

Women Facing the Death Penalty in Saudi Arabia: Invisibility and Structural Injustice

Women Facing the Death Penalty in Saudi Arabia: Injustice Sustained by Silence

This briefing examines Saudi Arabia's use of the death penalty through a gendered and intersectional lens, with particular attention to migrant women. It draws on case documentation, engagement with civil society actors and families, analysis of execution data, and an in-depth survivor interview.

Between 2023 and 2025 at least 20 women were executed: 9 Saudi nationals and 11 foreign workers from Ethiopia, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh, Kenya and Nigeria. Saudi women were largely executed for murder, while over a third of the foreign women were executed for drug smuggling, underscoring how nationality and labour status shape exposure to capital punishment. These cases form part of a wider execution crisis, with record numbers of executions in the past two years. Although women account for just over 2 per cent of all executions, they face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination that heighten their vulnerability to capital punishment.

Key findings

1. Determinants of Execution Structural, Not Criminal

Women's vulnerability to the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is not primarily determined by the severity of the alleged offence but by **structural factors**: nationality, class, language, gender, and the availability of external political leverage.

2. Gendered Vulnerability Across Citizenship Status

Migrant women – especially domestic workers – are positioned at the intersection of these risks, but Saudi women are also executed, at roughly the same rate, demonstrating that **gendered vulnerability** operates **across citizenship status**. While migrant women are rendered invisible through legal and diplomatic abandonment, Saudi women face execution without transparency regarding evidence, mitigation or judicial reasoning.

3. Absence of Consular Protection

A central finding of this research is the **systemic absence of consular protection** for non-Saudi defendants. Despite repeated outreach, no embassy agreed to participate in interviews, including embassies representing labour-sending states with nationals facing capital charges in Saudi Arabia. This non-engagement mirrors documented patterns of late notification, minimal intervention, and post-execution silence. It reflects an institutional posture in which the protection of migrant women is subordinated to diplomatic relations.

4. Hierarchies of Citizenship and Visibility

Responses varied along **global hierarchies of citizenship**: embassies of wealthier or geopolitically influential states responded more readily, though still declined engagement, while those representing poorer labour-sending countries were largely unresponsive. This unevenness helps explain why many cases involving migrant women never reach international scrutiny.

5. Survivor Testimony: How Structural Failures Operate in Practice

The survivor interview conducted for this research offers rare insight into how structural failures operate in practice. The woman was arrested without explanation and taken at night to an unrecognised detention facility by men who did not identify themselves. She was interrogated exclusively in Arabic, a language she did not understand, and was required to sign documents written entirely in Arabic without interpretation or legal counsel. She did not know the charges against her, where she was being held, or what she had agreed to by signing. She was detained for months without appearing before a court. Although she did not report physical violence, the conditions of detention – language exclusion, isolation and prolonged uncertainty – constituted **sustained psychological coercion**. Crucially, her release occurred only after her family mobilised evidence externally and escalated the case through national institutions in her home country, eventually reaching the presidency. This finding is analytically significant: it shows that innocence alone is insufficient, that procedural violations are not corrected internally, and that **survival depends on extraordinary political visibility** unavailable to most women, especially non-Saudi nationals.

6. Language as a Tool of Control

Where the research touches on migrant women, **language emerges as a mechanism of control**, not merely an administrative barrier. The denial of interpretation at arrest and interrogation, combined with the requirement to sign untranslated documents, produces coerced consent and forecloses meaningful defence. These practices disproportionately affect domestic workers, who are often isolated in private households, lack legal literacy, and have limited access to embassies or independent support. **Gender further compounds**



vulnerability: interrogations conducted by male officers in unfamiliar settings, coupled with the absence of trauma-informed procedures, systematically erase histories of abuse, coercion or self-defence. For Saudi women, even without the language barrier, similar **dynamics of coercion and exclusion** are rendered invisible by the absence of public case records, masking how gendered power operates within ostensibly domestic prosecutions.

7. Systematic Erasure of Women's Experiences

Equally significant are the findings that cannot be fully documented. The research was unable to interview women currently on death row, families of executed women, or embassy officials willing to speak on record. This absence reflects **a climate of fear, surveillance and retaliation that suppresses testimony from those most affected**. Families often lack information or safe channels to speak; survivors fear repercussions; diplomats avoid scrutiny. This produces what can be understood as **epistemic violence**: the systematic removal of women's experiences – migrant and Saudi alike – from legal records, diplomatic engagement and public advocacy.

8. A System Sustained by Silence

Taken together, these findings show that the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is **a system sustained by silence**. For both migrant and Saudi women, exposure to capital punishment is shaped less by culpability than by invisibility, language exclusion, and the absence of institutional will to protect them.

Recommendations

For the Saudi authorities:

- Ensure that all detainees facing capital charges are held in officially recognised facilities, informed promptly of the reasons for their arrest, and granted immediate access to legal counsel and, where necessary, qualified interpreters.
- Guarantee timely notification of families and consular authorities.
- No detainee should be required to sign documents or confessions in a language they do not understand.
- Judicial proceedings, sentencing decisions, and execution orders must be subject to transparency and independent scrutiny. This includes the publication of judicial reasoning and clarification of how mitigating factors—such as coercion, abuse, or self-defence—are assessed in cases involving women.

- A moratorium on executions—particularly for non-violent offences—should be adopted as an immediate safeguard, alongside an independent review of capital cases involving migrant women, survivors of abuse, and victims of trafficking, with a view to commutation and release.

For labour-sending states:

- Strengthen consular protection mechanisms, including clear protocols for responding to arrests and trials, proactive monitoring of detainees, early intervention in capital cases, and guaranteed access to legal representation and interpretation.
- Ensure that families are informed in a timely manner.
- Failures of notification or access should be formally documented and raised through bilateral and multilateral channels.

For international bodies and partner states:

- United Nations mechanisms should intensify scrutiny of Saudi Arabia’s use of the death penalty, with particular attention to gendered and migration-related impacts, and treat failures of consular notification and fair-trial guarantees as violations of international law. States engaged in diplomatic, economic or security cooperation with Saudi Arabia should ensure that such engagement is conditioned on measurable improvements in transparency, due process and protection for vulnerable defendants.
- Civil society organisations and international partners should support cross-border documentation efforts and survivor-centred approaches that address structural barriers to testimony, including language access, secure communication and protection from retaliation.
- Researchers should engage embassies, civil society organisations and affected families to map how and why consular protection collapses in practice—particularly for migrant women facing capital punishment.

Urgent action is required. Unless institutional silence—legal, diplomatic and political—is confronted, women will continue to face execution in Saudi Arabia without accountability, and migrant women in particular will remain the most invisible and least protected defendants within the system.



