Qatar’s women can’t work, study or travel without a man’s permission

(Article by Suzanne Moore in the Daily Telegraph, 22nd November 2022)

Qatar adheres to the strict sect of Salafism, often referred to as Wahhabism, and this interpretation of Islam has severe consequences for women, who live under a repressive regime of guardianship. Human Rights Watch calls it ‘deep discrimination’.

Women have to obtain men’s permission (usually their father’s or brother’s) to marry, to travel, to get educated. Neither rape nor domestic violence is illegal. Men can marry up to four wives but can divorce any wife without even informing her about it. Divorce for women is limited, even if the marriage is abusive.

Women are not guardians of their own children. They do not have the authority to make decisions about their children’s schools, their finances or medical treatment. A woman who reports rape may be sent to prison.

During the pandemic, one woman, ‘Asma’ compared her life with a permanent lockdown. “For girls – you are constantly in quarantine. What the whole world experiences now, this is the normal life for girls in Qatar. I wanted to study abroad but it was a no from my parents, even though I had a scholarship”.

On the surface it is true that many Qatari women live privileged lives and are very sophisticated and educated. They have maids, drivers and nannies who do all the domestic work and are paid a pittance. (It is not just the migrant workers who built the stadiums who are treated badly).

Although the government and an increasing number of Qatari women talk about gender equality, women’s rights and female empowerment, the reality is that there is nowhere to go to complain and no monitoring of how women are treated.

What the government really does is hand down a mandate to families to keep control of their girls in every possible way. If a father wants to pull his daughter out of education and beat her, then that is fine. The extreme patriarchal nature of Wahhabism means that everything a woman does is controlled; the honour and reputation of her family is paramount.

The scrutiny that the World Cup has brought is welcomed by some young women who want the system exposed, but freedom of expression is also limited in Qatar. The backdrop to all this are surely the protests in Iran, whose courageous male football team refused to sing their national anthem, before their match against England, in solidarity with protesters in their country.