

Saudi Women still not granted Full Rights



Saudi women vote at a polling center during the country's municipal elections after King Salman announced sweeping changes that would recast the kingdom's line of succession Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 23 January 2016. Photo AP

On 17 April 2017, [King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud](#) issued a royal decree that appeared to loosen strictures on Saudi women that bars them from most public activities without approval from a male guardian. [Salman's decree](#) allows women to seek education, health care and other services on their own, "unless there is a legal basis for this request in accordance with the provisions of the Islamic Sharia."

In other words, little has changed for the kingdom's women.

The new freedoms covered in the decree are activities that most of the rest of the world regard as basic human rights: Go to the hospital, get a job, study, appear in court and file a police complaint without male permission. But among some [Saudis](#), they pass for progress under the kingdom's Sharia

law, whose fundamental premise is the belief in women's "lack of capacity."

Without irony, Saudi Arabia in 2000 signed and ratified the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#). Then, as now, the declaration came attached with huge loopholes, including in cases when the convention contradicts Islamic law. That was the kingdom's last major concession to women's rights until 2011, when then-King [Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud](#) gave them the right to vote and to run in municipal elections. Abdullah also allowed women to serve on the [Shura Council](#), an advisory body to the Saudi monarchy.

Despite those advances, Saudi women and girls still live with pervasive discrimination. They cannot study or travel abroad without approval from a husband, father, son or another male relative. They can't marry without permission. Registering to vote, renting an apartment, participating in sports are some of the tasks that are [difficult or impossible](#) for a Saudi woman to accomplish by herself.

It's hardly surprising, then, that Saudi Arabia [ranked](#) 141 of 144 countries in the [2016 Global Gender Gap](#) compiled by the World Economic Forum. The only countries where women lag farther behind men in education, health and other measures of equality are [Syria](#), [Pakistan](#) and [Yemen](#).

In 2016, [Human Rights Watch](#) issued a report documenting the ways that Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system curtails women's lives. The dozens of women interviewed included women like Zahra, 25, whose father refused her to study abroad. "Whenever someone tells me, 'You should have a five-year plan,' I say I can't," Zahra said. "I'll have a five-year plan and then my dad would disagree. Why have a plan?"

That same year, The [New York Times](#) asked for and received nearly 6,000 written testimonies from Saudi women about their daily lives. One teen described how the deeply patriarchal society affects even women's life-and-death decisions.

"I got into an accident once in a taxi, and the ambulance refused to take me to the hospital until my male guardian arrived," Rulaa, 19, recalled. "I had lost a lot of blood. If he didn't arrive that minute, I would've been dead by now."

But some Saudi women told the newspaper they saw hopeful signs of change, slow as they may be. "Women now are doctors, engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, working with men and having a value, and this is all in the past seven years or so," said L., 18. "We are advancing. We are moving forward. We just need patience and a chance."

Since last summer, thousands of Saudis have signed a [petition](#) to abolish male guardianships. The effort is part of a growing protest movement calling for full citizenship rights for females. The discontent is swaying public opinion. In November 2016, a liberal Saudi prince, [Alwaleed bin Talal](#), declared that it was time for Saudi Arabia to become the last country in the world to [allow women to drive](#).

Some Saudi women are protesting their second-class status through everyday actions. One provocative gesture came from [Malak Al Shehri](#), who posted a picture of herself outside on Twitter without a hijab. The post drew many threats, including from one man who called on Saudi Arabia to "kill her and throw her corpse to the dogs."

[Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said Saudi Arabia needs to go much farther than targeting few of the most egregious restrictions, such as the edit calling for an end to [informal male guardianship rules](#) that prevent women from accessing government services.

"Saudi Arabia has a tremendous opportunity to root out all vestiges of the guardianship system, and

should use the three-month review period King Salman ordered to immediately declare all guardian consent requirements null and void,” Whitson said. “The king should also require state agencies to actively prevent discrimination by private individuals and businesses.”

The [Gulf Center for Human Rights](#) also has called for abolishing male guardianship. Human rights advocates in Saudi Arabia are often silenced. Nonetheless, [Ali H. Alyami](#), founder and executive director of the [Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia](#), pointed out that royal decrees are hardly meaningful tools for change. A decree is “not institutionalized, it is not a law, and it doesn’t remove what women face everyday, Alyami said. “The guardian is still in control.”

For example, Alyami said, Saudi courts are ruled “only misogynistic men. If a woman goes to court because her guardian is preventing her from traveling, they will just tell her she shouldn’t come without his permission!”

“There is absolutely no institution to implement what the King said for women,” he said. The recent gestures at liberalization, Alyami said, may look “like an improvement but it’s not”.