

Saudi Women Can Drive But Gender Inequality Remains



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On 24 June 2018, as promised by Saudi authorities, several women received driving licences and started driving their cars. So, after 30 odd years, Saudi Arabia lifted its widely criticized ban on female drivers sparking jubilation among many women in the country that went out on the roads shortly after the ban was lifted. On June 2018, the future seemed a little brighter for Saudi Arabian women. This paper looks at Saudi women's recent emancipation and the right to drive a car unaccompanied by a male relative or guardian. It also, details their ongoing plight to seek gender equality and where men still have ultimate control and a repressive system where women who attempt to flee an abusive spouse or family can be arrested and returned to their families. This paper also highlights the inequality and repressiveness endured by Saudi women and even though permission to drive is a massive leap forward and a new found freedom for many Saudi women, their lack of fundamental basic rights and gender inequality is firmly entrenched and still remains in situ in the Saudi system. Finally, a conclusion is given.

Saudi Women Can Drive But Gender Inequality Still Remains

Tom Harrington LL B F Inst. MTD (September 2020)

In 2013, Sheikh Saleh bin Saad al-Lohaidan, a judicial adviser to an association of Gulf psychologists, told a Saudi website that:

"If a woman drives a car, not out of pure necessity, that could have negative physiological impacts as functional and physiological medical studies show that it automatically affects the ovaries and pushes the pelvis upwards. That is why we find those who regularly drive have children with clinical problems of varying degrees."¹

On 26 September 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman issued a statement recognizing the right of Saudi women to drive in keeping with Sharia.² Licenses were set to be issued to women starting on 24 June 2018. Saudi authorities also contacted women to drive campaigners. Around 15–18 May 2018, Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan, Aisha Al-Mana, Aziza al-Yousef, Madeha al-Ajroush, and several other women and two men also involved in the women to drive movement and the anti male-guardianship campaign were detained by Saudi authorities. Human Rights Watch interpreted the purpose of the arrests as frightening *"anyone expressing skepticism about the crown prince's rights agenda"*. On 24 June 2018, as promised by Saudi authorities, several women received driving licences and started driving. Many of the women to drive movement and anti male-guardianship women activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul, remained in detention as part of the 2018–2019 Saudi crackdown on feminists. As of 23 August 2018, twelve remained in detention without any legal charges laid against them and without legal representation. In late November 2018, the Women to Drive campaigners detained in Dhahban Central Prison were tortured.

¹ Olga Khazan 7 October 2013. *'Negative Psychological Impacts': Why Saudi women aren't allowed to drive*. The Atlantic.

² Sharia law is Islam's legal system. It is derived from the Koran, Islam's central text, and fatwa's - the rulings of Islamic scholars. Sharia literally means "the clear, well-trodden path to water". Sharia law acts as a code for living that all Muslims should adhere to, including prayers, fasting and donations to the poor. It aims to help Muslims understand how they should lead every aspect of their lives according to God's wishes. Serious offences include theft, which can be punishable by amputation of the offender's hand, and adultery which can carry the penalty of death by stoning.

According to Human Rights Watch, several of the women were lashed and given electric shocks, one was *"made to hang for long periods of time from the ceiling"* and one tried several times to commit suicide. As of 21 November 2018, the women had been publicly accused of *"undermining state security and aiding enemies of the state"* but had not yet been charged. As of 20 November 2018, according to the Saudi newspaper Okaz, the women were to be tried at the Specialized Criminal Court, with prosecutors calling for prison terms of up to 20 years. In late March 2019, the women presented their defence and described physical and sexual abuse they had endured in captivity. Aziza al-Yousef, Dr Rokaya Mohareb and Eman al-Nafjan were released on bail.³

Women Driving Solo Seen as Scandalous, Even Sacrilegious.

So, after 30 odd years, Saudi Arabia lifted its widely criticized ban on female drivers sparking jubilation among many women in the country that went out on the roads shortly after the ban was lifted. In June 2018, the future seemed a little brighter for Saudi Arabian women. Home to one of the most repressive societies on earth, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was finally taking steps to lift the ban that had prevented women from driving. At last, women would be free from the need to rely on males for their basic ability to move around. However, ultra-conservatives opposed ending the ban, claiming it was immoral for women to drive and would subject them to sexual harassment. A staunchly conservative and religiously orthodox country, Saudi Arabia embraces and enforces a strict, all-encompassing version of Islam called Wahhabism.⁴ The laws of the religion are one and the same as the laws of the state. Gender segregation rules are strictly observed and the idea of a woman behind the wheel, driving herself wherever she chooses with no man accompanying her, was seen by many as scandalous, even sacrilegious. Eliminating gender-based driving restrictions was an earth-shattering change that gave hope to millions of Saudi women. The lifting of the driving ban was presented in 2017 by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (Nicknamed MBS) as part of a sweeping initiative to modernize and diversify the economy away from a heavy reliance on oil. In order to attract foreign investment, the idea was to align some part of Saudi society with the rest of the world.

³ Olga Khazan 7 October 2013. *'Negative Psychological Impacts' : Why Saudi women aren't allowed to drive.* The Atlantic.

⁴ Wahhabism is named after an 18th century Arabian theologian of the Hanbali school and is the strictest of the four Sunni Islamic juridical schools. It was originally the cornerstone of Saudi statehood. In 1744, Muhammad bin Saud, the founder of the current royal dynasty, made a pact with theologian Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, in which the latter provided the crucial religious underpinning for the former's project to unify and centralize the warring tribes of Arabia, bringing them under his control.

It was hailed by Saudi rulers and much of the rest of the world as a great feminist forward. In just the first seven months after the ban was lifted, as many as 40,000 women were issued driving licenses, according to Saudi Arabia's traffic department.



Saudi female driving trainees gather at the entrance of the Saudi Driving School (SDS) in the Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on June 24 2019.

Men Still Have Ultimate Control

"There are two stories here, two narratives," Madawi Al-Rasheed told ABC News. She is a Saudi Arabian scholar and a visiting professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. "The first one is that MBS (Crown Prince) is the greatest thing that has ever happened to Saudi Arabia, especially to women," she said. Some of the laws governing segregation have been loosened, so now it is possible to see women and men attending sporting events and concerts together. Women are also allowed a voice in public discussion and can be found speaking at press conferences and addressing symposiums. "Yet, there is another story," Al-Rasheed said. "It is one that says his reforms are being planned by the privileged classes only to serve the privileged classes. There is a greater opening of the public sphere for women but the changes don't come with legitimate rights." Saudi Arabia's restrictive guardianship system ensures that men still have ultimate control over most aspects of women's lives. Part legal requirement, part custom, Saudi women are dependent upon their male guardians, whether they are fathers, husbands, brothers or even sons. These men have the power to make a range of critical decisions on her behalf for her entire life. "Women still need permission from their male guardians in two main areas," Al-Rasheed said. "When they want to marry or when they want to get a passport to leave the country."



A Saudi woman checking the oil level in her car

Women as Permanent Legal Minors.

A few countries in the Middle East still retain some elements of the male guardianship system, although nowhere is as far reaching and restrictive in terms of laws and regulations as Saudi Arabia's. *"The Saudi state essentially treats women as permanent legal minors. Saudi Arabia has done very little to end the system, which remains the most significant impediment to women's rights in the country,"* as detailed in a [report](#) by Human Rights Watch. According to Dana Ahmed, a Middle East and Gulf researcher for Amnesty International, the inherent control of male family members over almost all aspects of women's lives makes it incredibly difficult for females to seek protection or obtain legal redress if they become victims in their own homes. *"Women in Saudi Arabia remain inadequately protected against domestic violence and abuse and more generally are discriminated against in large part as a result of the male guardianship system,"* Ahmed told ABC News. *"Women who attempt to flee an abusive spouse or family can be arrested and returned to their families."* The situation for Saudi Arabia's civil society and human rights community, including women's rights activists, has deteriorated markedly this past year, including *"the torture and sexual abuse of human rights defenders"* who have been detained by authorities, she said. *"Today, several women activists are being tried for their human rights work on bogus charges and risk lengthy prison sentences,"* she noted. ⁵

Execution, Even Crucifixion, Takes Place All The Time

While state reforms have been welcomed by most Saudis, two-thirds of whom are under the age of 30, human rights activists are concerned that even these small nods to a liberal lifestyle could be easily curtailed again at a moment's notice. *"There is no political change happening in Saudi Arabia that will benefit all members of society,"* Al-Rahseed said. *"Execution, even crucifixion, takes place all the time and can be decided at the whim of a judge. There is no independent judiciary, no separation of powers. The judges are appointed by the king."* Indeed, just weeks before lifting the law, the Saudi government initiated a crackdown against women's rights campaigners and arrested more than a dozen activists, including some of the very women who led the petition for the right to drive. *"Authorities started locking up some of Saudi Arabia's bravest women activists, instead of including them in the country's reforms agenda,"* Ahmed told ABC News. *"By targeting them, they are signaling to their entire people that there will be zero tolerance of any form of criticism, let alone questioning, of the state's authoritarian practices."*

⁵ *The changing role of women and youth in Saudi Arabia.* Middle East Policy Council. mepc.org

As recently as March, eleven prominent female activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Iman al-Nafjan, and Aziza al-Yousef were brought to trial before the Criminal Court in Riyadh. Ahmed said the court session was closed and diplomats and journalists were banned from attending. Several women activists have been charged with the crimes of contacting foreign media and reaching out to other activists and international organizations including Amnesty International. Following the court session, Ahmed said, several of the jailed women were temporarily and provisionally released. However, they continue to face trial and remain at risk of being sentenced to prison terms. *"Releasing these women from detention is not enough,"* Ahmed said. *"Saudi authorities must drop all charges against them."* This past spring, a planned "public decency" law seeking to uphold "values and principles" was approved by the Saudi cabinet, although it has not yet been announced when it will go into effect. Aspects of the new measures are intended to curb behaviors such as dressing disrespectfully, including men wearing shorts, avoiding taking photos or using phrases that might offend. *"The main problem in Saudi Arabia is that both men and women are not represented in government, they are denied basic human rights,"* Al-Rasheed said. *"They can be detained and thrown in prison for no reason at all. Emancipation in a dictatorship is impossible."*

Women - Greater Freedoms and Equality

Female drivers and people throughout Saudi Arabia have been publishing scores of photos and videos to social media following the lifting of the driving ban. Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal posted a video to Twitter, which said, *"Finally, first ride with my daughter while she's driving me and my grand daughters in Riyadh."* Previously, women in Saudi Arabia had to depend on chauffeurs and male relatives to drive the anywhere, even to run simple errands. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, more than three million women could receive licenses and drive by 2020. There are already long wait lists for women's driving schools that have recently opened in the country. The lifting of the ban is just one of many changes planned by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who assumed power one year ago. The 32-year-old prince is regarded as a risk-taker, and has begun a sweeping campaign of liberalization in the kingdom, which has been ruled by the House of Saud since 1932. Saudi Arabia's transformation, including allowing women greater freedoms and equality, may be essential to its economy. Experts say that as the nation shifts away from an economy predominantly reliant on oil, more households will need dual incomes. Layla Albraikan, a 25-year-old who lives in Riyadh, says she drove a car with her female colleagues on Sunday for the first time in Saudi Arabia.

*"We experienced two cars thumbing up, honking and cheering. It was very nice."
"If you look at it from a social perspective, the women's driving ban being lifted, is a positive one. And also from a workforce perspective, women are being given more leadership roles," Albraikan says. "Hopefully I'll drive every day to work, and in a couple of months I'll buy my own car."*

Women's Driving Activists Undermining Security?

Prince Mohammed (MBS) has launched Vision 2030, which he says presents Saudi Arabia's blueprint for the future, and includes plans to reduce the country's dependence on oil, diversify its economy and develop public service sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure. The campaign imagines a future Saudi Arabia that is more open and inclusive to foreign tourists and investors, and domestically, to women's participation in the workforce and economy. Since Prince Mohammed assumed power, Saudi Arabia has already lifted bans on women attending movies and music concerts with men. Some, like 30-year-old Faisal Mohammed, who lives in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, support the prince's bid for transformation. *"I am glad to see such progress, empowering women to be more involved in this development ... The opening of the market to foreign investors ... The entertainment and tourism developments ... It's a challenging vision, but as of now, everything seems to be on track,"* says Mohammed. Referring to Saudi Arabia's older generations, Mohammed continues, *"Some people are more conservative in their views of the changes, and want to see how all of this will unfold. But overall, they seem to welcome change."* Despite the liberalization effort, it remains unclear to what extent the kingdom will become more tolerant of dissent or challenges to the government. In the lead up to the lifting of the driving ban, Saudi Arabia arrested several women's driving activists, and accused them of undermining security. Among those recently detained is 28-year-old Loujain al-Hathloul, who was previously arrested for driving in 2014. That year she was held for more than 70 days. Al-Hathloul was arrested again on May 15. Another prominent activist recently arrested in Saudi Arabia is Aziza al-Yousef, a professor at Riyadh's King Saud University. The prince's reforms risk sparking dissent within the kingdom. Saudi society has long been dominated by Wahhabism, an ultraconservative form of Sunni Islam. Fearing a backlash ahead of the lifting of the ban on female drivers, Saudi Arabia's government passed a law against sexual harassment, with a penalty of up to five years in prison, and warned men not to stalk women drivers on the road. Allowing women on the road is part of a transformation in the way women are regarded that could extend beyond Saudi Arabia's borders, according to Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir.

He told The New York Times' Roger Cohen, "When people look at Saudi Arabia, see Mecca and Medina, they want to emulate it. When they see openness and moderation and tolerance and innovation, that's what they want to be." According to Cohen, al-Jubeir said no other country has "that soft power".

Note. A group of 29 EU states has expressed "deep concern" about human rights in Saudi Arabia as it bids to rejoin the United Nations Human Rights Council. Human rights organizations Reprieve and the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR) has echoed these concerns as the Saudi Arabian government has not followed through on human rights promises. They say that the government continues to sentence people to death for non-violent drug offences and crimes committed as children, despite promises of reform. Ed.

Conclusion

Up until June 2018, Saudi Arabia was unique in being the only country in the world where women were forbidden to drive motor vehicles. Home to one of the most repressive societies on earth, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was finally taking steps to lift the ban that had prevented women from driving. At last, women would be free from the need to rely on males for their basic ability to move around. Although Saudi laws never explicitly banned women from driving, they were not eligible to hold a driving licence. If they did try to drive, police would often detain them until a male relation came to sign a pledge that she would not drive again. A staunchly conservative and religiously orthodox country, Saudi Arabia embraces and enforces a strict, all-encompassing version of Islam called Wahhabism. The laws of the religion are one and the same as the laws of the state. Gender segregation rules are strictly observed and the idea of a woman behind the wheel, driving herself wherever she chooses with no man accompanying her, was seen by many as scandalous, even sacrilegious. The introduction of the Women to Drive Movement was a campaign by Saudi Arabian women, who have more rights denied to them by the government than men for the right to drive motor vehicles on public roads. Dozens of women drove in Riyadh in 1990 and were arrested and had their passports confiscated. In 2007, Wajeha al-Huwaider and other women petitioned King Abdullah for women's right to drive, and a film of al-Huwaider driving on International Women's Day 2008 attracted international media attention. The lifting of the driving ban was seen as part of a sweeping initiative to modernize and diversify the Saudi economy away from a heavy reliance on oil. In order to attract foreign investment, the idea was to align some part of Saudi society with the rest of the world. It was hailed by Saudi rulers and much of the rest of the world as a great feminist forward.

Finally, we trust that Saudi women who drive don't suffer the alarming effects announced by Sheikh Saleh bin Saad al-Lohaidan (above) that according to medical studies show that it automatically affects the ovaries and pushes the pelvis upwards and those who regularly drive have children with clinical problems of varying degrees.