

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/06/saudi-arabia-allow-access-detained-women-activists>

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Report of Fourth Activist Tortured

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(Beirut) [Saudi Arabia](#) should immediately allow independent international monitors to access Saudi womens rights advocates detained since May 2018 to ensure their safety and well-being, Human Rights Watch said today.

On November 23, Saudi Arabias media ministry denied evidence published by [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#) that Saudi authorities had tortured and sexually harassed and assaulted at least three detained activists. On November 28, Human Rights Watch received a report from an informed source indicating that Saudi authorities had tortured a fourth woman activist. Sources said the torture of Saudi women activists may be ongoing. Saudi Arabia should immediately and credibly investigate the allegations of abuse in detention, hold accountable any individuals found complicit in torture and mistreatment of detainees, and provide redress for activists abused during this prolonged pretrial detention.

Saudi Arabias consistent lies about senior officials role in Jamal Khashoggis murder mean that the governments denials that it tortured these women activists are not nearly good enough, said [Michael Page](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. Unless independent monitors are able to confirm the women activists well-being, there is every reason to believe that the Saudi authorities have treated them with unspeakable cruelty.

The sources for the allegations of torture were concerned that they and the activists would suffer reprisals if the women were identified publicly. Media outlets including [The Washington Post](#) and [The Wall Street Journal](#) also reported the torture allegations.

Saudi authorities should also allow the detained women unfettered access to lawyers and family members and release all of those jailed solely for peacefully advocating reform.

The new source indicated that authorities tortured the fourth activist with electric shocks and tied them down to a steel bed and whipped them with an *egal*, the black cord used in traditional dress by Arab men to keep their head covering in place. The source said that the fourth activist was also sexually harassed.

All the women activists are in Dhahban Mabathith (intelligence) Prison north of Jeddah, but sources described most of the torture as taking place at an unofficial detention facility they called a hotel prior to moving the women to Dhahban in August. The new source indicated that the women are taken to a room called an officers guesthouse for torture, but the location of this room is unclear.

The new source also told Human Rights Watch that the men responsible for mistreating the women were from cyber security, a probable reference to officers working under the authority of the former royal court adviser Saud al-Qahtani, who was fired, [according to a royal decree](#), for his role in the Khashoggi murder plot. Al-Qahtani, who was known as Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salmans enforcer, previously served as head of the royal courts Center for Studies and Media Affairs, as well as the Saudi Union for Cyber Security and Programming. According to media reports, al-Qahtani [directed online campaigns against Saudi critics](#), and developed a black list of critics to target. He is known in diplomatic circles as the [prince of darkness](#).

According to multiple informed sources, Saudi interrogators tortured the women during the initial stages of interrogation, primarily between May and August 2018. The torture included electric shocks and whippings.

At least three women were subjected to sexual harassment and assault, including forced hugging and kissing and exposure to sexually suggestive gestures. One source said that one of the detained womens rights advocates said that a senior official attended several of her torture sessions wearing a mask. According to the source, he told her during an interrogation the next electrocution will be on your head and threatened to rape her but did not carry out the threat. He also asked her whether she preferred the death penalty or life in prison for her treason.

One source said that interrogators attempted to terrify and intimidate one of the detained women by telling her that they had murdered one of her colleagues in detention. At least one of the women attempted suicide multiple times, the sources said.

Following the interrogations, sources said, the women showed physical signs of torture, including difficulty walking, uncontrolled shaking of the hands, bruises on their thighs, and red marks and scratches on their faces and necks.

The sources said that members of Saudi Arabia's governmental Human Rights Commission (HRC) visited the women in detention at Dhahban. One of the women told the HRC that the women were tortured at another site and submitted to them all the details of their treatment. The HRC indicated to her that they did not know about the other site. A source told Human Rights Watch that another activist told a HRC representative everything that had happened to her and asked if the HRC could protect her, but the representative said it could not.

The [crackdown on women's rights activists](#) began just weeks ahead of the much-anticipated lifting of the driving ban on women on June 24, a cause for which many of the detained activists had campaigned. While some were quickly released, others remain detained without charge. They include Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Nouf Abdelaziz, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Saada, and Hatoon al-Fassi, all women's rights activists, as well as male supporters of the movement, including Ibrahim al-Modaimegh, a lawyer; Abdulaziz Meshaal, a philanthropist, and Mohammed Rabea, a social activist.

Authorities accused several of those detained of serious crimes, including suspicious contact with foreign parties. Government-aligned media outlets have carried out a smear campaign against them, branding them traitors. The [Saudi newspaper Okaz](#) reported that nine of those detained will be referred for trial to the Specialized Criminal Court, originally established for terrorism offenses. If convicted, they could face up to 20 years in prison.

The public media campaign against the women contravened Saudi Arabia's longstanding policy of not publishing names of criminal suspects in pre-trial detention. At the same time, pro-government media have not identified the people arrested for their alleged involvement in Khashoggi's murder.

Dr. al-Fassi, a renowned scholar and associate professor of women's history at King Saud University, was one of the first women to acquire a Saudi drivers license. Saudi authorities arrested her just days before lifting the ban. Numerous other women's rights activists have since been placed under travel bans. On November 17, the [Middle East Studies Association of North America awarded al-Fassi](#) the MESA Academic Freedom Award for 2018.

Saudi women's rights activists have petitioned government authorities to reform discriminatory laws and policies and have sought to change societal attitudes. While the government has recently introduced limited reforms, including allowing women to enter some professions previously closed to them and lifting the driving ban, the [male guardianship system](#), the main impediment to the realization of women's rights, remains intact.

Under this system, women must obtain permission from a male guardian a father, brother, husband, or even a son to travel abroad, obtain a passport, enroll in higher education, get a life-saving abortion, be released from a prison or shelter, or marry.

Saudi authorities have repeatedly made false statements in denying serious allegations of rights abuses, including in the case of Saudi agents' murder of journalist Khashoggi on October 2 in the Saudi consulate. For instance, Saudi authorities initially claimed Khashoggi left the Saudi [consulate alive](#), but later evidence found that Saudi agents had pre-planned a body double to leave the consulate [to attempt to hide the fact](#) that agents had murdered Khashoggi in the consulate.

World leaders should urgently act based on new evidence of Saudi Arabia's brutal torture of women's rights advocates and publicly demand that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and his government release all of these peaceful activists immediately, Page said. They should make clear that unless these peaceful rights advocates are freed, the Saudi government will face further isolation.

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