

## Defying the Women's Driving Ban

I got my driving learner's permit before I was 16 years old. I took a Driver's Ed course in high school. I have a clean driving record and am a careful and cautious driver. I have driven in many states in the USA, even made a few cross country trips, and I have also driven in a handful of other countries around the world.

When I moved to Saudi Arabia in 2007, I knew that females were not allowed to drive in this country. In fact, this kingdom is the only country in the entire world that does not allow women to drive. In 1990 a caravan of 40 Saudi women drove in the country's capital city of Riyadh in an organized effort to defy the ban on women driving. Their lives were affected in a myriad of adverse ways after that. Among other things, they were banned from traveling outside the kingdom for many years and they lost their jobs.

### Saudi Activist Wajeha Al-Huwaider



The Saudi Women's Driving Movement was quiet for many years. But since 2007, it has picked up steam. Activist Wajeha al Huwaider has petitioned the king and has defied the driving ban regularly since 2007. The Arab Spring seemed to breathe new life into the movement, with more and more women speaking out and demanding their right to drive. Manal al Sharif was arrested for driving and held in jail for ten days, making worldwide

headlines and becoming an activist and sought-after speaker as a result. Shaima Jastania was also arrested for driving and made headlines when a judge sentenced her to ten lashes - for driving! Fortunately for Shaima the king intervened and her sentence was overturned.

Saudi Activist Manal Al-Sharif



Dozens of women in Saudi Arabia have posted videos of themselves driving. One of the latest is a prominent Saudi business woman, Aisha Al-Manie -who in an act of solidarity with her less fortunate Saudi sisters who cannot afford drivers - posted a video of herself driving on International Women's Day. While Al-Manie can afford a personal driver, she wanted to show her support for all women in Saudi Arabia who would benefit from lifting the driving ban.

Not being able to drive in this country continues to be my biggest problem affecting the quality of my life here. It really pisses me off that I am not allowed to drive, yet I see little boys as young as 8 or 10 driving huge SUVs around the city, sometimes filled with a gaggle of Saudi female passengers. To me, this is the height of ridiculousness. With safety concerns often cited as a main reason for why women aren't permitted to drive here, how on earth is a little boy driver who can't even see over the steering wheel any safer?

A few days ago I was out with three of my female friends. It was a hot day and we got thirsty, so the driver double parked behind some cars and left the vehicle to get us some cold drinks. Double parking is very common here in Jeddah since (a) much of the available parking space is taken up by disabled abandoned vehicles covered in a thick

layer of dust and (b) there is not nearly enough parking provided for on the narrow streets of the city in the first place.

Of course the driver of one of the cars that our vehicle was blocking arrived back to his car. As all drivers in this situation must, he resigned himself to the fact that he would have to wait for our driver to return. But he didn't know who was sitting in our car. A car full of helpless women we were not! I hopped out of the back seat and into the driver's seat, shifted into "Drive" and inched the big SUV about two car lengths forward. One of the other gals hopped out and videotaped part of it.

The man we were blocking backed up and stopped next to our car before he drove off and gave us two thumbs up while declaring how he was in favor of women driving in Saudi Arabia! As a result of that day, I am proud to say that my name has been added to the Honor Wall, the list of women who have defied the driving ban here in Saudi Arabia. Here is my video: