

Saudi Arabia: Violating Women's Rights

In 2019, Saudi Arabia was ranked among the worst places in the world to be a woman. While Saudi Arabia's overall human rights record is abhorrent, such violations are exasperated exponentially for women. Many policies and practices endorsed and enforced by Saudi Arabia's monarchy dehumanize women, leaving them vulnerable to extreme discrimination and abuse. Change is desperately needed, and Saudi Arabia must immediately end its violations of women's rights and allow Saudi women to fully advocate for the social and political reforms that they desire, including substantive participation in government and the policy making process.

Silenced in Government

At present, women are mere accessories in Saudi Arabia's non-democratic government. Not a single female has ever been appointed as a minister in Saudi Arabia, and women hold only 30 seats of the 150-seat shura council, which is not nearly enough to influence the 2/3 majority vote required for recommendations to proceed forward to the King. And even then, the shura council is just an advisory body in a non-democratic system.

Discrimination Against Women in Saudi Courts

Saudi courts are deeply flawed and often serve as a mechanism for hiding the Saudi State's torture and other violations of human rights. For women, these fundamental flaws are made even worse. Women are barred from making rulings in courts, as not a single female judge presides over any courtroom in all of Saudi Arabia. Particularly concerning are the Saudi personal status courts, which effectively grant men immunity under the law with regards to charges, complaints, or concerns raised by women. Saudi law requires women to be obedient to husbands, considers a man's word as twice as valuable as a woman's, permits women's evidence to be discarded if a man swears an oath to contradict her, and makes it incredibly difficult for women to divorce or marry without permission of a man. Children in Saudi are being stolen away from their mothers based on judicial justifications as outlandish as failure to cover their face, having a different culture, working full time, and remarriage. Saudi judges routinely order such shockingly low amounts of child support from fathers that divorced mothers are habitually forced to give up custody or live in poverty. Despite the countless hardships that women face in the Saudi legal system, there are minimal legal consequences exist for men who abuse and even kill their wives or daughters. This leaves the horrific impression that Saudi law not only considers women as unequal to men, but also that women's lives are considered disposable.

Forced Gender Segregation

Saudi Arabia's government-enforced system of gender segregation further debilitates women's position in society. In a country run by men, State-forced segregation based

on gender leaves women with unequal access to government services, educational and workplace opportunities and full participation in society. Segregation in schools is forced on children at a very young age and continues all the way through university. Forced, involuntary gender segregation can undermine student preparation for a global economy. It also removes female perspectives and leadership in the context of men's educational experience. Lastly, forced gender segregation also severely limits women's access to the labor market and male-dominated networks required for equal growth and development potential. Such equality in the workforce is desperately needed, considering Saudi Arabia has one of the world's worst female labor force percentages. Gender segregation in Saudi Arabia has resulted in inexcusable disadvantages to generations of women and decades of untapped potential.

Silencing Women Activists

Generations of women who have bravely spoken out against the system of oppression have been fired from their jobs, shamed, arrested, and even subjected to torture. Prominent women's rights advocates Loujain Al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Naseema al-Sada, Nouf Abdulaziz, and Maya Al-Zahrani remain detained and face bizarre charges that violate basic human rights principles. Several other women's rights activists (including Iman al-Nafjan and Aziza Al-Youssef) have been forced to sign statements swearing silence, issued travel bans prohibiting their right to exit Saudi Arabia, and are facing trial along with other prisoners for nonsensical allegations. Other women have disappeared in prisons over trivial accusations, unable to exit due to a refusal of their male guardians to sign a required permission allowing them to exit.

Foreigners in Saudi Arabia: Modern-Day Slavery

Human Rights violations in Saudi Arabia certainly aren't limited to Saudi citizens. Every foreign resident in the Kingdom is currently subject to an abhorrent system of sponsorship (*kafala*) which is often referred to as modern-day slavery. The system subjects foreign workers rights in Saudi Arabia to the mercy of their employers. While it is illegal for Saudi nationals to marry foreigners, in the case that a Saudi man is granted an exception to the law, he also becomes the sponsor of his foreign wife. Foreign residents require their sponsors permission to exit the country or to change jobs, and they are dependent on sponsors to keep their status legal. If a resident leaves a job or household without permission, the sponsor may register them as a "runaway", subjecting them to arrest or deportation. Most vulnerable are the female domestic employees, who are recruited by the millions as live-in nannies and cleaners each year. They are routinely overworked, underpaid, and held against their will in the country. Reports of abuse and rape of domestic workers is atrocious, yet their status in Saudi leaves them with little access to justice or legal retribution.

Global Solidarity for Change

Women who diverge from the State-enforced narratives of praise of the government or the status of their country risk losing their jobs, having their children taken from them,

travel bans, imprisonment, and in extreme cases, death. When governments routinely silence and violate the basic rights of their citizens, it becomes the responsibility of the global community to advance the solution. The global community must continue to demand justice for women in Saudi Arabia and refuse to be complicit in damaging propaganda campaigns seeking to legitimize the Saudi government. We must shift from awareness to action. Women's dignity, equality, and basic rights are inherent, and such grave human rights violations require global solidarity and action.

For more information please email womensrights@freedomforward.org.