



Saudi Arabia – Women’s rights, May 2018

Despite positive legislative developments, Saudi Arabia’s 13 million women and four million girls face [severe discrimination](#) in all aspects of their lives.

Cosmetic reforms on women’s rights and persistence of the guardianship system

In recent years, **Saudi Arabia has undertaken a number of positive reforms** meant to ease restrictions on women, notably allowing them to [participate](#) in municipal elections, encouraging them to engage in the labour market, taking measures to better respond to domestic violence, curtailing the aspects of the male guardianship system in May 2017, and, most recently, allowing them to [drive](#).

While **these reforms** have slightly improved women’s situation, they **remain partial and incomplete**. Among other things, women need a guardian’s permission in order to get married, travel internationally, and get out of prison, their testimony in court is reportedly worth less than a man’s.

Ultimately, as long as the government maintains his support for the [male guardianship system](#), under which every women must have a male guardian empowered to make important decisions on her behalf, **the efficacy of these ostensible reforms will be hindered or nullified** and women will continue to be second class citizens subject to the whims of their male guardians.

- Since 2001, eased restrictions on women’s ability to obtain independent identity cards. Prior to 2001, there was no individual national ID card for Saudi women—authorities registered all women under the identity cards of their male next-of-kin, often their father or husband. In 2001, the government [began](#) granting independent ID cards to Saudi women with their guardian consent. In 2013, the consent of the guardian [was](#) no longer formally required to apply for a national ID. However, **in order to prove their identity to obtain the ID card, woman are still reliant on their male guardian**. In 2015, the Shura Council [allowed](#) divorced women, widows and Saudi women married to foreigners to receive identification cards.
- Since 2004, encouragement to engage in the labour market. Despite government decisions, **the guardianship system continues to impact on women’s ability to seek work** and to pursue career opportunities abroad. Among others, many employers in both the private and public sector continue to require female staff to obtain the permission of a male guardian to be employed; businesses and government agencies in Saudi Arabia are sex segregated and failing to abide by the rules can entail serious consequences; women cannot apply for a passport or [travel](#) outside the country.
- In 2011, decision to grant women the right to vote and stand as candidates in the municipal elections. While the decision was adopted in 2011, women [were](#) forced to wait until 2015 to finally cast their votes. On 12 December 2015, over 100.000 women voted in the municipal elections. Women made up less than 10 percent of the final list of registered voters and only 21 women were [elected](#) to the municipal councils out of 2,106 contested seats. However, **municipal councils have no influence on national politics, while female candidates and voters faced [restrictions linked to the guardianship system](#)** on their ability to register to vote and to campaign (e.g. they [could](#) not speak directly to man, they only had three-week to register, those lacking personal identifying documents could not have their identity verify). Besides, women elected as council members [sit](#) in separate rooms to their male counterparts and only participating via video link.

In 2013, the king [appointed](#) the first women to the Shura Council – the 150-member advisory body that advises the king on legislation but cannot pass laws.

- In 2013, new law criminalizing domestic abuse. However, the law **do not detail specific enforcement mechanisms** that would ensure officials promptly investigate allegations of

abuse or prosecute those who commit abuse. Nor can [women leave an abusive husband](#) because of restrictions on movement and impositions due to the guardianship system.

- In April 2017, King's order stipulating that government agencies [cannot](#) deny women access to government services simply because they do not have a male guardian's consent unless existing regulations require it. **However, the order is limited to public agencies and keeps in place regulations that explicitly require guardian approval. It has not yet been implemented** leaving Saudi Arabia's discriminatory male guardianship system intact.
- [Decree of 27 September 2017](#) granting women the right to drive as of 24 June 2018. While the government recently announced June 2018 as the end of the ban on women driving, this reform **has not yet been implemented and women that advocated for it have now been arrested.**

Women human rights defenders targeted for their work

Even as Saudi Arabia has instituted a number of promising reforms, authorities [have targeted](#), intimidated, and detained a number of women working on gender equality, including those involved in the #IAmMyOwnGuardian campaign. Dozens of activists have [been accused](#) of 'insulting religion', 'terrorism', 'destabilising the State', 'attempting to influence public opinion', or even 'creating an illegal organisation', and are now spending long years in prison.

Among the numerous cases:

- In December 2014, authorities [banned Samar Badawi](#) from travelling internationally after she spoke at the 27th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. She was arrested briefly in January 2016 and interrogated in February 2017.
- In November 2014, authorities [detained Loujain al-Hathloul](#) and [Maysaa al-Amoudi](#) for 73 days after they attempted to drive from the United Arab Emirates into Saudi Arabia. In June 2017, Saudi officials [detained](#) al-Hathloul again for a week.
- In October 2014, [Suad al-Shammari](#) was arrested in connection to social media comments that criticized religious authorities and called for a women's right to drive. She was released 3 months later, after being forced to sign a document promising to refrain from her activism. She remains under a travel ban.
- In 2014, [Amna al-Juaid](#) fled her home to escape physical violence and emotional abuse from her family. Her father hired a private detective to track her down. It is believed she is effectively imprisoned in a women's reformatory center.
- In 2016, [Naimah al-Matrood](#), an online blogger who monitored and documented violations against HRDs and protestors, was arrested and held incommunicado for the first two weeks. She was denied the right to legal representation. On 10 November 2017, al-Matrood [was tried](#) under the counter-terror law by the Specialised Criminal Court, and sentenced to six years in jail and a six year travel ban for allegedly participating in peaceful protests and calling for the release of detainees on social media.
- In April 2017, officials arrested and [detained](#) activist [Mariam al-Otaibi](#) for 104 days after she fled domestic violence to live by herself in Riyadh. Also in April, family members of [Dina Ali Lasloom](#) forcibly [repatriated](#) her from the Philippines to Saudi Arabia as she attempted to seek asylum in the Australia.
- In September 2017, hours after the king decreed that women would be able to drive in June 2018, authorities [called](#) activists and told them not to comment on the decision.
- In the last week of January 2018, authorities arrested woman rights defender [Noha Al-Balawi](#), who supported the women driving campaign and solidarity for prisoners of conscience.

- Early February 2018, security forces **arrested Maria Naji**, a university student studying in Egypt, when she returned to Saudi Arabia, due to her advocacy for women's rights.
- Mid-May 2018, Saudi authorities **arrested** a dozen of people (including **Loujain al-Hathloul held incommunicado**) for their women's rights activism only weeks before the government is set to lift the ban on women driving.

Recommendations

- Immediately abolish the male guardianship system and allow women to participate in society with the same rights as men, including by adopting a law removing the restrictions imposed by the guardianship system;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all women detained for their activism and drop all charges against them;
- Establish and empower an independent and impartial commission to assess the government's approach towards domestic violence;
- Establish a nation-wide government body empowered to increase women's voter turnout, and educate women in voting and the political process;
- Implement the decree to allow women to drive and remove all obstacles to their ability to drive;
- Extend an open invitation to the mandates of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and ensure the mandates have open access to women's rights activists.