

As part of reforms in Saudi Arabia, women are finally allowed to drive

On Sunday, Saudi Arabia stopped being the last country in the world to bar women from driving – a welcome move that is part of changes which have brought more openness to the conservative kingdom. The first 10 driving licences were issued to women who already held foreign licences, and 2,000 more are expected to be issued this month. The ability to drive is expected to bring more women into the workforce, give them a larger role in public life, and make them less dependent on male relatives and guardians to drive them to work. More young Saudi women have been graduating from universities but their participation rate in the labour force was only 20.9% in early 2017. The changes now sweeping the kingdom are part of Vision 2030, a package of social and economic reforms that is being largely driven by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Sultan, who wants to reduce the country's dependence on its oil reserves and diversify the economy, while including more Saudis in a workforce that is mostly made up of foreign workers. Under the reforms, the kingdom has opened cinema halls, limited the powers of the dreaded religious police, permitted the playing of music in public, and pushed for the employment of women, who make up half the population.

However, the changes have been a long time coming. Women have finally been allowed to get behind the wheels almost three decades after they first protested in Riyadh in 1990 for the right to drive. Some women who had campaigned for years against the ban on driving were among 17 people detained recently by the police and several of them continue to be in detention. There is also the Saudi system of guardianship that leaves women largely dependent on husbands or male relatives. While Saudi women no longer need the endorsement of a guardian to apply for a driving licence or to register a business, they still need permission from male relatives to work and to marry, and for everyday activities such as travel, pursuing higher education and receiving medical care. Though the Saudi monarchy has ordered a review of the laws that impose such restrictions on women, there continues to be some lack of clarity about the guardianship system. Without these issues being addressed, Saudi Arabia will not be able to attain true gender balance.

The end of the ban on driving by Saudi women must, therefore, be part of a continuing process that gives women more power to fashion their own destinies and become equal partners in shaping the future of their country.

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