



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on September 30, 2011

Will Women be Allowed to Drive in Saudi Arabia?

Not every nation and not every culture grants women the rights that they enjoy in America or those nations we usually call “Western” nations. Consider Najalaa Harriri of Saudi Arabia. She and other Saudi women began a campaign to be allowed to drive cars in June. The religiously orthodox kingdom observes closely the precepts of Islam, and the interpretation given to the Moslem rulers of Saudi Arabia is that activities like driving cars is restricted by Islam to males.



Not only is it forbidden for Saudi women to drive cars, but other restrictions of Saudi-stye Islam (sometimes called Wahhabism) would make women driving cars actually dangerous. Women in public, according to the strict reading of Islam given by the Saudi government, must be fully clothed. That means dress that restricts vision and may inhibit the free movement of women’s arms and legs while driving.

The ban has become increasingly questioned among Saudi leaders. In March, [Prince Alwaleed bin Talal](#), a nephew of Saudi King Abdullah, suggested lifting the ban:

A lot of Saudi women want to drive their care in line with strict regulations and wearing a headscarf, but now they need a driver...This is an additional burden on households. The Saudi society wants fewer foreigner laborers [like chauffeurs to drive women] so why this hesitation [with women driving cars]?

Najalaa Harriri and other women activists in Saudi Arabia were anxious to challenge the restrictions on women driving. Not only did these women begin in June to drive in public, but they also videotaped their driving and posted the videos on social media sites. This gained much attention in the Arab world, especially in the backdrop of revolts in Egypt, Libya and Syria. Najalaa was summoned to court by the prosecutor general in Jeddah and she, along with several other women, will stand trial next month for the crime of driving while a woman.

If these women win their case, in might open up other rights to women in Saudi Arabia. Today no woman can travel, work, marry, divorce, be admitted to a hospital or live alone without permission of a “mahram,” or male relative. The right to beat women — not just wives but sisters and daughters — still remains, and that would probably be among the changes which these reformers would like to see in Saudi Arabia.

Harriri, a 45-year-old housewife, said that her decision to drive was not a protest against the monarchy or Islam, but driven by necessity: “My drive should not be considered a defiance of the law, the ruler or religion. I need to drive because I do not have a driver.” Although Harriri got off with a promise not to drive anymore, other Saudi women were not as fortunate.

Shaima Jastaina was sentenced to ten lashes by a Saudi court on September 27 for the crime of driving.



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The decision surprised some observers because it came the day after King Abdullah had promised that in 2015 women would be allowed to vote in certain local elections, a first for the religiously serious kingdom. After an international outcry, the King has [overturned the sentence](#) on Jastaina.

This story highlights the different approaches that religions and cultures have taken historically towards the rights of women. Many more moderate Islamic nations have relaxed or even abolished the legal restrictions on women. Benazir Bhutto, for example, was twice prime minister of Pakistan. Turkey, also, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, abolished not only the restrictions on women but also changed the entire structure of Turkish society.

Outside of Islam, the religions and metaphysical systems of the world have varied widely in how they treat women. China practiced the binding of feet of wealthy women based upon the notion that tiny, deformed feet, which could barely allow grown women to walk, was attractive. Japan, also, relegated women to the status of very few rights and many duties under Shinto and Japanese culture. Hinduism, which does not view women as possessing souls until they marry, also commended the suttee (the burning to death of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) and the consummation of child bride marriages.

Zoroastrianism, in stark contrast, grants women broad rights and it is probably not coincidental that the husband of Indira Gandhi, longtime leader of the Congress Party in India and prime minister on several occasions, was a Parsee (or Zoroastrian.) Bahai also do not treat woman as inferior to men, nor does the Sikh faith. (These faiths, in should be noted, were founded by men who lived on the Iranian plains or in northern India and their scriptures were recorded by men.)

Though often maligned by feminists in America, the Judeo-Christian tradition has always considered women to have immortal souls and equal (though not equivalent) status within the Judeo-Christian religious experience. In Judaism, even though it has historically reserved some roles only for men. (A Cohen, for example, has priestly status as a male, although the heritage of Jewishness is transmitted through the mother.) In an Orthodox shul, curtains separate male and female. Yet even the most cursory reading of the Bible draws forth names like Judith, Deborah, Esther and Miriam, who were no shrinking violets. Also, great nobility is often ascribed to women. The Book of Ruth, for example, is one of the most poignant stories in all religious literature.

During these "Days of Awe," or the High Holy Days, Jewish women and Jewish men will hear the Shofar on Rash Hashanah and will fast and repent on Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur. Judaism teaches that we each have an immortal soul and that each of our lives has infinite value to our Blessed Creator.

Christianity preaches that God, Himself, taking on a human form, was born of a young Jewish woman named Mary. Mary's unique status as the Mother of the Savior impels members of the older branches of the Christian faith — Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Greek Orthodox (who call Mary "Theotokos," or "God bearer"), and others — to accord her greater dignity than any other created creature in the universe, angels included. All Christians believe that Christ appeared first to women, then to men, after His resurrection. When St. Paul wrote his magnificent epistles, he enjoins early Christians to see that we are not Greek or Jew, freeman or slave, man or woman, but of one body with Christ. Those who truly believe those words have a hard case to make for flogging women who drive cars.

Photo: Azza Al-Shamasi drives a car as part of a campaign to defy Saudi Arabia's ban on women driving, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, June 22, 2011: AP Images



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