



# Possible Impact of Saudi Women Driving on Female Employment and Reliance on Foreign Workers

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# Possible Impact of Saudi Women Driving on Female Employment and Reliance on Foreign Workers

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and Usamah Alfarhan

**Abstract:** In a landmark decision by Saudi King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud on September 26, 2017, a decree was issued allowing Saudi women to drive motor vehicles. In this short paper, we reflect on the possible impact of this decision on future domestic workers' immigration trends. We also comment on the measure's possible effects on the labour force participation of Saudi women, in the light of some of the existing socio-demographic characteristics. We conclude that while the decision holds the potential for increasing the work force participation of women, the speed of such participation will be greatly determined by the related social and cultural changes within the family and society.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia; Policy; Laws & Regulations; Female Employment; National & Foreign Labour; Domestic Workers; Recruitment

## 1. Lifting of the Driving Ban on Women: Its Impact on the Employment of Foreign Private Drivers

A survey conducted in 2014 by the Public Opinion Survey Unit of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue indicated that 87.2 per cent of the interviewed Saudi families had a foreign private driver.<sup>1</sup> The Labour Force Survey 2017 (Q1) recorded that the number of domestic foreign drivers was 1,376,096 (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> Of these, some are employed by non-Saudi households.

The two figures suggest that some drivers probably work for several households: using the previously mentioned figure of 87.2 per cent of the 3,417,788 Saudi households<sup>3</sup> reportedly having private drivers, the calculation returns an estimate of three million drivers in the country, which is far higher than the figure of 1,376,096 in the Labour Force Survey. The pattern of sharing drivers is indicative of the

financial burden on households, part of which can be attributed to the ban on women driving. It was actually estimated that lifting the ban could save the Kingdom SR20 billion (\$5.3 billion) per year in salaries, and in recruitment, iqama and work permit fees.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1: Non-Saudi domestic workers by sex and main groups of household occupations (Q1, 2017)**

Occupations	Male	Female	Total
Housekeepers	1,807	1,114	<b>2,921</b>
<b>Drivers</b>	<b>1,376,096</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1,376,096</b>
Servants and house cleaners	141,068	747,096	<b>888,164</b>
Cooks and food providers	19,880	4,077	<b>23,957</b>
Houses, buildings and restrooms guards	35,418	0	<b>35,418</b>
Gardeners	3,176	0	<b>3,176</b>
Home tailors	906	1,487	<b>2,393</b>
Nurses in homes	549	2,406	<b>2,955</b>
Private teachers at home	358	140	<b>498</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,579,258</b>	<b>756,320</b>	<b>2,335,578</b>
<i>Drivers % of all male domestic labourers</i>	<i>87%</i>		
<i>Drivers % of all male foreign labourers</i>	<i>7.2%</i>		

Source: Labour Market Survey (Q1, 2017), General Authority for Statistics (GaStat) and Ministry of Labour and Social Development

Foreign private drivers made up 87 per cent of all male domestic labourers and 7.2 per cent of all employed non-Saudi males in early 2017: this highlights the relative importance of this activity for migrants. Judging by surveys in Kuwait in 2017<sup>5</sup> and Oman in 2010,<sup>6</sup> male domestic workers mostly originate from two countries: India and Bangladesh. The two nationalities make up 91 and 80 per cent, respectively, of all male domestic employees in the two countries.

In the short- to middle-term, one should expect that some families will continue employing foreign private drivers. Indeed, not all drivers are employed to only drive women and not all women will get a driving license. Nevertheless, Saudi women's access to driving will inevitably impact the foreign workers currently employed in that field and compel foreign male workers willing to come to the Gulf States to

seek alternative destinations or employment sectors. India and Bangladesh may be particularly affected. On the other hand, facilitating women's employment outside the household as a result of their ability to drive a vehicle may end up creating an additional need for migrant domestic workers to care for children. Thus, the number of female domestic workers may increase, in contradiction to the government's policy to reduce migrant workers.

## 2. Potential Impact on Female Labour Force Participation

An analysis of the potential effects of granting Saudi women the right to drive motor vehicles in the Kingdom must also take into account the change in the general atmosphere that has led to the lifting of the driving ban. Saudi Arabia, which has for long been known as a country with one of the most conservative socio-political systems globally, has recently shown progressive signals towards higher degrees of international integration and accommodation. This can clearly be seen in the Saudi Vision 2030. Calls for progress and change can be seen all throughout, from the objectives of becoming a hub connecting three continents, and the promotion of culture and entertainment, to the explicit goal of providing equal opportunities for men and women.<sup>7</sup>

A direct consequence of the lifting of the driving ban is an increase in the mobility of women. That in turn could have a positive impact on their labour force participation rate (LFPR). During the first quarter of 2017, the LFPR of Saudi women aged 15+ was 17.4 per cent,<sup>8</sup> a level significantly lower than in the other GCC countries.<sup>9</sup>

The relatively low LFPR of Saudi women seems to be somewhat contradictory to their educational attainment that could enable them to enter the workforce. About 19 per cent of all women aged 15+ had attained an education up to the university level. Furthermore, 41 per cent of young females aged 30-34 were university-educated in 2016 (as compared to 36 per cent men that age).<sup>10</sup> Besides, such an investment in education indicates the women's intention to participate in the economy. Saudi females' low participation rates thus cannot be fully explained by a lack of human capital or lack of women's intention to join the labour force.

As a matter of fact, Saudi females' high unemployment rate (34.5 percent of the economically-active women aged 15 and above)<sup>11</sup> suggests that those effectively seeking employment encounter specific difficulties. By contrast, only 7.2 per cent of Saudi men are unemployed. Exogenous factors, such as legal and social constraints, most likely hamper Saudi women's access to the labour market. Such factors may include the wide prevalence of traditional norms about women's mobility and work outside the home, especially in non-segregated environments, and the restriction on the disciplines that women are allowed to enrol in. Thus, even the university educated women may possess skills that qualify them to enter only a limited number of occupations.<sup>12</sup>

Facilitating the mobility of women may help them overcome some of the difficulties they face in accessing job opportunities. Furthermore, it may lift some of the material impediments to their seeking employment. It is nonetheless noteworthy that, first, most Saudi households do have a non-Saudi driver whose job is to run household errands and not only to drive women. Second, one ought to keep in mind that the legal constraint on women driving was long augmented by social norms, as mentioned earlier,

which might not change as easily. The legal aspect of the phenomenon is merely one element keeping women off the driver's seat, and it might take a longer time span for social and cultural norms to adapt to the new legal frameworks.

We do not know the extent to which Saudi women's low workforce participation, or their high level of unemployment, is caused by their inability to drive. Assuming that this is a major handicap, the new law would enable most of the 0.43 million unemployed women to actually contribute to the labour force and the economy. Also, it would enable many of the 1.5 million women who are in school or undergoing training to join the labour force in the years to come. Future research should provide insights into the degree to which facilitation of women's driving does, in fact, act as a catalyst for women's entry into the Saudi labour force, notwithstanding the historical, cultural and social impediments.

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## Endnotes

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**Short Reference:** F. De Bel-Air, N.M.Shah, P.Fargues and U.Alfarhan, "Possible Impact of Saudi Women Driving on Female Employment and Reliance on Foreign Workers". Explanatory Note No. 4/2017, GLMM, <http://gulfmigration.eu>.

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