

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

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This report examines Saudi Arabia's use of the death penalty through a gendered and intersectional lens, with particular attention to migrant women. It exposes how gender, migration status, race and class combine to shape vulnerability within the Saudi criminal justice system. 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.

The analysis brings together a review of existing documentation – including UN human rights mechanisms, international NGOs, ALQST's monitoring, and media investigations – with limited primary information gathered through families of affected women and civil society actors. Efforts were also made to engage embassies representing the women's countries of origin. The restricted access to official and diplomatic sources reflects the highly opaque and politically sensitive environment in which these cases occur.

The report focuses not on the death penalty itself but on how women experience the system in Saudi Arabia in practice, through arrest, interrogation, trial and detention, highlighting recurring issues such as the absence of legal representation, language barriers, pressure to sign documents or confessions, and the lack of timely or effective consular support, while families are often left without information or means to intervene.

By consolidating available evidence and situating it within a gender- and migration-aware framework, this report aims to clarify how women come to face capital punishment in Saudi Arabia and why their cases remain largely invisible. The analysis informs the findings and recommendations that follow and provides a foundation for targeted policy and advocacy engagement.

1. Legal framework and capital jurisdiction

Across death penalty systems globally, women face discrimination at every stage of the legal process. [Research shows](#) that many women sentenced to death are survivors of long-term sexual or domestic abuse, yet these histories are rarely introduced in court or treated as mitigating factors during sentencing. Intersectional inequalities further intensify this vulnerability: migrant domestic workers, women living in poverty, and racialised minorities are disproportionately represented among those facing capital charges. In Saudi Arabia, this [pattern](#) is particularly evident among foreign women employed in domestic work, who frequently lack access to legal counsel, interpretation or effective consular support, and are therefore unable to meaningfully challenge accusations or defend themselves in court. However, execution data compiled by ALQST reveal that women executed in Saudi Arabia during the period 2023-2025 were split roughly evenly between foreign nationals and Saudi citizens (55% vs. 45% respectively), indicating that gendered exposure to the death penalty operates across citizenship status, albeit through different legal and political pathways.

Saudi Arabia's death penalty operates within an uncodified legal system. There is no comprehensive written penal code setting out crimes, sentencing thresholds or binding standards. Instead, judges exercise wide discretion in interpreting religious law on a case-by-case basis, without a doctrine of precedent that would require consistency across rulings. This system results in significant variability in sentencing outcomes and creates space for subjective and gendered interpretations to shape judicial decisions.

Women from marginalised backgrounds – including migrant workers, poor defendants, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities – are overrepresented among those sentenced to death. Courts frequently fail to consider histories of gender-based violence, coercion or exploitation, even in cases involving prolonged domestic abuse or acts committed in self-defence. In some cases, women have been judged not only on the alleged offence but on [perceived violations of social and moral norms](#). Prosecutors and judges have portrayed women as immoral, disobedient, or unfit as wives or mothers, using these character assessments to justify harsh punishment rather than assessing the facts of the case alone.

Judicial discretion is further shaped by [deeply patriarchal institutional structures](#). Judges are exclusively male, and proceedings are often informed by conservative interpretations of gender roles. International legal analyses have found that this environment reinforces structural bias, particularly in cases involving coerced confessions, domestic violence, or limited evidentiary standards. Reports submitted to the United Nations have repeatedly found that Saudi Arabia has failed to meet its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and that recent legal reforms – including the 2022 Personal Status Law – continue to allow wide judicial discretion that results in [discriminatory outcomes](#) across both family and criminal law.

A recurring feature of capital cases in Saudi Arabia is heavy reliance on confessions, many of which are obtained during interrogations without legal representation or adequate safeguards. Human rights organisations have documented the use of [intimidation, threats and ill-treatment](#) to secure

statements, particularly from women interrogated by male officers in custodial settings. These confessions are frequently accepted as decisive evidence, even when later retracted or challenged in court. [Public testimonies](#) by detainees and activists, including high-profile cases, have further illustrated how coercion continues to shape outcomes in both criminal and politically sensitive cases.

The breadth of judicial discretion has also enabled the imposition of death sentences for non-lethal and non-violent offences, most notably drug-related charges. Migrant women workers are disproportionately affected by such prosecutions. In several [documented cases](#), domestic workers were sentenced to death despite strong indications of self-defence against abusive employers. In drug-related cases, women are often low-level couriers, frequently coerced, deceived or exploited by trafficking networks, yet they face capital prosecution while organisers and higher-level actors evade accountability. The absence of fair trial guarantees means that mitigating factors such as histories of abuse, coercion or trafficking are rarely meaningfully examined.

2. Trends and scale

Saudi Arabia has carried out a sharp and sustained escalation in executions over the past decade, reaching levels not seen in modern records. According to consolidated monitoring by human rights organisations, at least 198 people (including six women) were executed in 2023, already marking one of the highest annual totals in recent history, followed by 345 recorded executions in 2024 (nine of them women) and 356 (among them five women) in 2025.

A defining feature of this expansion is the extensive use of the death penalty for non-violent offences, particularly drug-related cases. A substantial proportion of the executions recorded in 2024, and the majority in 2025, were for drug offences that did not involve lethal violence. This marks a clear departure from international standards, which restrict the death penalty – where it has not been abolished – to the “most serious crimes”, generally understood to mean intentional killing.

Foreign nationals constitute a disproportionately large share of those executed, especially in drug-related cases, with migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia and Africa heavily represented among those sentenced to death. For women, ALQST’s tracking shows that 55 per cent of the women executed in Saudi Arabia between 2023 and 2025 were foreign nationals and 45 per cent Saudi citizens. [Monitoring data](#) indicate that many foreign defendants face trial without effective interpretation, without early access to lawyers, and without timely consular notification, significantly undermining their ability to challenge evidence or present mitigating circumstances.

The sharp rise in executions since 2018, combined with the opacity of proceedings and the over-representation of foreign and economically marginalised defendants, underscores how the death penalty in Saudi Arabia operates as a systemic instrument of control over individuals who face structural barriers to due process, rather than being confined to the most serious and exceptional crimes.

3. Systemic due-process violations

Capital cases in Saudi Arabia reveal systemic violations of fair-trial guarantees. Defendants are frequently interrogated and tried [without access to legal representation](#). Saudi Arabia has no state-funded legal aid system, and privately retained lawyers are often denied access to clients until late stages of proceedings, or after sentencing has already occurred. Courts routinely rely on confessions that defendants later retract, while judges frequently fail to investigate credible allegations that such statements were obtained through coercion, intimidation or ill-treatment.

These violations are especially acute for foreign nationals who do not speak Arabic and are unfamiliar with Saudi legal procedures. Human rights documentation repeatedly records cases in which defendants were required to sign Arabic-language documents they could not read or understand, without interpretation or explanation of their rights. Interpreters are often absent during interrogation and trial, severely undermining defendants' ability to challenge evidence, understand charges, or participate meaningfully in proceedings.

Women face compounded disadvantage within this system, particularly migrant domestic workers who are isolated from support networks and dependent on employers or intermediaries. Claims of gender-based violence, self-defence, and exploitative labour conditions are routinely excluded from judicial consideration, despite their relevance to culpability and mitigation. Migrant women are frequently pressured into confessions without any meaningful examination of prior abuse, coercion or trafficking. Similarly for Saudi women, in cases involving domestic violence or family-related homicide, courts frequently fail to assess abuse histories and instead frame women's conduct through moral or social norms.

Due-process violations extend well beyond the courtroom. Consular notification and family contact are frequently obstructed, with executions often carried out in secrecy. Families have reported learning of executions only through media coverage or NGO monitoring, sometimes after burial has already taken place. ALQST has documented cases in which bodies were not returned to families and burial locations were withheld. In several recent cases involving foreign nationals, embassies were not informed in sufficient time to pursue clemency requests or engage in compensation negotiations with victims' families (commonly referred to as *diyya*, a discretionary financial settlement that may be considered in certain cases involving private claims). The absence of timely notification effectively forecloses these avenues, regardless of whether families or states are willing to pursue them.

Opacity is further reinforced by the lack of publicly available judicial reasoning. Indictments, judgments and execution orders are rarely published, and defendants have been transferred, executed, or denied appeals without prior notice to their lawyers or families. United Nations Special Rapporteurs have repeatedly raised concerns about Saudi Arabia's non-compliance with international fair-trial obligations, citing patterns affecting foreign nationals, women, minors, and economically marginalised defendants.

4. Gendered dimensions and migrant intersectionality

Although women constitute a relatively small proportion of those executed in Saudi Arabia (see Appendix for disaggregated data), gender and nationality combine to produce distinct and heightened patterns of vulnerability. Migrant domestic workers – predominantly from African and South and Southeast Asian countries – face acute structural risks linked to the sponsorship-based labour migration system, which ties their legal residency to individual employers and severely restricts mobility, access to legal assistance, and the ability to report abuse without reprisals.

Employment within private households further isolates migrant women from community networks and external oversight. This isolation makes it exceptionally difficult to seek legal advice, consular intervention or independent medical and forensic assessment when accusations arise. ALQST has documented cases in which domestic workers were interrogated without interpretation, prosecuted without consular awareness, or charged with capital offences despite credible indicators of trafficking, coercion, or acts committed in self-defence against violent employers.

Gendered disadvantage is particularly pronounced in cases arising from domestic or intimate settings, where women defendants often face credibility bias and are judged through moralised assumptions about behaviour rather than evidentiary standards. In such cases, outcomes may hinge on private negotiations with victims' families, including the possibility of financial compensation in exchange for forgiveness (*diyya*). Migrant women are systematically excluded from these processes: without family presence, social standing, financial resources or effective embassy engagement, they are rarely able to participate in or influence negotiations and may face execution without their relatives being informed. The opacity of Saudi Arabia's justice system, combined with the private and unregulated nature of domestic work, means that many such cases remain undocumented and unmonitored.

5. Embassy responses: patchy and late

Consular protection for foreign nationals facing capital charges in Saudi Arabia is inconsistent, frequently delayed, and in many cases entirely absent. Embassies are often notified only after conviction or shortly before execution, leaving little or no opportunity to pursue clemency, challenge coerced confessions, or intervene in sentencing outcomes. ALQST has documented multiple cases in which families and diplomatic missions were informed only after executions had already taken place, foreclosing any possibility of legal intervention or even repatriation of remains.

These failures disproportionately affect low-income migrant workers from countries with limited diplomatic leverage. Governments of labour-sending states often lack the resources, political influence or institutional mechanisms to systematically monitor detainees, secure early access to defendants, or ensure effective legal representation in capital cases. As a result, consular involvement – where it occurs at all – is often reactive rather than preventative.

Structural barriers further undermine consular access. Under Saudi Arabia's sponsorship-based labour migration system, employers may control workers' mobility and communication, restrict access to defendants, or fail to report arrests altogether. [Embassies are largely dependent on state notification](#) to initiate support, particularly in criminal cases involving migrant workers. These constraints are especially severe for women employed in private households, where employers frequently confiscate phones and passports, effectively isolating workers from both their families and diplomatic missions.

United Nations Special Rapporteurs have repeatedly warned that Saudi Arabia's failure to ensure systematic consular notification violates its obligations under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and contributes directly to executions being carried out without meaningful legal defence.

6. Evidence constraints in a system sustained by silence

Despite the growing volume of reporting by NGOs, United Nations mechanisms and investigative media, systemic gaps persist in understanding how gender, nationality and structural dependency shape exposure to capital punishment in Saudi Arabia. These gaps are not incidental. They are produced by a combination of judicial secrecy, restricted access to detainees, weak consular notification, and the private, unregulated conditions under which many migrant women live and work. As a result, the lived experiences of women facing capital charges – particularly migrant women employed in private households – remain largely inaccessible, while the decision-making processes that leave them unprotected are obscured from scrutiny.

Structural barriers play a central role in this enforced invisibility, pointing to a broader pattern of epistemic erasure. This report therefore proceeds on the basis of what can be responsibly established within a highly restricted evidentiary environment. By consolidating available documentation, limited case mapping, survivor testimony, and patterns of institutional silence, it seeks to make visible the mechanisms through which women enter, move through, and disappear within Saudi Arabia's capital punishment system. The findings that follow should be read, in light of these structural constraints, not as an indication of insufficient evidence but as evidence of a system designed to resist transparency and accountability.

7. Findings: silence, fear, and institutional non-cooperation

This research set out to document the gendered and intersectional dynamics shaping women's exposure to capital punishment in Saudi Arabia, with particular attention to migrant women. While the project encountered severe barriers to access – including the refusal of embassies to engage and the impossibility of reaching women currently on death row – these obstacles should not be read merely as methodological constraints: they constitute findings in themselves. The absence of access reveals how silence, fear and non-cooperation are structurally produced and sustained within the systems that govern capital punishment.

Despite repeated outreach, no embassy of a labour-sending state agreed to participate in this research. Responses ranged from non-reply and indefinite delay to informal refusals citing political sensitivity or lack of authorisation. This pattern of non-engagement mirrors the failures of consular protection documented throughout this report and should be understood as institutional silence rather than incidental unavailability. The unwillingness of embassies to speak, even off the record or in general terms, reflects a diplomatic posture in which the protection of migrant nationals, particularly women in precarious labour sectors, is subordinated to bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia. Notably, this silence was unevenly distributed: embassies representing wealthier or geopolitically influential states responded more quickly, though they still declined participation, while embassies of low-income labour-sending countries – whose women are disproportionately represented among those prosecuted for drug-related or domestic-context offences – were largely unresponsive. These disparities reproduce global hierarchies of citizenship and reinforce a central pattern identified throughout this report: migrant women from poorer countries are the least protected, least visible, and most expendable defendants within Saudi Arabia's capital punishment system. Embassy non-engagement must therefore be regarded as a form of complicity.

Within this landscape of silence, the research team was able to conduct one in-depth interview with a migrant woman who was detained on drug-related charges carrying the potential for capital punishment but later, extremely unusually, released. She described being arrested at night from a hotel room by men who did not identify themselves, did not wear uniforms, and provided no explanation or warrant. She was taken to an unrecognised detention facility, transported without knowing where she was going, who was detaining her, or what she was accused of. Arabic was spoken exclusively, despite her inability to understand the language, and from the outset she was deprived of basic information about her legal situation. The combination of secrecy, anonymity and linguistic exclusion generated acute fear and disorientation and set the conditions for coercion long before any formal legal process began.

Crucially, she was required to sign documents in Arabic at the outset of her detention, without translation, legal counsel or explanation. She later stated that she never learned what those documents contained. She was held in pre-trial detention for months without appearing before a court, without access to a lawyer, and with only limited and delayed access to interpretation. Although she did not report physical violence, she described sustained psychological pressure created by prolonged

uncertainty, repeated questioning, and interrogation by men in unfamiliar, poorly lit facilities.

Her release occurred not because the Saudi authorities identified procedural failures, or for lack of evidence, but because her family mobilised rapidly outside the country, using CCTV footage obtained at an airport in her home country showing that drugs had been planted in luggage linked to her passport. Her case escalated through national institutions until it reached the presidency, prompting direct diplomatic intervention. Only then was she released – without explanation, apology or acknowledgment of any wrongdoing. At one point in the interview she stated plainly, “My family was not voiceless.” This statement is analytically decisive in explaining why she survived. Her release depended not on her innocence, nor on legal safeguards within Saudi Arabia, but on exceptional political visibility, family advocacy and diplomatic leverage, conditions unavailable to most women facing capital charges, particularly migrant domestic workers, trafficked women, and those whose families lack resources or access to power.

The research was unable to interview women currently on death row, families of executed women, or embassy officials willing to speak on record. This is not accidental. It reflects a climate of fear, surveillance and retaliation that actively suppresses testimony from those most affected. Families often lack information, safe channels, or the resources needed to speak publicly; survivors fear repercussions for themselves or relatives still in Saudi Arabia; and embassy officials face institutional pressures that discourage scrutiny. Together, these dynamics produce what can be described as epistemic violence: the systematic erasure of certain experiences from the record. Their absence from this research is therefore not a limitation to be minimised, but evidence of the very structures this report seeks to expose.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

This briefing demonstrates that women's exposure to capital punishment in Saudi Arabia is not the result of isolated judicial failures, but of systemic and intersecting harms embedded within the criminal justice, migration and diplomatic protection systems, reinforced by global hierarchies of citizenship that determine which defendants are visible, protected, or expendable. The findings show that survival in capital cases depends less on innocence or due process than on exceptional political visibility and the capacity of families or states to exert pressure from outside Saudi Arabia.

The absence of testimony from women currently on death row or from families of executed women is therefore not a limitation of this research, but evidence of a system structured to suppress scrutiny. Silence, secrecy and fear are not peripheral features of Saudi Arabia's death penalty regime; they are central to its operation.

Recommendations

For the Saudi authorities:

- The Saudi authorities must 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. No detainee should be required to sign documents or confessions in a language they do not understand, and families and consular authorities must be notified without delay.
- 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:

- Labour-sending states must strengthen consular protection mechanisms including proactive monitoring of detainees, early intervention in capital cases, and guaranteed access to legal representation and interpretation.

- Embassies should establish clear protocols for responding to arrests and trials involving their nationals, especially women, and ensure that families are informed in a timely manner.

Diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia should prioritise the protection of nationals over political or economic considerations, and failures of notification or access should be formally

- documented and raised through bilateral and multilateral channels.

For international institutions 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 the structural barriers to testimony identified in this report, including language access, secure communication, and protection from retaliation.

The evidence presented here makes clear that women facing capital punishment in Saudi Arabia – Saudis and foreigners alike – are subject not only to harsh laws but to a system that depends on their invisibility. Challenging that system requires confronting not only state violence but the silences – legal, diplomatic and institutional – that allow it to persist.

Appendix

a. Women reported by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) as having been executed in the period 2023-25

	Women as proportion of all executions	Ratio of Saudi: non-Saudi women executed	Women as proportion of all Saudis executed	Women as proportion of all non-Saudis executed
2023	6/172 (3.49%)	3:3 (50:50%)	3/135 (2.22%)	3/37 (8.11%)
2024	9/345 (2.61%)	3:6 (33:36%)	3/208 (1.44%)	6/137 (4.38%)
2025	5/356 (1.40%)	3:2 (60:40%)	3/154 (1.95%)	2/202 (0.99%)
Total 2023-25	20/873 (2.29%)	9:11 (45:55%)	9/497 (1.81%)	11/376 (2.93%)

b. Charges on which women were reported by SPA to have been executed in the period 2023-25

	Murder/other violent crime		Drugs-related (all non-Saudi)
	Saudi	non-Saudi	
2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Murdered her mother 2. Together with brother, murdered family members 3. Murdered her husband 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. (Yemeni) murdered her Saudi husband 2. (Ghanaian) murdered a Saudi woman 3. (Bangladeshi) murdered a Saudi man 	
2024	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Murdered her husband 2. + 3. Formed a gang, together with three Saudi men (all five were executed), who committed muggings and murder 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. (Ethiopian) murdered a Saudi child 2. (Kenyan) murdered a Saudi man 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. – 6. (all Nigerian) smuggling cocaine
2025	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Murdered her husband 2. She and husband (both executed) murdered their daughter 3. In partnership with a Yemeni man (also executed), kidnapped three newborn babies from hospital and carried out acts of sorcery 		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. – 2. (both Nigerian) smuggling cocaine

