



The State of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

Through a set of discriminatory laws and practices, the Government of Saudi Arabia ensures that female citizens confront political and social inequality on a daily basis. Numerous Saudi women, however, are actively challenging restrictions on their basic rights and freedoms. Despite the deterioration in the position of women's rights over the last half century, activists in Saudi Arabia continue to fight for women's social, political, cultural, and religious equality.

Overview of Women's History in Saudi Arabia

On November 6, 1990, 47 Saudi women [illegally drove](#) down the streets of Riyadh to protest the Kingdom's driving ban. Police arrested all of the women involved. Over the next two decades, women became more active in politics. In June 2004, a National Dialogue convened to discuss women's employment, driving rights, and legal submission to men. In 2009, King Abdullah opened the first co-ed university, appointed a female deputy minister and openly condemned domestic violence. While some of these reforms constitute limited progress, critics maintain that they are little more than symbolic, and that gender inequality remains widespread. [Child marriage is still legal](#), [women are unable to drive](#), and even the 30 new female members of the Shoura Council have [limited power](#). The Guardianship System plays a significant role in limiting women's mobility and access to basic rights.

The Guardianship System

Under Saudi Arabia's [Guardianship System](#), women operate as legal minors in relation to a designated male guardian (a father, a husband, or a son) and the state. They must gain permission from their guardian in order to study at a university, travel, marry, and, in some cases, work. Many women have arranged marriages and are often unable to make important [decisions](#) about their children's well-being. Saudi women cannot open bank accounts for children, place them in school, access their records, or travel with them without the father's consent.

Women's Employment

The Guardianship System also has a tremendous effect on women's employment and education. Women are prohibited from entering non-segregated government agencies without male supervision. As a result, only [15 percent](#) of Saudi women participate in the labor force. The financial burden of creating female-segregated spaces in public discourages many businesses from hiring female employees. Schools intentionally train women and girls for household tasks rather than trades in order to avoid later workplace and guardianship complications. According to a report from Human Rights Watch, Saudi men's all-encompassing power over women's movements and activities is directly related to [problems of domestic violence](#) in the Kingdom.

Driving

In 1990, the Saudi Grand Mufti issued a *fatwa* that banned women driving on legal and religious grounds, claiming that women driving would lead to "promiscuity that overruns a society."¹ In the mid-2000s, increasing numbers of women came forward claiming that the government was treating them like "incapacitated children"² and that the ban forced them to hire chauffeurs, an economic burden. Tensions mounted once more on September 23, 2007, Saudi Arabia's National Day, when 1,100 activists petitioned the King to eliminate the driving ban. Driving reformers have now turned to social media to garner support. In October 2014, dozens of women were incarcerated for posting videos of themselves driving to their social media accounts. On December 1, 2014, 25-year-old Loujain al-Hathloul became the

¹ Ibn Baz, *Islamic Fatawa Regarding Women*, 310.

² Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 178.

latest Saudi woman to be arrested after attempting to drive over the border from the UAE to Saudi Arabia with a valid GCC license.

Women and the Legal System

Saudi women are unable to manage their own legal affairs and are often powerless to initiate a divorce (depending on the circumstances and the type of divorce). It is extremely difficult for a Saudi woman to obtain a divorce if her husband can prove that he is still supporting her financially. Religious officials argue that a woman cannot “seek a divorce without the presence of a necessity.”³ A woman’s legal testimony is also equal to half that of a man, further complicating official court proceedings. Women who manage to obtain a divorce have limited rights to child custody,⁴ as they are only permitted to keep their [daughters until they are seven years old and their sons until they are nine](#). While women’s driving activists receive a lot of press, many others have devoted themselves to pushing for legal reforms to family law.

³ Ibn Jibreen, *Selected Fatawa for Women (Second Edition)*, 42.

⁴ Mark Weston, *Prophets and Princes: Saudi Arabia from Muhammad to the Present*, 513.