

AUTOMOTIVE

## Saudi women can now drive legally, but automakers should not rush efforts

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*Saudi women were fighting for the right to drive for decades before it finally came. Image credit: Nissan*

By DANNY PARISI

The notoriously conservative government of Saudi Arabia has finally lifted the ban on women driving, but lingering restrictions on women's rights may prevent the auto industry from capitalizing on this gain.

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The rule against women driving has long been one of the go-to criticisms of the larger repression of women in Saudi Arabia, and the rule's lifting is similarly emblematic of the slow shift away from the repression. While auto manufacturers may be tempted to change their strategies in the country to accommodate new women drivers, it may be some time before there is any notable difference in the Saudi Arabian auto market.

"Looking at it from a macro perspective, one can guess if not every woman will be driving, there will be a substantial uptick in number of drivers and in turn demand for vehicles," said Brett Levine, automobile consultant at [DriveAnything.com](http://DriveAnything.com).

### Royal decree

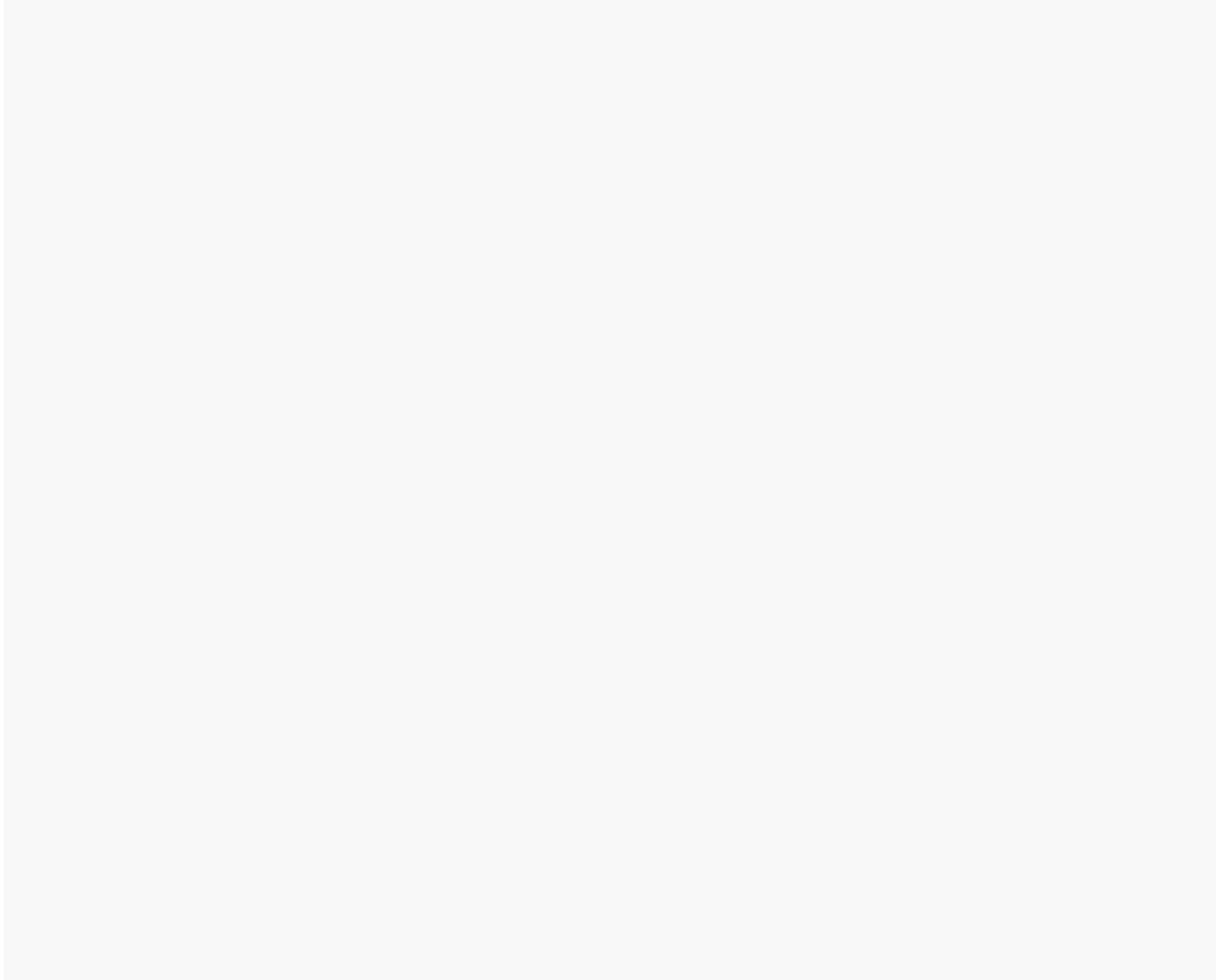
The fight for women's rights in Saudi Arabia has been one of long suffering and little progress.

The country is notorious for its repressive policies toward women and decades of campaigning has led to little advancement. Last year, Saudi Arabia ranked 141 out of 144 countries for gender parity.

While a royal decree from the Saudi royal family now allows women to drive, Reuters reported that several women's rights advocates were urged by Saudi officials to cease campaigning for other causes in light of the royal decree ([see story](#)).

For the auto industry, the influx of new women drivers may seem like an appealing opportunity to begin marketing cars to women in Saudi Arabia.

This may prove true in the future, but progress is slow. While women are technically allowed to drive now, other mitigating factors will impede their ability to purchase cars in the immediate future.



#\_#\_#\_#\_ The wait is over. #SaudiWomenCanDrive #DareGreatly

A post shared by Cadillac Arabia (@cadillacarabia) on Sep 27, 2017 at 4:43am PDT

For one, cultural pressure from peers may prevent many women from driving for awhile, even if there is no legal reason not to get behind the wheel.

Additionally, the Saudi government has said that it will be a little while before the decree goes into effect as the country needs to set up driving schools and create other infrastructure that will allow women to drive and interact with the automotive world.

This last point is especially important as there are still strict rules for the interactions between men and women, meaning that a woman who was pulled over or gets in an accident will have to have their situation handled by the authorities in a different way than if the driver were a man.

Many brands have already responded to the news, such as Cadillac's Instagram post celebrating the decree as well as Nissan and Chevy, who have both offered commentary in support of Saudi women. But so far, no brands have announced anything official regarding the country.

#### Slow march

The many obstacles women face in Saudi Arabia have often left them at the economic mercy of men. Women make up only a fraction of the workforce and their average income is dwarfed by men, making it far less likely that they will be able to afford a car on their own.

Some of this may be alleviated by the ban on women driving being lifted, as critics have long said that one of the biggest effects of the ban is causing women to sink up to half their income on taking taxis everywhere.



*Four Seasons is one of the earliest luxury brands to target Saudi women. Image credit: Four Seasons*

As for the luxury auto world, it is unlikely that any specific brands will increase shipments to Saudi Arabia or institute any special marketing campaigns there for women until a little time has passed and the full effects of the royal decree can be seen.

In the past, some brands have capitalized on women's unique challenges in Saudi Arabia, such as Four Season's women-exclusive travel experience in the country ([see story](#)).

In the future, brands do have the opportunity to do some good by offering vehicles to women who have campaigned for the right to drive for decades. Now that the ban has been lifted, brands need to think carefully about how they approach this delicate subject.

"There would definitely need to be a strategic or tiered approach over time to gaining market share," DriveAnything.com's Mr. Levine said. "In my opinion, it will take years and a generational shift for the market to be impacted significantly."

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