



Oman

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The Sultanate of Oman is a monarchy that has been ruled by the Al Bu Sa'id family since the middle of the 18th century. It has no political parties, but does have one representative institution, whose members are elected directly by voters selected by the Government. The Sultan, Qaboos Bin Sa'id Al Sa'id, acceded to the throne in 1970. Although the Sultan retains firm control over all important policy issues, he has brought tribal leaders and other notable persons into the Government. In accordance with tradition and cultural norms, much decisionmaking is by consensus among these leaders. In 1991 the Sultan established a Consultative Council, or Majlis Al-Shura, which replaced an older advisory body. The Consultative Council was expanded to 83 seats for the September 2000 elections, and members were chosen directly by the vote of 175,000 government-selected electors. The Council has no formal legislative powers but may question government ministers and recommend changes to new laws regarding economic and social policy, which on occasion leads to amendments to proposed decrees. In January the Sultan appointed 53 members, including 5 women, as members of a new Council of State (Majlis Al-Dawla), which, with the Consultative Council, forms the bicameral body known as the Majlis Oman (Council of Oman). In late 1996, the Sultan promulgated by decree the country's "Basic Charter" (also known as the Basic Law), which provides for citizens' basic rights in writing. The judiciary is not independent, and courts are subject to the Sultan's influence.

The internal and external security apparatus falls under the authority of the Royal Office, which coordinates all intelligence and security policies. The Internal Security Service investigates all matters related to internal security. The Royal Oman Police (ROP), whose head also has cabinet status, perform regular police duties, provide security at airports, serve as the country's immigration agency, and maintain a small coast guard. The security forces reportedly committed some abuses during the year.

The country has a population of approximately 2.3 million, including approximately 600,000 foreigners. Since 1970 the country has used its modest oil revenue to make impressive economic progress and improve public access to health care, education, and social services for its citizens. The average per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was approximately \$8,000. The economy is mixed, with significant government participation in industry, transportation, and communications. The Government seeks to diversify the economy, whose GDP is \$21.1 billion, and stimulate private investment.

The Government generally respected its citizens' human rights in some areas; however, its record was poor in other areas, particularly with respect to citizens' right to criticize the Government. Citizens do not have the right to change their government. Police do not always follow procedures regarding arrest and detention, and in some instances police handling of arrest and detention constituted incommunicado detention. There are no publicly available codified procedures or legal provisions regarding conduct of a public trial. Due process was denied to persons tried in state security courts. Citizens must obtain permission from the Government to marry foreigners. The Government interferes with citizens' privacy rights. The Government restricted freedom of expression and association. The Government must approve the establishment of all associations, and human rights organizations are prohibited. The Government does not ensure full rights for women. The Government severely restricts workers rights. Foreign workers at times are placed in situations amounting to forced labor, and abuse of foreign domestic servants is a problem.

The 1996 Basic Charter, issued as a decree by the Sultan, proposed many basic human rights, such as an independent judiciary, and the freedoms of association, speech, and the press. The Basic Charter states that the Government was to strive to issue all enabling laws within 2 years of November 1996; however, this has not occurred. Only certain laws pertaining to the legal code for family and interpersonal relationships, to judicial reform, and to aspects of the Finance Ministry, have been enacted. There has been no public statement made by the Government noting the end of the 2-year period since issuance of the Basic Charter, nor has a new

target date for implementation been proposed.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of the arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law does not specifically prohibit torture; however, there were no reports of torture during the year.

Judges have the right to order investigations of allegations of mistreatment. The 1996 Basic Charter, which has not yet been implemented in this area, specifically prohibits "physical or moral torture" and stipulates that all confessions obtained by such methods are to be considered null and void.

On one or two occasions in 2000, the police used tear gas and physical force to control demonstrations, and made some arrests (see Section 2.b).

Prison conditions are Spartan, but appear to meet international standards. Access to some prisoners was restricted severely. There are separate facilities for men and women, as well as separate facilities for juveniles and adults. Security prisoners are held separately and in different conditions from regular prisoners. Pretrial detainees also are held separately.

The Government does not permit independent monitoring of prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The police may obtain warrants prior to making arrests but are not required by law to do so. However, within 24 hours of arrest, the authorities must obtain court orders to hold suspects in pretrial detention, and the police are required to file charges or request a magistrate judge to order continued detention. However, in practice the police do not always follow these procedures. Judges may order detentions for 14 days to allow investigation and may grant extensions if necessary. There is a functioning system of bail. The 1996 Basic Charter provides for certain legal and procedural rights for detainees; however, these provisions have yet to be implemented.

Police handling of arrests and detentions constitutes incommunicado detention in some instances. The police do not always notify a detainee's family or, in the case of a foreign worker, the worker's sponsor of the detention. At times notification is made only just prior to the detainee's release. The authorities post the previous week's trial results (including the date of the trial, the name of the accused, the claim, and the sentence) near the magistrate court building in Muscat. The police do not always permit attorneys and family members to visit detainees. Judges occasionally intercede to ensure that security officials allow such visits.

The Government does not use forced exile. The 1996 Basic Charter prohibits exile; however, the provisions concerning exile have yet to be implemented.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The 1996 Basic Charter affirms the independence of the judiciary; however, the various courts are subordinate to the Sultan and subject to his influence in practice. All judges are appointed by the Sultan and serve at his pleasure. The Sultan acts as a court of final appeal and intercedes in cases of particular interest, such as those concerning national security. However, there have been no reported instances in which the Sultan has overturned a decision of the magistrate courts or the commercial courts.

All courts are administered by the Ministry of Justice. The judiciary comprises the magistrate courts, which adjudicate misdemeanors and criminal matters; the Shari'a (Islamic law) courts, which adjudicate personal status cases such as divorce and inheritance; and the commercial courts. The Labor Welfare Board attempts to mediate disputes between employers and employees. If a settlement cannot be reached, the parties may seek recourse in the appropriate courts. The Rent Dispute Committee has been abolished; the courts of general jurisdiction may hear cases involving rent disputes.

The magistrate court system was established by royal decree in 1984 to take over all criminal cases from the Shari'a courts; it is not independent, and its president reports directly to the Sultan. Regional courts of first instance handle misdemeanor cases, which are heard by individual judges. All felonies are adjudicated at the Central Magistrate Court in Muscat by a panel made up of the President of the Magistrate Court and two judges. All rulings of the felony panel are final except for those in which the defendant is sentenced to death. The death penalty rarely is used, except in serious felonies such as murder, and the Sultan must approve death sentences. There is no provision for amputation.

The Criminal Appeals Panel also is presided over by the President of the Magistrate Court in Muscat and includes the court's vice president and two judges. This panel hears appeals of rulings made by all courts of first instance. In the past, specially trained prosecutors from the Royal Oman Police (ROP), all of whom are trained as policemen as well as prosecutors, carried out the role of public prosecutor in criminal cases; however, as a step toward implementing a November 1999 Royal decree designed to increase the independence of the judiciary, prosecutors were made independent of the ROP.

The Criminal Code does not specify the rights of the accused. There are no written rules of evidence, codified procedures for entering cases into the criminal system, or any legal provision for a public trial. Criminal procedures have developed by tradition and precedents in the magistrate courts. In criminal cases, the police provide defendants with the written charges against them; defendants are presumed innocent and have the right to present evidence and confront witnesses. The prosecution and the defense direct questions to witnesses through the judge, who is usually the only person to question witnesses in court. A detainee may hire an attorney, but has no explicit right to be represented by counsel.

The 1996 Basic Charter affirms both the right to counsel and government-funded legal representation for indigents; however, these provisions have yet to be implemented, and the Government does not pay for the legal representation of indigents. Judges often pronounce the verdict and sentence within 1 day of the completion of a trial. Those convicted may appeal jail sentences longer than 3 months and fines over the equivalent of \$1,250 (480 rials) to a three-judge panel. Defendants accused of national security offenses and serious felonies do not have the right of appeal.

The State Security Court tries cases involving national security and criminal cases that the Government decides require expeditious or especially sensitive handling. Magistrate court judges have presided over trials in the State Security Court. Defendants tried by the Security Court are not permitted to have legal representation present. The timing and the location of the Court's proceedings are not disclosed publicly. The Court does not follow legal procedures as strictly as the magistrate courts, although prominent civilian jurists form the panel. The Sultan has exercised his powers of extending leniency, including in political cases.

The Shari'a courts are administered by the Ministry of Justice and apply Shari'a law as interpreted under the Ibadhi school of Islamic jurisprudence. Courts of first instance are located in each of the 59 wilayats, or governorates, and are presided over by a single judge, or qadi. Appeals of the rulings of the courts of first instance involving prison sentences of 2 weeks or more or fines greater than \$260 (100 rials) must be brought within 1 month before the Shari'a Court of Appeals in Muscat. Panels of three judges hear appeals cases. Court of Appeals rulings themselves may be appealed, within a 1-month period, to the Supreme Committee for Complaints, which is composed of four members, including the Minister of Justice and the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate.

In 1997 the Government promulgated into law the provisions of the 1996 Basic Charter pertaining to family law, that is, law that falls under the purview of the Shari'a courts. The effect of the new law has been to regularize the nature of the cases and the range of corresponding judgments within the Shari'a court system that only deals with family law.

The Authority for the Settlement of Commercial Disputes (ASCD), better known as the commercial courts system, was established by royal decree in 1981 to decide all cases related to commercial matters. Subsequent decrees have empowered the commercial courts to decide labor disputes referred to it by government departments, commercial disputes to which the Government is a party, and arbitration cases involving private parties. After the June reform, the ASCD falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, rather than the Minister of Commerce and Industry. The ASCD is made up of the Chairman, Deputy Chairman,

a number of judges appointed by royal decree, and members of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Cases are heard in regional courts for suits involving not more than \$26,000 (10,000 rials).

In November 1999, the Sultan issued several royal decrees to establish a law on judicial authority and to affirm the independence of the judiciary as called for in the 1996 Basic Charter. The decrees formally established the judiciary as an independent, hierarchical system composed of a Supreme Court, an appeals court, primary courts (one located in each region), and, within the primary courts, divisional courts. Within each of the courts there are to be divisions to consider commercial, civil, penal, labor, taxation, general, and personal status cases (the latter under Shari'a). The General Prosecutor's Office, which before the June reform was under the jurisdiction of the Royal Omani Police Chief Inspector, has become an independent legal entity within the Ministry of Justice.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The police are not required by law to obtain search warrants. There is a widely held view that the Government eavesdrops on both oral and written communications, and citizens are guarded in both areas. Citizens must obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior to marry foreigners, except nationals of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Such permission is not granted automatically. Delays or denial of permission have resulted in secret marriages within the country. Marriages in foreign countries may lead to denial of entry of the foreign spouse into the country and prevent a legitimate child from claiming citizenship rights.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law does not provide for freedom of speech or of the press, and the Government restricts these rights in practice. The law prohibits criticism of the Sultan in any form or medium. The authorities tolerate criticism of government officials and agencies, but such criticism rarely receives media coverage. The announced 1996 Basic Charter provides for freedom of opinion expressed in words, writing, and all other media, within the limits of the law; however, the charter provisions have yet to be implemented.

The 1984 Press and Publication Law authorizes the Government to censor all domestic and imported publications. Ministry of Information censors may act against any material regarded as politically, culturally, or sexually offensive. Journalists and writers generally exercise self-censorship to avoid government harassment. Editorials generally are consistent with the Government's views, although the authorities tolerate some criticism regarding foreign affairs issues. The Government discourages in-depth reporting on controversial domestic issues and seeks to influence privately owned dailies and periodicals by subsidizing their operating costs. There are five daily newspapers, three in Arabic and two in English. Al-Watan has a circulation of 40,000 and is the only privately owned newspaper.

In late 1997, the Government began to permit the entry into the market of foreign newspapers and magazines containing reports or statements deemed critical of Oman, including articles critical of the Sultan. The lifting of the boycott against Israel in December 1994 eliminated prohibitions on publications from or about Israel that otherwise meet censorship standards. However, in August 1999 the Ministry of Information stopped distribution of a London-based, Arabic-language magazine that contained an interview with a representative of the Israeli trade mission in Oman. Customs officials at times confiscate videocassette tapes and erase offensive material, despite the lack of published guidelines regarding what is considered offensive. Such tapes may or may not be returned to their owners. Government censorship decisions are changed periodically without apparent reason. There is a general perception that the confiscation of books and tapes at the border from private individuals and restrictions on popular novels have eased somewhat; however, it reportedly has become more difficult to obtain permission to distribute books in the local market that censors decide have factual errors regarding the country (including outdated maps).

The Government controls the only local radio and the two television stations. They do not air any politically controversial material. The Government does not allow the establishment of privately owned radio and television companies. However, the availability of satellite dishes has made foreign broadcast information accessible to the public.

The Government, through its national telecommunications company, provides Internet access to citizens and foreign residents. However, it blocks certain Web sites that it considers pornographic or politically sensitive. As use of the Internet to express views normally not permitted in other media has grown, the Government has

taken additional measures to monitor and control its use. The Government has placed warnings on Web sites that criticism of the Sultan or personal criticism of government officials is likely to be censored; however, some such Web sites apparently have operated without interference.

The appropriate government authority, such as Sultan Qaboos University, the police, or the relevant ministry must approve public cultural events, including plays, concerts, lectures, and seminars. Most organizations avoid controversial issues because of fears that the authorities may cancel their events.

Academic freedom is restricted, particularly regarding publishing or discussing controversial matters, such as politics. Professors may be dismissed for going beyond acceptable boundaries.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law does not provide for freedom of assembly; all public gatherings require government approval. The authorities with rare exceptions enforce this requirement. Over the course of 8 days in October 2000, rare, unauthorized public demonstrations in support of the Palestinians and against Israeli and United States policies took place at Sultan Qaboos University and other venues. Most demonstrators were young men, and most demonstrations were peaceful. Rock throwing and vandalism of private vehicles occurred at some locations. On one or two occasions, police used tear gas and physical force to control demonstrations and arrested some persons. After the demonstrations, the Government took action to prevent further demonstrations. The 1996 Basic Charter provides for limited freedom of assembly, but these provisions had not been implemented by year's end.

The Government restricts freedom of association. The law states that the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labor, and Vocational Training must approve the establishment of all organizations and their by-laws; however, some groups are allowed to function without formal registration. The Government uses the power to license organizations to control the political environment. It does not license groups regarded as a threat to the predominant social and political views or the interests of the Sultanate. Formal registration of foreign associations is limited to a maximum of one association for any nationality. The 1996 Basic Charter's provisions in this area--not yet in effect--regulate the formation of associations.

A February 2000 royal decree allowed for the formation of nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) providing services to women, children, and the elderly. Four NGO's, all related to persons with disabilities, have been registered; government-sponsored women's associations perform some associative functions, but are completely dependent on government funding.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law does not provide for freedom of religion, and the Government restricts this right in practice. Non-Muslim religious organizations must be registered with the Government, and the Government restricts some of their activities.

The 1996 Basic Charter provides that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the basis for legislation; it preserves the freedom to practice religious rites, in accordance with tradition, provided that such freedom does not breach public order. Discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion is prohibited; however, implementing decrees for the 1996 Basic Charter in this area have not yet been passed.

Most citizens are Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims, but there is also a minority of Shi'a Muslims. Non-Muslims are free to worship at churches and temples built on land donated by the Sultan. There are many Christian denominations, which utilize two plots of donated land, on which two Catholic and two Protestant churches have been built. Hindu temples also exist on government-provided land. Land has been made available to Catholic and Protestant missions to provide places of worship and ministry to resident Christians in Sohar and Salalah.

In June 2000, the departure from the country of a foreign Baha'i due to termination of his employment may have been hastened by the proselytizing activities of his wife. The authorities requested members of the Baha'i community to sign statements that they will not proselytize, in accordance with the country's law and custom.

The Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing. It also prohibits non-Muslim groups from publishing religious material, although religious material printed abroad may be brought into the country. Certain medical and educational activity by missionaries is permitted as long as missionaries do not proselytize. Members of all religions and religious groups are free to maintain links with coreligionists abroad and undertake foreign travel for religious purposes.

The police monitor mosque sermons to ensure that imams do not discuss political topics and stay within the state-approved orthodoxy of Islam. The Government expects all imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts distributed monthly by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The law does not provide for these rights, and the Government partially restricts these rights in practice. The Government does not restrict travel by citizens within the country except to military areas. Foreigners other than diplomats must obtain a government pass to cross border points. To obtain a passport and depart the country, a woman must have authorization from her husband, father, or nearest male relative. However, a woman having a national identity card (which also must be authorized by a male relative) may travel to certain Gulf Cooperation Council countries without a passport.

Until the promulgation of the Basic Charter, the Government did not have a policy on refugees or a tradition of harboring stateless or undocumented aliens. The 1996 Basic Charter prohibits the extradition of political refugees; however, this provision has not yet been implemented. There were no reports of the forced return of persons to a country where they feared persecution. The issue of the provision of first asylum did not arise during the year. Tight control over the entry of foreigners into the country effectively has limited refugees and prospective asylum seekers from entering. There is no government policy of cooperation with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Citizens do not have the right to peacefully change their government. The Government is an autocracy in which the Sultan retains ultimate authority on all important foreign and domestic issues.

The Sultan promulgated by decree the country's first defacto written constitution, known as the Basic Charter, in November 1996. Although it has immediate force of law, most laws and regulations to implement its provisions have not yet been enacted. There has been no public statement made by the Government noting the end of the 2-year period since issuance of the Basic Charter, nor has a new target date for implementation been proposed.

The law does not provide for political parties or direct elections. Citizens have indirect access to senior officials through the traditional practice of petitioning their patrons, usually the local governor, for redress of grievances. The Sultan appoints the governors. Successful redress depends on the effectiveness of a patron's access to appropriate decisionmakers. The Sultan makes an annual 3-week tour of the country, accompanied by his ministers. The tour allows the Sultan to listen directly to his subjects' concerns.

In 1991 Sultan Qaboos established a Consultative Council, or Majlis Al-Shura. The number of seats in the Council was expanded to 83 for the September 2000 elections. Beginning with the September 2000 elections, the Government established a new system under which council members, male and female, are elected directly by receiving the most votes from eligible voters in their districts. In the September 2000 elections, the Government selected more than 175,000 men and women, about 25 percent of adult citizens, to register to vote, of whom 114,000 registered and 100,000 voted. The Government's selection criteria reportedly was based on tribal and social status; educational background; personal and professional connections; and loyalty to the Government. The number of eligible female voters increased from 5,000 to 52,000. In August 2000, a royal decree abolished the prior procedure under which voters (or electors) had volunteered as candidates for Council seats, had their police records checked by the Government, and relied on government approval of their decision to run. The nominees with the most votes did not win appointment to the Council if the Sultan decided not to appoint them. Under the new procedures, candidates are not subject to government scrutiny, and the Sultan no longer ratifies winning candidates. However, the Sultan controls the process, and at least two sitting members of the Council were excluded from the outset from standing for reelection in September 2000 because of their criticism of ministers during previous council sessions.

The Council has no formal legislative powers, which remain concentrated in the Sultan's hands; however, it serves as a conduit of information between the citizens and the government ministries. No serving government official is eligible to be a Council member. The Council may question government ministers in public or in private, review all draft laws on social and economic policy, and recommend legislative changes to the Sultan, who makes the final decision. During the year, the membership of the Majlis Al-Dawla, or Council of State, was increased from 48 to 53 members, including 5 female members. The precise responsibilities of the Council of State and its relationship to the existing Consultative Council have yet to be clarified. The Council of State and the Consultative Council together form the Majlis Oman, or Council of Oman. A royal directive issued in April 2000 prohibited members of the Council of Oman from serving more than two 3-year terms.

The percentage of women in government and politics does not correspond to their percentage of the population. However, the Sultan publicly has advocated a greater role for women in both the public and private sectors. Women constituted 30 percent of eligible voters in the 2000 elections.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The Government prohibits the establishment of human rights NGO's, and there are no government-controlled or autonomous human rights entities in the country. The existing restrictions on the freedom of speech and association do not permit any activity or speech critical of the Government.

There were no known requests by U.N. or international human rights organizations to visit.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The 1996 Basic Charter prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, race, religion, language, sect, place of residence, and social class; however, decrees to implement its provisions have not been promulgated. Effective government enforcement is insufficient in some areas, and societal and cultural discrimination based on gender, race, religion, social class, and disability exists.

Women

The law does not specifically address domestic violence against women, but, according to Shari'a, all forms of physical abuse are illegal. There is no evidence of a pattern of spousal abuse, although observers claim that allegations of such abuse in the Shari'a courts are not uncommon. Doctors do not have a legal responsibility to report either spouse or child abuse to the courts. Battered women may file a complaint with the police but more often seek family intervention to protect them from violent domestic situations. Likewise, families seek to intervene to keep such problems from public view. In the past, there have been reports that employers or male coworkers have sexually harassed foreign women employed in positions such as domestic servants and hospital nurses. There were reports of employers physically and sexually abusing domestic servants; employers are not always held accountable for such actions (see Section 6.d.). There are no government programs for abused women.

The law prohibits rape. Shari'a provides no punishment for spousal rape.

Prostitution is illegal, and is not a widespread problem.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is widely condemned by international health experts as damaging to both physical and psychological health. A few communities in the interior and in the Dhofar region still practice FGM. Experts believe that the number of such cases is small and declining annually.

Many women live within the confines of their homes. While progress has been made in changing laws and attitudes, women continue to face many forms of discrimination. Illiteracy among older women hampers their ability to own property, participate in the modern sector of the economy, or inform themselves of their rights. Government officials frequently deny women land grants or housing loans and prefer to conduct business with a woman's husband or other male relative. Women may own property. Women require permission from a male relative to leave the country (see Section 2.b.).

Some aspects of Islamic law and tradition as interpreted in the country also discriminate against women. Shari'a favors male heirs in adjudicating inheritance claims. Many women are reluctant to take an inheritance dispute to court for fear of alienating the family.

Since 1970 conditions for women have improved markedly in several areas. Whereas in 1970 no schools existed for girls, the most recent figures available from the Ministry of Education in 1999 report an enrollment rate of nearly 90 percent for all girls eligible for elementary school. In the 1997-98 school year, female students constituted approximately 50 percent of the total number of students attending public schools. Women constitute roughly half of the 5,000 students at Sultan Qaboos University. In November 731 women and 566 men received bachelor's degrees as members of the 11th graduating class, while 2 women and 40 men received master's degrees. The university has a quota system with the apparent goal of increasing the number of men studying certain specialties. For example, women reportedly are being limited to 50 percent of the seats in the medical department. The quota system is expected to allow women to constitute a majority in some other departments.

Women also have made gains in the work force. Some educated women have attained positions of authority in government, business, and the media. Approximately 30 percent of all civil servants are women; of these, 59 percent are citizens. In both the public and private sectors, women are entitled to maternity leave and equal pay for equal work. The government bureaucracy, the country's largest employer of women, observes such regulations, as do many private sector employers. However, many educated women still face job discrimination because prospective employers fear that they might resign to marry or raise families. Female employees in the Government have sought administrative redress for alleged denial of promotion in favor of less capable men. Government grants for study abroad generally are divided evenly between men and women. According to unconfirmed reports, the Government provided grants to 40 men and 20 women during the year.

Within the Government, women's affairs are the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labor, and Vocational Training. The Ministry provides support for women's affairs through support for and funding of the Oman Women's Association (OWA) and local community development centers (LCDC's). The OWA consists of 25 chapters, with an active membership of more than 3,000 women. Typical OWA activities include sponsoring health or sociological lectures, kindergarten services, and handicraft-training programs. The OWA also provides an informal counseling and support role for women with divorce-related difficulties, girls forced to marry against their will, and women and girls suffering from domestic abuse. The main purpose of the 50 LCDC's located throughout the country is to encourage women to improve the quality of life for their families and to improve their contributions to the community. LCDC activities focus on health and sociology lectures, childcare issues, and agricultural and traditional handicraft training programs.

Children

The Government has made the education, health, and general welfare of children a budgetary priority. Primary school education for children, including noncitizen children, is free and universal, but not compulsory. Most children attend school through secondary school, until age 18. The infant mortality rate continues to decline, and comprehensive immunization rates have risen. The Government provides free health care for children to age 6. There is no pattern of familial or other child abuse, but government officials have publicly called for greater awareness and prevention of child abuse.

Child prostitution is not known to occur.

FGM is performed mainly on young girls (see Section 5, Women).

Persons with Disabilities

There are no laws prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities. The Government has mandated parking spaces and some ramps for wheelchair access in private and government office buildings and shopping centers. Compliance is voluntary, yet widely observed. Students in wheelchairs have easy access to Sultan Qaboos University. The Government has established several rehabilitation centers for children with disabilities. Persons with disabilities, including blind persons, work in government offices. While the Government may charge a small fee to citizens seeking government health care, persons with disabilities generally are not charged for physical therapy and prosthetics support.

Religious Minorities

There are no laws prohibiting discrimination against religious minorities. Some members of the Shi'a Muslim minority claim that they face discrimination in employment and educational opportunities. However, some Shi'a occupy prominent positions in both the private and public sectors.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

There are no laws prohibiting discrimination based on racial or ethnic characteristics. In the past, citizens of East African origin claimed that they frequently faced job discrimination in both the public and private sectors. Some public institutions reportedly favor hiring members of one or another regional, tribal, or religious group.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

Workers do not have the right to form or to join unions.

The law stipulates that "it is absolutely forbidden to provoke a strike for any reason." Labor unrest is rare. There has been only one job action within the last 7 years.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law does not provide for the right to collective bargaining; however, it requires that employers of more than 50 workers form a joint labor-management committee as a communication forum between the two groups. The implementation of this provision is uneven, and the effectiveness of the committees is questionable. In general the committees discuss such matters as the living conditions at company-provided housing. They are not authorized to discuss wages, hours, or conditions of employment. Such issues are specified in the work contracts signed individually by workers and employers and must be consistent with the guidelines of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor.

The law defines conditions of employment for some citizens and foreign workers. It covers domestic servants and construction workers but not temporary workers or those with work contracts that expire within 3 months.

Work rules must be approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor and posted conspicuously in the workplace by employers of 10 or more workers. Similarly any employer with 50 or more workers must establish a grievance procedure. Regardless of the size of the company, any employee, including foreign workers, may file a grievance with the Labor Welfare Board. In some cases, worker representatives file collective grievances, but most grievances are filed by individual workers. Lower-paid workers use the procedure regularly. Legal counsel may represent plaintiffs and defendants in such cases.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or bonded labor. Although the enabling laws have not yet been implemented, the 1996 Basic Charter prohibits forced or bonded labor for any person; however, the Government does not investigate or enforce the law effectively. Foreign workers at times are placed in situations amounting to forced labor. Employers have withheld letters of release (documents that release workers from employment contracts), which allow workers to change employers. Without such a letter, a foreign worker must continue to work for his current employer or become technically unemployed, which are sufficient grounds for deportation. Many foreign workers are not aware of their right to take such disputes before the Labor Welfare Board. Others are reluctant to file complaints for fear of retribution from unscrupulous employers. In most cases brought before it, the Board releases the worker from service without deportation and awards compensation for time worked under compulsion; however, employers face no penalty other than to reimburse the worker's back wages.

The law prohibits forced or bonded labor by children, and instances of forced or bonded child labor are unknown.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits children under the age of 13 from working. Children between 13 and 16 years of age may be employed, but must obtain the Ministry's permission to work overtime, at night, on weekends or holidays, or to perform strenuous labor. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor generally enforces the law; however, in practice enforcement often does not extend to some small family businesses that employ underage children, particularly in the agricultural and fisheries sectors. Child labor does not exist in any industry.

The law specifically prohibits forced or bonded labor by children, and it is not known to occur (see Section 6.c.). The Government has not ratified International Labor Organization Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor issues minimum wage guidelines for various categories of workers. In July 1998, the Government raised the minimum wage for most citizens to about \$260 (100 rials) per month, plus \$52 (20 rials) for transportation and housing. Minimum wage guidelines do not apply to a variety of occupational categories, including small businesses that employ fewer than five persons, the self-employed, domestic servants, dependent family members working for a family firm, and some categories of manual labor. Many foreigners work in occupations that are exempt from the minimum wage law, and the Government is lax

in enforcing minimum wage guidelines, where applicable, for foreign workers employed in menial jobs. However, highly skilled foreign workers are well-paid.

The minimum wage is sufficient to provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. The compensation for foreign manual laborers and clerks is sufficient to cover living expenses and to permit savings to be sent home.

The private sector workweek is 40 to 45 hours and includes a rest period from Thursday afternoon through Friday. Government workers have a 35-hour workweek. While the law does not designate the number of days in a workweek, it requires at least one 24-hour rest period per week and mandates overtime pay for hours in excess of 48 per week. Government regulations regarding hours of employment are not always enforced. Employees who have worked extra hours without compensation may file a complaint before the Labor Welfare Board, but the Board's rulings are not binding.

Every worker has the right to 15 days of annual leave during the first 3 years of employment and 30 days per year thereafter. Employers provide many foreign nationals, including domestic servants, with annual or biannual round-trip tickets to their countries of origin.

All employers are required by law to provide first aid facilities. Work sites with over 100 employees must have a nurse. Employees covered under the Labor Law may recover compensation for injury or illness sustained on the job through employer-provided medical insurance. The health and safety standard codes are enforced by inspectors from the Department of Health and Safety of the Directorate of Labor. As required by law, they make regular onsite inspections.

The law states that employers must not place their employees in situations involving dangerous work; however, the law does not specifically grant a worker the right to remove himself from dangerous work without jeopardy to his continued employment.

Foreign workers constitute at least 50 percent of the work force and as much as 80 percent of the private sector work force. In the past, there have been reports that employers or male coworkers have sexually harassed and abused foreign females employed in such positions as domestic servants and hospital nurses. Foreign women employed as domestic servants and garment workers have claimed that their employers have withheld their salaries and that government officials have been unresponsive to their grievances, due to investigative procedures that disadvantage the victim. There were reports of employers physically and sexually abusing foreign domestic servants, and employers are not always held accountable for such actions. Foreign women at times have had to ask their Governments' embassies for shelter to escape abuse (see Section 5).

Foreign workers at times find themselves in situations amounting to forced labor (see Section 6.c.).

f. Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit trafficking in persons; however, there were no reports that persons were trafficked to, from, or within the country.