

Must I drive? The discrimination debate in Saudi Arabia

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In the West, the general perception is that Saudi women are unhappy (or at least should be) about the strict religious laws, the need to have a male guardian, being required to cover up in public spaces and not being allowed to drive cars (basically anything exceeding 10 km/h!). In fact, Saudi Arabia remains the only country in the world where women are banned from driving a car. However, for some women a gender segregated life has its clear advantages. In the following, we shall see how nuanced the debate on gender equality is within female circles.

Saudi Arabia often appears as the paradigmatic example of a country where gender related issues are not up for discussion or, at least, discussed and decided only by men. In the Western part of the world, we have a tendency to perceive Saudi Arabia as a country where women, generally speaking, do not have an opinion and whose values, norms and rights are merely defined and sustained by men. In the West, the general perception is that Saudi women are unhappy (or at least should be) about the strict religious laws, the need to have a male guardian, being required to cover up in public spaces and not being allowed to drive cars (basically anything exceeding 10 km/h!). However, with this essay I wish to demonstrate that this perception has its flaws. I want to shed light on the fact that the gender debate can be as nuanced and polarized inside segregated women spheres as it is amongst men and women both inside and outside the Kingdom.

Various state measures in Saudi Arabia have been important factors in the development of a mosaic of female spaces prohibited for men. Even if in a Western perception it may seem strange to live in a society where men and women are separated in most instances, this gender segregation and these female spaces are often supported by Saudi women themselves. In fact, many Saudi women are even justifying these separate spaces and practicing gender segregation voluntarily. Personally, I have experienced these female spaces several times while living in Saudi Arabia. I have been at charity benefits hosted by resourceful women and private coffee dates with young female students - both gatherings without men. Based on my experiences, I would argue that women in many situations prefer to be separated from men, even if they actually would have the choice of gender-mixing. In a country like Saudi Arabia, where in most cases there are limits to what can be said or done, these female spaces function as places where women can act as they want without the supervision of men. The female spaces are in many cases preferable for women and therefore it is not just the men who are interested in maintaining the system of gender segregation, but also the other way round. This essay does not aim to discuss women's rights in general in Saudi Arabia, where rights between men and women are obviously not equal. However, as stated above, I believe that it is important to draw attention to the fact that also groups of women in Saudi Arabia make an effort to maintain the society as it is when it comes to gender issues. This argument is best illustrated by the recent debate about women's (non-existing) right to drive motorized vehicles in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia remains the only country in the world where women are banned from driving a car. The ban is not written into law but imposed through *fatwas* (religious, legal opinions) issued by senior clerics who regulate the strict observance of Wahhabism (Saudi Arabia's official interpretation of Islam). In many families the ban on female drivers means that women either have to hire drivers, whose wages eat into the families' budgets, or they have to rely on male relatives driving them around. For some women this is not a problem since their families are wealthy and dispose over economic resources to either pay for a driver or keep some of the male relatives out of jobs so that they can act as drivers for mothers, wives and sisters. However, for an in-

creasing part of the population the driving ban is an obstacle in daily life. Many families have not the means to provide drivers for female family members. The driving ban causes serious problems for widows, for women without sons or with a handicapped husband. All these women are compelled to use taxis (women are not allowed to use public transportation or walk alone in the streets) and this often causes additional problems because it is frowned upon for women to drive in a taxi alone. In addition, the ban is problematic in emergency situations where women are not able to bring their relatives to the hospital or emergency room. As a consequence, very young boys often are seen accompanying female relatives in vehicles, if there is no other man around.

Triggered by the revolts and uprisings in the region in 2011, the debate about women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia resurfaced. A movement called *Women2drive*, which campaigned online, urged women to get behind the steering wheels and begin to drive themselves (many women in Saudi Arabia actually know how to drive). The *Women2drive* debate quickly received a lot of attention and support around the world. The online campaign urging women to start driving also sparked a huge controversy in Saudi Arabia, where many came forward and supported it openly. However, the debates within the female spaces were not as one-sided as often projected in Western media. Surprisingly, the discussion among Saudi women was quite polarized and a relatively large group of women was strongly *objecting* to the *Women2drive* movement. In response to the campaign calling for a lifting of the driving ban in Saudi Arabia hundreds of women from an anti-driving movement launched a counter-campaign with the curious title "*I don't want to drive...I want my rights*". The women supporting this campaign advocated to maintain the ban on female car driving in the Kingdom and instead argued for the development of a public transport system (note: for women only!). According to news reports thousands of women signed a petition to King Abdullah calling him *not* to lift the ban on female driving. The women from this movement argued that the demands for a right for women to drive only represented a small minority of the country's women and that a lift of the ban would hurt the Islamic religion and even destabilize the country.

I would argue that despite the potential benefits a public women-only transport system would have, the *unofficial* reason behind the anti-driver movement could lie in the fact that these women are afraid to lose the comfort of being driven around by a driver. Some Saudi women told me personally that in principle they would like equal rights for men and women, but at the same time they have a hard time imagining the potential scenario where women suddenly have to drive themselves. They seem to view it as an *impractical* right almost. These women have been brought up with male relatives or drivers driving them around every day – to school, shopping malls, the dentist or for a doctor's appointment. These women (here I especially refer to the upper or middle class women, who have financial resources to engage a driver) are accustomed to leave driving to others. This means that women can use the time spent in their cars (which is a substantial number of hours in the congested traffic of Saudi Arabia's cities) on socializing with female friends or relatives, conducting phone calls, and other activities. If this 'female privilege' is taken away from them, some women seem to believe they will suffer. Whether it is the comfort of not driving themselves or relig-

ion or tradition that motivates these women to oppose the *Women2drive* movement, these female voices in support of the driving ban prove the multi-faceted character of the gender debate in Saudi Arabia.

When discussing gender related issues in Saudi Arabia we have to remember that gender segregation is not just something exclusively imposed by men. Some women also support gender segregation and different rights and opportunities for men and women and they are working hard to keep society from changing. To better understand women in a country as Saudi Arabia, where the overall view on women is so very different from the Western part of the world, we must begin to acknowledge that gender discrimination is not necessarily a one-way street. Even though it can be hard to imagine how it can be preferable to cover your face, to be accompanied by a man every time you leave your house or not to be allowed to drive a car, it is also an accepted and supported reality by a substantial part of Saudi women. Profound changes in gender related issues in Saudi Arabia will probably only occur if the wish for them comes from inside the country's segregated female spaces.