



Saudi Woman Drives on YouTube

Activist Flouted Saudi Law Against Women Driving

By LARA SETRAKIAN

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When Wajeha Al Huwaider gets behind the wheel of a car, it's a daring and defiant act, flying -- or driving -- in the face of Saudi Arabia's ban on female drivers.

This weekend, in honor of International Women's Day and in protest of the law, she posted a video on Youtube of her driving inside the kingdom.

Al Huwaider is one of a group of women petitioning for the right to drive in Saudi Arabia. In a country governed by fundamentalist interpretations of Islam its activities have earned the group a rash of slanderous accusations and death threats from religious conservatives.

"They accuse me, [saying] 'you are a prostitute and you want all the women to be like you.' That's how they see when a women drives a car," Al Huwaider told ABC News after making the video.

She made the video while driving outside the city limits of her hometown, Dahrán, a city in Saudi Arabia's eastern province.

She says women can get away with driving outside major urban areas. Some Saudi women drive within private compounds or limited rural spaces. Al Huwaider, who took driving lessons in Bloomington, Ind., drives to work each day within a compound.

In the clip Al Huwaider makes an impassioned speech in Arabic from behind the wheel. She congratulates women around the world for their achievements and calls on all women in Saudi Arabia to fight for more legal and social rights.

Al Huwaider and her fellow activists have collected signatures from women around the country hoping that the Ministry of the Interior will overturn the ban. Saudi women have protested the ban for decades, but with new technology they have been able to amplify an emboldened voice of opposition.

There have been broad calls for greater legal and civil rights in Saudi Arabia. Those in favor of change include the Saudi ruler, King Abdullah, who announced an initial set of judicial reforms last year. The king has said that he expects Saudi women will drive one day. But, for the time being, the ban remains.

Seeking Her Son's Permission

Change has come gradually for women in Saudi Arabia. More women have been joining the work force and earlier this year they were granted permission to stay in hotels alone, though only with the consent of a male guardian. Saudi women need the permission of a mehram, or male guardian, for basic activities like work or travel.

"Women cannot do anything. She cannot study, she cannot work, she cannot marry, she cannot get a divorce. It's a long list. You cannot move from the house, you cannot get medical care without a man's permission. So driving is a minor issue compared to some others," Al Huwaider told ABC News.

Sheikh Assem Al Hakeem, a conservative religious TV preacher based in Jeddah, describes and advocates the fundamentalist thinking behind the requirement of a male guardian. One conservative moral argument against letting women drive is that they will be able to mix more freely with men outside their families.

"Guardianship in marriage is a must," Al Hakeem told The Middle East magazine. "Islam looks at marriage as a boat. The woman is the passenger and the man is the captain."

Under the Saudi system a woman's male guardian can be her husband, brother or son. In Al Huwaider's case, her guardian is her 17-year-old son.

"He's the one in charge of my life, he's the one who has the control if I want to travel & even if I want to have surgery I have to get a permission from him," she said.

Al Huwaidar says the general consensus among Saudi women is that sons are the worst male guardians because "they feel they own their mothers." Brothers, she says, make the best male guardians. Husbands fall somewhere in between.

"In general, brothers are the best ... especially when he has a wife and is open-minded," she said. "But of course we don't want anybody, we want to be responsible for ourselves."

Despite opposition from the religious establishment Al Huwaidar expects change to come eventually. In January there were reports that the driving ban would be lifted by year's end, an optimistic view that Al Huwaidar has adopted.

"We feel it will happen soon. & I feel it's going to happen this year," she told ABC News.

Until then she remains part of a growing movement in Saudi Arabia engaged in the fight for women's rights.

"I'm not afraid of the government, but I'm afraid of the religious establishment -- people who think that I am trying to change the society, to make it Westernized," said Al Huwaidar.

"In a country like Saudi Arabia you always have to take risks."

Theo May contributed to this article.

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