibilities like men."

Earlier this month, Obaid, an executive director of the U.N. Development Program for 10 years, told Al-Arabiya that women will present their opinion matters discussed by the council, especially when it comes to issues pertaining to women.