

For Women in Qatar, Lockdown Is Nothing New

By [News Desk](#)

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When it comes to the issue of women's rights in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia is most frequently cited as the most repressive country in the region, and Qatar is widely regarded as the most modern in terms of human development. Qatar has become somewhat of a darling among Western liberal intelligentsia, likely in part because of the peninsular country's pumping tens of millions of dollars into Washington D.C.'s most influential Think Tanks, such as Brookings Institution. The United Nations has even lauded Qatar for their efforts to achieve gender equality.

It is certainly true that Qatar, as well as even Saudi Arabia, has instituted a number of legal provisions that promote the empowerment of women. They can own businesses, own property, vote, even hold political positions and judgeships (all of which, when cited as progressive steps, expose just how far away the Gulf is from modern concepts of equality); so Qatar is applauded for taking such bold action on behalf of women. What no one explains, however, is that all of these provisions only grant rights for women in Qatar that their male guardians allow them to exercise.

Everyone knows that women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia, but how many people know that Qatar is actually the only Gulf country that still does not allow women to travel without the permission of a male relative? The ban on women driving was repealed some time ago in KSA, and every Gulf nation has lifted the restrictions on women's travel, except Qatar.

Business ownership, voting, owning property, working, going to school, and yes, even driving, are all available to women in Qatar only if their husband, father or brother allows.

Understandably, many Qatari women do not share the West's admiring view of their country's treatment of women. Aisha Al Qahtani famously fled to the UK to avoid being forced to return to Doha; just as so many others have fled Qatar's neighbours.

"It is really quite appalling," says Radha Stirling, CEO of Detained in Dubai and founder of Due Process International, "Qatar can seemingly legislate rights for women, all the while winking to the country's male population because nothing has actually changed. Every woman is ruled by her husband, father or brother regardless of what the law ostensibly provides. They talk about empowering women, but continue to treat them like children."

Stirling has been involved assisting women escaping oppression in the Gulf as part of her 12 years human rights work in the gulf, including high profile cases such as Princess Latifa, Hind Al Balooki, Dua and Dalal Al-Shweiki and others.

"Every adult person, male or female, must have the right to self-determination,

and no one should be allowed to overrule an individual's choices about their own lives; obviously this cannot apply only to men, and I fail to see how Qatar exceeds any other country in the region when all of the rights that the government has granted them, their male relatives have the right to deny them.

Qatar will be hosting the World Cup, the Qatari royal family owns significant holdings in the United Kingdom, and there is considerable mutual investment and trade. All of this sends a signal of acceptance to Qatar, and is undoubtedly interpreted by Doha as Western approval.

"Our countries have been in lockdown due to the Coronavirus, and the emergency restrictions we have had to accept have reportedly caused drastic increases in mental and emotional health problems, depression, and even suicide; and that is while we know that the situation is temporary. But a person in the West under lockdown has more autonomy and freedom than a woman in Qatar, and her situation is permanent. Of course more women will flee, and many more may try and fail. We cannot continue to look the other way when an ally, a trading partner, a country that is being given the honour of hosting perhaps the biggest sporting event in the world, treats half of its adult population like minors with freedom completely conditional on male approval."

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