

Saudi Arabia: UN experts push for prompt release of women human rights defenders

A ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia may have officially ended at the weekend, but on Wednesday, nine United Nations experts called for the immediate release of a number of women's rights defenders who were imprisoned following a government crackdown which began in mid-May.

"In stark contrast with this celebrated moment of liberation for Saudi women, women's human rights defenders have been arrested and detained on a wide scale across the country, which is [truly worrying](#) and perhaps a better indication of the Government's approach to women's human rights," said UN Human Rights experts in a joint statement.

"We call for the urgent release of all of those detained while pursuing their legitimate activities in the promotion and protection of women's rights in Saudi Arabia," added the Special Rapporteurs and experts.

The crackdown began on 15 May with a spate of prominent women's rights defenders' arrests. Over the following three weeks, some 12 other human rights defenders, including both women and men, were also arrested.

The majority of detainees were advocating for lifting the driving ban and for improvements in women's rights within Saudi Arabia. Many of those detained face extremely serious charges, such as 20 years in prison, according to reports.

Although charges have not been confirmed, the experts' statement said that some of those imprisoned have been reportedly accused of undermining national security, and of acting against religious and national foundations inside Saudi Arabia.

These arrests portray a contradictory stance in policy regarding women's rights *—UN Experts*

"Women human rights defenders face compounded stigma, not only because of their work," added the statement, "but also because of discrimination on gender grounds."

While noting that Saudi Arabia has won acclaim for its recent programme of modernization under Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the experts said that "these arrests portray a contradictory stance in policy regarding women's rights."

"We reiterate our long-time concern over others detained in Saudi Arabia on the basis of their activism and the exercise of their right to freedom of

expression as well as their right to freedom of association,” the experts stated, urging the Government to improve its human rights record, “especially with regards to women’s rights.”

“The first step in demonstrating such commitment is to free the human rights defenders who remain in prison solely as a result of working to advance the enjoyment of rights for all,” the experts concluded.

Special Rapporteurs and other UN rights experts are appointed by the Geneva-based [UN Human Rights Council](#), as honorary positions, to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or country situation.