

Saudi vice police order shops who employ men and women to put up segregation walls to keep them apart

- **Shops have been ordered to erect dividers to keep men and women apart**
- **The dividers need to be at least 5ft 3in, religious police said**
- **Saudi Arabia's strict sharia law ban men and women who are not immediate relatives from socialising**

By Sara Malm

Shops in Saudi Arabia have been ordered to put up walls to separate their male and female employees in accordance with the country's strict vice laws. The barriers need to be at least 5ft 3in high and will keep staff from seeing and communicating with workers of the opposite sex. This follows Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islam which prohibits men and women who are not immediate relatives from socialising.

Segregation: Shops in this mall in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia will have to erect barriers to separate their male and female employees as religious law prevents mingling of men and women who are not blood relatives

The news comes only days after the religious police, known as the Mutawa, said there would be no punishment for men who frequent shopping malls and public spaces in their underwear. The new and controversial trend among young men is to go out in public wearing only undershirts and trousers, normally worn underneath the traditional robes.

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Despite complaints about the new trend, Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice spokesman Najm Al Dhufairi dismissed rumours of a ban of the practice, leaving it up to shopping centre security whether they deem it inappropriate. Equality has been a slow process in Saudi Arabia, where women are still not allowed to drive a car, must use separate entrances at banks and offices, and follow strict dress codes. They also need permission from a male relative or their husband to work, travel, study or marry and a woman's testimony counts for less than that of a man in a court of law.

Restriction: Male attendants in a shop selling abayas, the female black robe, are only allowed minimum contact with a female customer even when she is chaperoned by a male relative or her husband

Controlled: The life of a Saudi woman is regulated by the country's sharia law and she may not travel, study or marry without a male relative's permission and must always follow the strict dress code seen in this picture

A small step forward was announced by King Abdullah last year as he opened up the government advisory council to both sexes. Earlier this month women were appointed women to 20 per cent of the 150-member Shura Council as King Abdullah reconstituted the council for a new four-year term. Although the women can attend the assembly, they will be separated from their male colleagues by a screen and will join the debate via an internal communication system.

To comply with the kingdom's Wahhabi sharia law, the Shura Council building must now be altered to include a separate entrance for women.