

Women's Executions in Saudi Arabia From Fragile Protection to Systematic Violations (2015–2025)



Issued by

European Saudi organisation for Human Rights

 ESOHumanRights



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Introduction

In recent years, amid official rhetoric promoting sweeping transformations in the status of women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the issue of women facing the death penalty has emerged as one of the most sensitive and urgent human rights concerns. Despite repeated claims of “major progress” in women’s rights, the period under review witnessed a troubling rise in the execution of women, carried out in contexts marked by a lack of transparency, weak procedural safeguards, and the absence of fair-trial standards. This stark contradiction between reformist discourse and judicial practice points to a systematic pattern of violations affecting women at every stage of the criminal process, from detention and investigation to trial and, ultimately, execution.

This report covers the period 2015–2025, a pivotal decade that coincided with King Salman bin Abdulaziz assuming power and Mohammed bin Salman's rise within the state apparatus. It also coincided with intensified efforts to reshape the Kingdom's image regionally and internationally—particularly through branding “modernisation” and “women's empowerment” policies as central pillars of Vision 2030¹. Yet the reality of criminal justice during this period indicates that women—both Saudi nationals and migrants—continued to face grave violations that systematically undermine their right to life and their access to justice.

This issue must also be understood within a broader context: the precarious situation of migrant domestic workers, who constitute a core pillar of Saudi Arabia's domestic labour market. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines domestic workers as workers who perform work in, or for, one or more private households. The ILO estimated that in 2022 there were approximately 57.7 million women domestic workers worldwide.²

At the national level, data from Saudi Arabia's General Authority for Statistics—based on administrative labour market records for Q2 2025—indicate that the number of non-Saudi domestic workers stands at approximately 4.12 million, including around 1,397,000 women, representing more than one third of the foreign domestic workforce³. The overwhelming majority of these women work in domestic service, cleaning, childcare, and other forms of household labour—sectors characterised by closed labour relations, near-total dependence on the sponsorship (kafala) system, and the absence of effective protection mechanisms.

This report seeks to shed light on women's executions by documenting cases and analysing violations linked to trial procedures and detention conditions, with a particular focus on migrant domestic workers as an especially vulnerable group. It aims to document a largely invisible reality and present it in legal and human rights terms that enable accountability for Saudi Arabia's justice system in light of relevant international obligations.



Monitoring Methodology

The report's core dataset is based on systematic monitoring by the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR) of execution announcements and statements issued by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Interior and published via the Saudi Press Agency (SPA). Monitoring covers January 2015 to December 2025, a period that saw the highest number of women's executions and coincided with the rule of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

This monitoring is complemented by a review of reports by international and regional human rights organisations, official statements issued by governments of labour-sending countries, and—where possible—verification of selected individual cases through direct communication with victims' families or other informed sources.

Documentation takes place in an extremely restrictive environment marked by a lack of transparency, the absence of independent civil society organisations, and strict constraints on local media. This makes access to detailed information—especially regarding women and migrant domestic workers—highly limited. Because Saudi authorities do not systematically publish lists of individuals on death row, nor detailed information on trial proceedings or places of detention, the report recognises a genuine possibility that additional executions may have occurred without official announcement, or that relevant cases could not be documented.

Accordingly, the figures and patterns presented should be understood as conservative minimum estimates. They reflect what could be reliably documented under prevailing constraints and should not be treated as an exhaustive record of all cases or violations.

Section I: Numbers and Statistics

Overall figures (2015–2025)

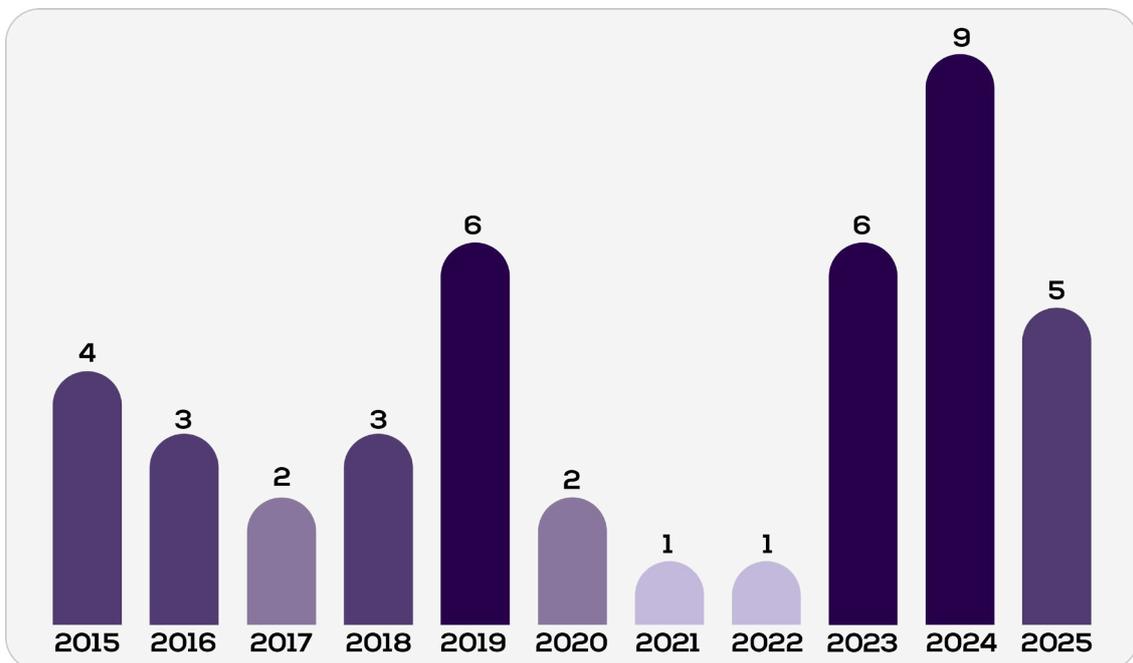
According to ESOHR's monitoring, the total number of women executed during the period covered by this report is 44.

These executions involved women of multiple nationalities, occurred across different years, and encompassed a range of charges and sentencing categories.



These figures are based primarily on Ministry of Interior announcements published via SPA, alongside multi-source verification, including at least three cases identified despite not being officially announced. The report does not claim these numbers are comprehensive, given the lack of transparency and the likelihood of additional unannounced cases.

Between 2015 and 2025, women's executions were carried out at varying rates. Four executions were recorded in 2015; three in 2016; two in 2017; and three in 2018, in addition to one case documented without an official statement. The number rose to six in 2019, alongside two executions reportedly carried out that year without official announcements. In 2020, two executions were recorded, followed by one in 2021 and one in 2022. The figure rose again in 2023 with six executions, peaked in 2024 with nine executions, and five women were executed in 2025.



Women Executed 2015–2025

Unannounced executions identified through external sources

A review of international media reporting, alongside databases maintained by the University of Oxford Death Penalty Research Unit⁴, indicates that at least three women were executed without any official announcement in Ministry of Interior statements or via SPA. These include:

- Biola Ologunro (Nigeria), executed on 3 April 2019;
- Warda Mandang (Philippines), executed on 28 March 2019;
- Tuti Tursilawati (Indonesia; born 6 June 1984), executed on 29 October 2018. Her case received significant international coverage because the execution was carried out without prior notification to the Indonesian government or her family⁵.

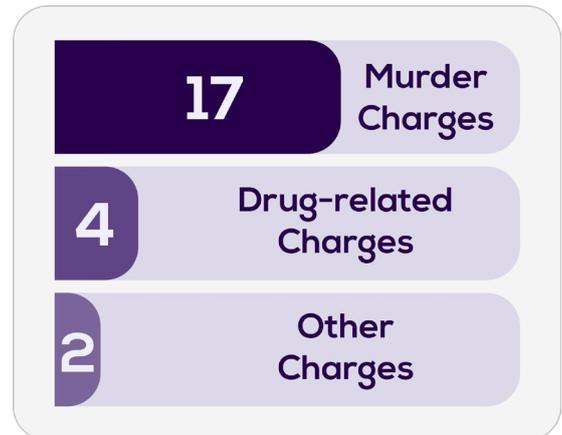
The absence of official announcements regarding these cases raises serious concerns about transparency and discriminatory practices in the publication of execution data—particularly where foreign women are concerned. It also reinforces fears that other cases may have gone unannounced, meaning that available figures may not reflect the true scale of the phenomenon and may represent only a conservative minimum under conditions of restricted access to information.

International media reported details concerning the charges and trial of Tuti Tursilawati, whereas ESOHR could not identify sufficient verifiable information regarding Biola Ologunro and Warda Mandang. Accordingly, Tursilawati's case is included within the documented figures.

Comparison with 2004–2014

According to available data, 23 women were executed between 2004 and 2014: 17 on murder charges; 4 on drug-related charges; 1 on charges relating to torture and kidnapping; and 1 on charges relating to sorcery/witchcraft. In terms of nationality, Saudi women constituted the largest group (9 cases), followed by Pakistani women (4 cases), with the remaining cases involving Ethiopian, Sri Lankan, Indonesian, and Nigerian nationals, as well as one case each involving Nepal and Egypt.

A comparison between 2004–2014 and 2015–2025 indicates both a quantitative and qualitative escalation in women's executions in Saudi Arabia. In addition to nearly doubling in number, the scope of charges expanded—most notably with increased reliance on drug-related cases—while foreign women continued to be disproportionately affected.



Charges 2004–2014

By nationality (42 documented cases)

Based on 42 documented cases, the data show a clear predominance of non-Saudi women. Thirteen women were Saudi nationals, compared to twenty-nine foreign nationals. The foreign nationalities were as follows: eight Ethiopians, seven Nigerians, three Indonesians, three Yemenis, and one case each involving Syria, Myanmar, Ghana, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Philippines.



By nationality

It should be noted that, within the overall number of women's executions identified during the reporting period, at least three cases lacked any official announcement in Ministry of Interior statements—all involving foreign women (Indonesian, Nigerian, and Filipino). This reinforces concerns regarding transparency and potential discriminatory practices in the communication and implementation of the death penalty, particularly against foreign women.

By type of charge

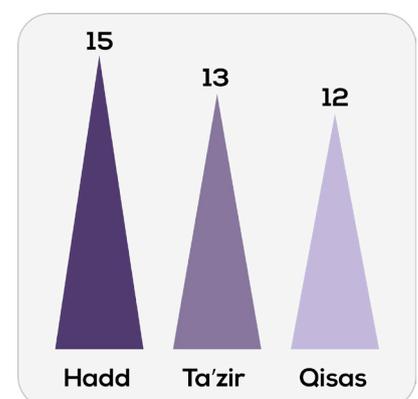
The overwhelming majority of women's executions were linked to murder charges: 33 murder cases out of 42 documented cases (approximately 79%). By contrast, eight cases were linked to drug-related charges, most of which were carried out after 2024, alongside an unprecedented escalation in executions for drug offences more broadly. Notably, all women executed in drug cases were foreign nationals, including one Pakistani woman and seven Nigerian women. In addition, one case was recorded in 2025 involving charges related to kidnapping and sorcery/witchcraft.



By type of charge

By type of sentence

Executions were categorised as hadd, qisas, or ta'zir. Hadd sentences were recorded in 15 cases, qisas in 12, and ta'zir in 13, while in three cases the sentencing category was not clearly specified in the official announcement⁶. In principle, hadd applies to offences defined under Islamic law and is subject to strict evidentiary requirements. Qisas,



By type of sentence

applied in murder cases, is tied to the right of the victim's family (wali al-dam) to pardon or demand retribution; however, a lack of transparency often undermines the meaningful exercise of this right.⁷

A key practical barrier—particularly affecting foreign nationals—is the difficulty of securing diya (blood money) even when victims' families indicate willingness to pardon in exchange for compensation. In practice, diya amounts in intentional murder cases are not subject to a clear legal ceiling; they are left to the victim's family's discretion without binding standards or maximum limits⁸. As a result, demanded sums are often extremely high and far beyond the financial capacity of those sentenced—especially foreign workers and domestic workers with limited income. Prior human rights reporting has pointed to a stark disparity in access to pardons through diya, with foreign workers far less likely to secure such outcomes than Saudi nationals. In conditions of poverty, weak support networks, lack of effective legal representation, and cross-border coordination challenges, many foreign prisoners and their families are unable to raise the required amount within the time available⁹. This renders the pardon route nearly unattainable in practice and empties the right of pardon of meaningful content for the most vulnerable groups.¹⁰

By contrast, ta zir grants judges broad discretionary power to determine punishments, opening the door

to arbitrariness and politicisation in death sentences—including in cases that do not meet the international threshold of the “most serious crimes.”¹¹ The failure to specify the sentencing category in some cases further deepens concerns about transparency and accountability in the application of the death penalty.

Section II: Key Cases

A range of obstacles prevents the documentation of detainees' cases in Saudi Arabia—particularly those sentenced to death. There are no independent civil society organisations, and no independent media able to report cases without strict censorship that enforces the state's narrative. Detainees also face severe barriers to communicating with international media or human rights organisations abroad.

In addition, social stigma often prevents families from speaking publicly, out of fear of community backlash. Family intimidation and fear of reprisals further discourage disclosure. Access to information about case progress—including charges and their background—remains difficult even for families. A lack of awareness of basic rights—such as the right to adequate legal defence, access to an interpreter and a lawyer, and communication with the outside world—adds further complexity.

These conditions are even harsher in the case of women

detainees, where stigma is greater and the fear of retaliation more acute. Nevertheless, some cases occasionally come to light, revealing the scale of the violations involved.

ESOHR highlights a number of cases it has followed over the past ten years (January 2015–December 2025), the period covered by this report.

Maryam Al-Muteb (Saudi Arabia)

On 21 May 2025, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Interior announced the execution (ta zir) of Saudi national Maryam Al-Muteb—known in the media as the “Dammam Kidnapper”—and her Yemeni partner Mansour Qa'id, after they were convicted of kidnapping three children more than 25 years earlier.¹²



Maryam Al-Muteb

According to the official statement, Al-Muteb “kidnapped, in collaboration with Mansour Qa'id, three newborn infants from the hospital by deception and trickery, falsely attributed them to persons other than their biological fathers, and practised sorcery and witchcraft.” The statement added that Qa'id “assisted her, facilitated her actions, and concealed the crime after learning of the kidnappings.” Authorities concluded that the defendants' actions constituted a prohibited act punishable under Islamic law and issued ta zir death sentences accordingly. The case became public in 2020 when Al-Muteb sought to obtain official identity documents for two children whom

she claimed she had found as abandoned infants more than two decades earlier. Investigations and DNA matching revealed the children belonged to families who had reported missing infants in the 1990s. The case received extensive coverage by official bodies and local media, including details of the investigation, trial, and sentencing¹³. However, no meaningful details were published regarding the defence's arguments or the defendant's explanations before the court.

Ijaz Fatima (Pakistan)

Ijaz Fatima, a Pakistani national, was executed in Saudi Arabia in April 2019 alongside her husband, Mustafa Muhammad, following their conviction for heroin smuggling. In 2016, the couple decided to travel to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah and arranged their trip through a friend acting as a travel intermediary. On 27 June 2016, the day they arrived at Jeddah airport, they were arrested on heroin smuggling charges.¹⁴

There is no definitive evidence that they had prior knowledge of the presence of drugs. They travelled with their daughter Bushra, who was six years old at the time, while their younger son remained in Pakistan.

Immediately after arrest, Saudi authorities separated the family: Mustafa was transferred to a men's prison, while Ijaz was held with her daughter in the women's section of Dhahban Central Prison. Six months later,

Bushra was separated from her mother and detained for more than two years in a juvenile facility. Saudi and Pakistani authorities did not inform the families of the arrest or the trial.

Proceedings reportedly fell far short of basic fair-trial standards: the couple were not provided with a lawyer or an interpreter, despite not speaking Arabic. According to family testimony, they did not even know they had been sentenced to death. Reporting also indicates that foreign nationals—especially those living in poverty—rarely receive legal representation in serious criminal cases in Saudi Arabia, including drug cases.

Bushra endured harsh conditions in the juvenile facility, including linguistic and psychological isolation. She met her mother once every two months for no more than 30 minutes under strict supervision. Over two years, she saw her father only twice—encounters that reportedly left a profound psychological impact. In February 2019, after prolonged efforts, Ijaz's relatives were able to recover Bushra and return her to Pakistan; she reportedly displayed severe psychological distress.

On 11 April 2019, Ijaz Fatima and Mustafa Muhammad were executed without prior notification to their families or the Pakistani government. The families learned of the execution later through former detainees. They attempted to retrieve the bodies for burial in Pakistan, but Saudi authorities did not respond and, to date,

have not issued death certificates or official documentation regarding the case. Supported by a human rights organisation, the families filed a petition before Pakistan's Supreme Court requesting state intervention to recover the remains; the court rejected the request. The burial location remains unknown.

Siti Zainab (Indonesia)

On 14 April 2015, Saudi Arabia executed Indonesian national Siti Zainab bint Dohri Ruba under qisas on murder charges. Amnesty International reported that she was suspected of having a mental health condition.

Siti Zainab arrived in Medina in March 1998 to work as a domestic worker.

She was from Bangkalan, East Java, married, and a mother of two. In September 1999, she sent her family a letter complaining of mistreatment by her lawyer¹⁵. She then disappeared from contact until her family received a fax in March 2003 from the Indonesian consulate in Jeddah informing them that she had been arrested for stabbing her employer to death.

Her trial began in May 2000 before three judges, with an Indonesian interpreter who was a graduate student—reportedly on his first interpreting assignment. In August 2000,



Siti Zainab

the Indonesian government informed her family that the execution had been postponed following a conversation between King Fahd and then-Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid.

On 29 March 2001, UN Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir issued an urgent appeal to Saudi Arabia, noting that Siti Zainab had been tried without legal assistance and had been denied visits by the ambassador or her lawyer. Saudi authorities responded that she had confessed, and that execution would be suspended until the youngest of the victim's children reached adulthood to decide whether to pardon or demand qisas. Saudi authorities waited more than 15 years until the youngest child came of age; the victim's family ultimately demanded qisas, and the execution was carried out.¹⁶

Karni bint Madi Tarsim (Indonesia)

On 16 April 2015—two days after Siti Zainab's execution—Saudi authorities executed Indonesian domestic worker Karni bint Madi Tarsim, aged 37, in Yanbu. Karni had been sentenced to death in March 2013 after being convicted of killing her employer's four-year-old child in Yanbu in 2012.



Karni bint Madi Tarsim

The execution was carried out without prior notification to Indonesian authorities regarding the time, place, or manner of implementation. Human rights organisations reported that she did not receive adequate legal support during trial proceedings, and that there were indications that she did not have qualified legal representation following her case from the outset.

Tuti Tursilawati (Indonesia)

Tuti Tursilawati's case began in May 2010, when she was working as a domestic worker in Taif, Saudi Arabia. She was accused of killing her elderly employer after he attempted to sexually assault her. In 2011, she was sentenced to death.¹⁷



Tuti Tursilawati

The Indonesian government and her family pursued a long path of appeals and pleas. Two Indonesian presidents sent letters to the Saudi monarch in 2011 and 2016 requesting commutation, but these efforts did not succeed.

Her mother, Eti Sarneti, visited her three times: in 2010, 2012, and May 2018. The final visit lasted an hour and a half, during which mother and daughter hugged and spoke without a glass barrier. One week before the execution, Tuti made a video call with her mother and appeared to be well.

On 29 October 2018, she was executed suddenly without prior notification to the Indonesian government or her family, becoming the fifth Indonesian citizen executed in Saudi Arabia in this manner.¹⁸ The case sparked shock in her hometown of Majalengka, West Java, where residents gathered for condolences and Qur'an recitation. Indonesia reportedly lodged an official protest, considering the execution a breach of international norms. According to ESOHR's monitoring, this execution was not published via SPA and therefore did not appear through the Ministry of Interior's standard announcement mechanism, despite wide international media coverage.

Qadeerat Adesola Afolabi (Nigeria)

In 2017, Qadeerat Adesola Afolabi, a Nigerian national and widowed mother of two, travelled to Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic worker. Upon arrival, Saudi authorities discovered drugs in her luggage, arrested her, and charged her with drug smuggling¹⁹.

At the same time, Nigeria uncovered a criminal network at Kano airport that had been planting drugs in travellers' bags without their knowledge. Qadeerat was identified as one of the victims of this network.

In December 2018 and February 2019, the Nigerian consul in Saudi Arabia reportedly wrote to Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs urging urgent intervention, but the letters received no response. Saudi authorities reportedly replied briefly that she had been granted "her right to defend herself," without further explanation or engagement with evidence indicating that she had been framed.

In March 2019, she was executed. The case provoked outrage in Nigeria and was cited as a stark example of injustice and of Saudi authorities' disregard for information indicating the defendant's innocence.

Israa Al-Ghomgham (Saudi Arabia)

Israa Al-Ghomgham's case represents a pivotal moment in the pattern of violations linked to the death penalty against women in Saudi Arabia. She was the first woman for whom the Saudi Public Prosecution sought the death penalty on charges of a political and human-rights nature. Al-Ghomgham is an activist from Qatif.



Israa Al-Ghomgham

She was arrested on 8 December 2015 alongside her husband and three other activists following a violent raid on her home. She has been held since then at the General Intelligence (Mabahith) prison in Dammam, without being granted a fair trial or consistent access to legal counsel. In August 2018, she appeared before the Specialized

Criminal Court (SCC), which handles cases that authorities describe as “terrorism.” The prosecution sought her execution—an alarming precedent targeting a peaceful activist. The charges centred on “inciting protests,” “damaging the reputation of the state,” and “belonging to hostile groups”—broad and vague allegations frequently used to criminalise freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

She was denied fair-trial safeguards: the first hearing reportedly took place without a lawyer, and subsequent hearings were conducted under a complete blackout with no public attendance or independent monitoring.

In October 2018, UN experts issued a statement highlighting violations faced by women detainees in Saudi Arabia and expressing deep concern about Al-Ghomgham’s trial before the SCC, emphasising that counter-terrorism measures should not be used to suppress or restrict human rights work and that human rights activities must not be conflated with terrorism.²⁰

In 2023, the SCC sentenced her to 13 years in prison based on the same political charges, in proceedings marked by violations of procedural fairness. Israa Al-Ghomgham remains detained to this day.²¹

Patterns of Violations

Cases documented by ESOHR demonstrate that violations affecting women facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia do not take a single form. Rather, they manifest in different patterns depending on the nature of the charge, while sharing an overarching framework of structural discrimination rooted in gender and legal/social status.

Among the 42 documented cases, migrant women constitute the majority—approximately 73%—most working in domestic labour and originating from African and Asian countries that are among the main labour-sending states to the Kingdom. Review of these cases indicates that violations often precede arrest or trial; they are embedded in a labour environment defined by legal and structural precarity that excludes domestic workers from meaningful protection and exposes them to exploitation, abuse, and cumulative violence—before this vulnerability then extends into the criminal justice system itself.

1) Drug-related cases

In drug cases, a clear pattern emerges of harsh and disproportionate criminalisation of women—especially migrant domestic workers—within the context of “war on drugs” policies²². Women are often prosecuted for smuggling, possession, or “participation” without meaningful investigation into circumstances of recruitment, coercion, deception, or exploitation that may have shaped the facts, and without serious assessment of the roles of criminal networks or principal beneficiaries.

Common violations include denial of effective legal representation from the moment of arrest; lack of interpretation during interrogation and trial; prolonged isolation; and failure to provide early consular notification. Case trajectories are often reduced to brief “confessions” suspected to have been extracted through coercion or psychological pressure, without meaningful opportunity to challenge evidence or understand legal proceedings.

2) Murder cases

In murder cases, violations are more complex and layered, often linked to the social, psychological, and economic contexts women experience—particularly migrant domestic workers and Saudi women. Quantitative and qualitative indicators suggest that a significant share of these cases occur in contexts of prior or accumulated violence,

whether within the family or workplace, without this being adequately reflected in legal characterisation or sentencing outcomes.

One academic study of 50 women accused of murder in Saudi Arabia found that 58% were Saudi nationals and 42% were non-Saudis, mostly from African and Asian nationalities, and that approximately 45% were under the age of 30. The study also reported that more than 88% of cases were classified as intentional murder or premeditated intentional murder—strict legal characterisations that substantially increase the likelihood of capital punishment, without adequate consideration of mitigating circumstances or the social and psychological context of the offence.²³

The study further found that 47.83% of women reported the victim was a family member, and that 15.22% of cases were linked to an employment/sponsorship relationship—indicating that the alleged offence occurred in closed contexts defined by unequal power relations. In terms of motives, 14% were linked to mistreatment, violence, and cruelty, and 12% to self-defence or so-called “honour crimes.” Yet these factors are rarely treated as mitigating circumstances in investigation or trial, and meaningful inquiries into prior violence or coercion are uncommon—transforming women from victims of structural, familial, or workplace violence into defendants facing the harshest penalties.

3) Other cases

In at least one monitored case involving a Saudi woman—and potentially others—the criminal justice system appears to operate within a broader context of social and political control. In political cases, or cases connected to expression or human rights activity, some women have been referred to exceptional courts such as the SCC, with additional restrictions on fair-trial guarantees, including limited access to lawyers, reliance on confessions of questionable validity, and expansive criminalisation.²⁴

The threat of using the death penalty against Saudi women in such contexts confirms that this punishment is not used solely as a criminal sanction, but also as a tool of political intimidation aimed at silencing dissent and reinforcing social control—expanding the scope of violations and giving the death penalty a dimension that goes beyond the underlying alleged act.

Overall, this categorisation by type of charge indicates that the high proportion of migrant domestic workers among women executed in Saudi Arabia is not accidental, but rather a direct result of a legal and security structure that allows violations to accumulate without accountability. It also suggests that the criminal justice system does not treat women equally; instead, it reproduces systemic discrimination whose manifestations differ by charge, but converge on a single outcome: denial of fair trial, use of the death penalty in contexts lacking proportionality and fairness, and addressing alleged “crime” in isolation from its structural roots.

Section III: Diplomacy and Violations

Over the past decade, executions were carried out against women in Saudi Arabia holding multiple nationalities. In addition to Saudi nationality, documented nationalities include: Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Yemen, Indonesia, Kenya, Syria, Myanmar, Ghana, and Bangladesh.

Despite the final and extremely serious nature of these sentences, ESOHR has not observed consistent, public, and systematic diplomatic engagement by most countries whose women nationals were executed in Saudi Arabia—including countries with hundreds of thousands of women citizens working in the Kingdom.

Investigations also did not indicate that official institutions in these countries publish clarifying statements on the number of women on death row or details of their cases, reflecting a near-complete absence of transparency and diplomatic follow-up. This gap is particularly evident in documented cases involving citizens of countries such as Nigeria, the Philippines, and Indonesia, where no public intervention was apparent during detention or trial, and any engagement—if it occurred—was largely confined to the period after execution.

General practices

A review of official positions reveals a recurring pattern of limiting responses to statements and diplomatic protests issued after executions are carried out, without adopting effective political or legal pressure measures that could influence case trajectories or prevent recurrence.

For example, following the execution of Nigerian national Qadeerat Afolabi on 1 April 2019, the Nigerian government condemned the execution as a human rights violation and criticised the failure to notify its diplomatic missions of her arrest and trial until shortly before implementation²⁵. However, this reaction remained confined to post-execution statements, with no observed subsequent diplomatic escalation. No public official comment was issued by Nigeria following the execution of four Nigerian women during 2024.

In the case of Indonesia, the government issued formal protests following executions of Indonesian domestic workers in 2011, again in April 2015 following the execution of Siti Zainab, and in October 2018 after the executions of Karni bint Madi Tarsim and Tuti Tursilawati²⁶. These responses included high-level phone calls and the summoning of ambassadors, but were not accompanied by sustained pressure measures or follow-up mechanisms capable of preventing repeated violations.

In the case of the Philippines, a Filipino woman was executed in January 2019²⁷. The Philippine government stated that it had provided legal assistance and attempted to intervene, while officials expressed regret over the inability to apply the diya mechanism. Despite later official letters sent by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to the Saudi monarch in other cases, no public diplomatic escalation was observed beyond appeals and bilateral communications.²⁸

Third: The legal framework for diplomatic protection

Legal and diplomatic protection of nationals abroad constitutes a cornerstone of contemporary international relations, and has been enshrined in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963). Under these conventions, Saudi Arabia is obliged to facilitate the work of diplomatic and consular missions, ensure free communication with foreign nationals, and protect their legal interests.

Pursuant to Article 36 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations—of which Saudi Arabia has been a party since 1988—Saudi authorities are required to inform the relevant foreign consulate without delay when one of its nationals is arrested or detained, allow consular visits and communication, and ensure access to effective consular assistance.

Documented cases involving nationals of Nigeria, Indonesia, and the Philippines demonstrate repeated breaches of these obligations, including consular notification occurring only shortly before execution or after it had already taken place.

While diplomatic protection is generally considered a right of the State rather than a direct obligation owed to individuals under the current framework, the work of the International Law Commission (ILC) points to the possibility that this right could evolve into a duty—particularly in cases involving grave violations of peremptory norms, such as systematic torture and arbitrary execution.

Models of preventive diplomacy

Experiences from several countries demonstrate that diplomacy can provide tangible protection when used as an effective pressure tool, particularly in the context of domestic work migration.

In February 2018, the Philippines announced a complete suspension of labour deployment to Saudi Arabia following the death of domestic worker Joanna Demafelis under torture. Deployment did not resume until the signing of a bilateral labour agreement in November 2018, which included basic safeguards.

Indonesia imposed a ban on sending domestic workers to Saudi Arabia in 2011 following an execution carried

out without prior notification, and linked the resumption of deployment to a bilateral agreement signed in 2014, before reintroducing additional restrictions in 2018 as part of a longer-term preventive policy.²⁹

Nepal adopted a ban in 2017 on sending domestic workers to Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, citing the absence of effective protection guarantees³⁰. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have also resorted to policies of deployment suspension, age restrictions, and mandatory training in response to serious violations.

These models confirm that diplomatic tools are available and can be activated. Yet their absence in death penalty cases reflects a structural gap between official discourse on protecting citizens and the actual willingness to deploy diplomatic protection when the right to life is at stake—particularly for foreign women in Saudi Arabia.

Section IV: Legal Framework

Domestic legal framework governing the death penalty for women.

Saudi Arabia does not have a comprehensive codified penal code; punishments are applied under interpretations of Islamic law, including the death penalty for specific offences such as intentional murder and certain hudud crimes. The Code of Criminal Procedure regulates investigation and trial but does not contain clear provisions addressing gender-related factors or women-specific mitigating circumstances, nor does it establish specific safeguards for women's rights during proceedings in capital cases.

Article (13) of the Prison and Detention Law provides that a pregnant prisoner or detainee shall be treated in a special manner in terms of nutrition and work from the onset of pregnancy symptoms until forty days after delivery. Qisas or execution sentences are postponed if the convicted woman is pregnant, postpartum, or breastfeeding until after delivery, the end of the postpartum period, and the child's weaning.³¹

Saudi Arabia's international and regional obligations

As a State party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Saudi Arabia bears international obligations to protect women's rights, including the right to life and fair-trial guarantees, ensure equality before the law, and prevent discrimination against women within the judicial system.

Concluding observations of the CEDAW Committee (October 2024)³²

The Committee expressed deep concern regarding the continued application of the death penalty against women and the lack of transparency concerning the number of women on death row and their conditions.

- It noted the failure to take into account gender-related mitigating factors (including domestic violence, forced marriage, psychological trauma, or poverty) in trials that may result in death sentences.
- It expressed concern about the absence of women judges within the judiciary, which negatively affects the system's sensitivity to women's issues.
- It highlighted the denial of regular contact for women on death row with their families and lawyers, and the lack of appropriate and continuous medical and psychological assessments.
- It recommended reducing solitary confinement, establishing independent complaint mechanisms, applying the Bangkok Rules and the Nelson Mandela Rules, ensuring interpreters and free legal aid, and training judges on gender-sensitive issues.

In addition to CEDAW, Saudi Arabia is also a State party to the Arab Charter on Human Rights³³ and is therefore bound by provisions regulating the use of the death penalty in general and for women in particular, including:

- Article 6: The death penalty may only be imposed for the most serious crimes and pursuant to a final judgment.
- Article 7(2): The death penalty shall not be carried out against a pregnant woman until after she gives birth, nor against a breastfeeding mother until two years after childbirth, with the best interests of the infant prevailing.

The gap between law and practice

Despite the existence of certain domestic provisions regulating the death penalty in relation to women, practice reveals a clear gap between legal texts and implementation. Saudi authorities do not publish official data on the number of women sentenced to death, the conditions of their trials, or their places of detention—creating systemic opacity and obstructing independent monitoring and accountability.

Moreover, procedural safeguards stipulated in law are not translated into effective practice. Women defendants face weak fair-trial protections, particularly in security-related or politically sensitive cases, and encounter obstacles in accessing lawyers, interpreters, and independent medical and psychological assessments³⁴. The absence of women

within the judiciary further limits the system's capacity to address the gender-specific nature of cases, and gender-related mitigating factors—such as being victims of domestic violence, trafficking, or forced marriage—are not systematically integrated into judicial assessment at sentencing.

In addition, the death penalty is applied to offences that do not meet the international threshold of the “most serious crimes,” including drug offences and sorcery-related charges, in contradiction with international standards³⁵. Collectively, these factors exacerbate the vulnerability of women on death row and intensify the difficulty of tracking violations they may face—particularly in cases involving pregnant or breastfeeding women—given the lack of transparency and barriers to accessing detention sites and detainees. This reflects a reality that differs fundamentally from the official legal framework.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that women's executions in Saudi Arabia are not an isolated or exceptional phenomenon, but rather a direct outcome of a legal and security structure that produces discrimination, accumulates violations in the shadows, and normalises the infringement of the right to life beyond effective oversight.

The documented data show that the vast majority of women executed over the past decade were migrant workers who faced a criminal justice system lacking even minimum fair-trial guarantees, within an environment characterised by opacity, systematic denial of effective legal representation, and weak consular notification.

The report highlights a recurring pattern of undermining procedural safeguards in capital cases—from denial of lawyers and interpreters, to isolation and ill-treatment, to carrying out executions without prior notice to families or concerned states. It confirms that the use of the death penalty against women extended beyond murder cases to include drug-related cases and other offences that do not meet the “most serious crimes” threshold under international law, reflecting a dangerous expansion of the death penalty as a disproportionate punitive tool.

The absence of transparency in the announcement of executions—especially in cases involving foreign women—deepens concerns that documented figures represent only a minimum estimate, given the possibility of additional

cases that were not officially disclosed. The period 2015–2025 also reflects a quantitative and qualitative escalation in women's executions, directly contradicting official reform narratives and signalling an increasingly punitive trajectory rather than any verifiable reform within the criminal justice system.

Internationally, the report underscores a profound gap between Saudi Arabia's obligations under human rights treaties—particularly CEDAW and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations—and practices that lead to execution in contexts of discrimination, isolation, and denial of basic rights. It also highlights widespread diplomatic shortcomings among many labour-sending states in activating consular protection tools and preventive pressure before executions occur—leaving women, especially migrant workers, without effective support at their most critical moments.

Deconstructing this reality requires a dual track: systematic documentation that confronts official secrecy, and practical international accountability that ties political, economic, and judicial cooperation to demonstrable progress in protecting the right to life and advancing gender justice. Without urgent steps—including suspending executions, ensuring the rights to defence, interpretation, and consular notification, and addressing the structural vulnerability of migrant domestic workers—women will continue to pay an unbearable price within a punitive system that operates in the shadows and beyond meaningful accountability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis presented, ESOHR considers that addressing women's executions in Saudi Arabia requires a multi-level response involving Saudi authorities, labour-sending states, UN mechanisms, and human rights organisations.

Recommendations to labour-sending states

1. Establish effective national mechanisms to monitor the situation of women nationals working in Saudi Arabia, identify those at risk of the death penalty, document violations, and publish periodic transparent updates.
2. Strengthen the role of embassies and consulates in Saudi Arabia by providing specialised legal staff, allocating resources to monitor detention and trials, and ensuring attendance at court hearings whenever possible.
3. Provide early and effective legal assistance to detained women, including appointing independent lawyers, covering defence costs, and facilitating regular communication with families.
4. Use diplomatic pressure tools where necessary, including summoning ambassadors, issuing public statements, and linking labour agreements to measurable protections and fair-trial guarantees.
5. Negotiate binding bilateral agreements with Saudi Arabia to ensure immediate notification when any woman national is detained or charged, regular consular visits, sufficient time for legal and diplomatic follow-up, and a

prohibition on carrying out executions without notifying the concerned state.

Recommendations to UN mechanisms

1. Prioritise women's executions in Saudi Arabia within the mandates of: the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls; the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; and the Working Groups on Arbitrary Detention and Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.
2. Request detailed information from the Saudi government on: the number of women on death row; the nature of charges; trial processes and defence guarantees; and compliance with obligations under CEDAW and the Arab Charter on Human Rights.
3. Strengthen country-visit efforts to Saudi Arabia and advocate for access to detention facilities where women on death row are held, including the possibility of confidential interviews.
4. Integrate this issue into the Universal Periodic Review and treaty body reporting (especially CEDAW and the Committee against Torture), and recommend concrete steps to reduce death sentences and move toward a suspension of executions.

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