

Driving While Female

PROTESTING THE BAN ON WOMEN DRIVING

There are wolves in the street, and they'll rape you if you drive.¹

M.I.A., THE CONTROVERSIAL ENGLISH SINGER of Sri Lankan Tamil descent, released the song *Bad Girls* in early 2012. The accompanying video, which received worldwide acclaim and attracted millions of viewers on YouTube, opens with shots of an empty desert road and a town of square cinder-block buildings. Women dressed in leopard-skin-patterned gold-lamé caftans—only their eyes visible from behind their veils—dance provocatively around an old car in a dusty alley. From nearby rooftops, rows of Saudi men dressed in long white *thobes*, their heads covered in red-and-white *shemaghs*, stand watching.

Live fast, die young,
Bad girls do it well.

M.I.A. sits in the driver's seat of a car stroking the steering wheel sensually. Two women race down the street, leaning out the windows, clenched fists raised in defiance. Their cars begin "drifting." They weave dangerously through traffic, twisting, skidding sideways, spinning in circles, and doing violent U-turns, as plumes of smoke pour from the wheel wells.

My chain hits my chest
When I'm banging on the dashboard.

Now their cars are "skiing," balanced precariously on two wheels tilted at a perfect forty-five degree angle. M.I.A. sits on the roof of a white sedan above the passenger's side window, her legs draped over the front windshield, calmly filing her nails (see fig. 4).

When I get to where I'm going, gonna have you trembling.
But if I go to bed, baby, can I take you?²

An Orientalist fantasy set in an imaginary Saudi Arabia, M.I.A.'s *Bad Girls* raises provocative questions about the relationships among sex, gender, cars, and power in Saudi culture. Many people know that women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. Less well known is the Saudi practice of drifting, in which unemployed young men go joyriding in poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of large Saudi cities. Bored and alienated, these young Saudi men, often of Bedouin origin, inhabit an underworld of car theft, petty crime, and the illegal use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. Drifting became popular in Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s as an expression of resistance to mainstream Saudi culture, a form of protest against the strict social order maintained by Saudi authorities.³ As M.I.A. herself joked in an interview, she filmed the video in Morocco, not Saudi Arabia, because she didn't want to go to jail.⁴

Thousands of YouTube viewers have commented enthusiastically on the "Bad Girls" video. Many have interpreted it as a feminist statement supporting Saudi women's right to drive, praising it as an expression of solidarity with oppressed Saudi women. One blogger called it "a great big middle finger to Saudi Arabia's inhumane laws about women."⁵

Other viewers have been less positive. Some thought M.I.A. was exploiting offensive Orientalist stereotypes by exoticizing and eroticizing Muslim Arabs of the Middle East. Romain Gavras, who directed the video, seemed to confirm this interpretation when he said that the sequel would "have to be shot on the moon with hookers."⁶ Other critics labeled the video "crass," "commercial," and "politically vacant," insisting that it had absolutely nothing to do with the serious subject of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. A reviewer for *Rolling Stone* dismissed it as an "anthem to recklessly empowered car sex."⁷

WOMEN IN SAUDI SOCIETY

Saudi Arabia is widely known for its repressive policies toward women.⁸ In 2009, The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report ranked Saudi Arabia as 130th out of 134 countries in its comparison of the gender-based inequality that exists in societies around the world. Saudi Arabia was the only country to score zero in the category that measured the political

empowerment of women.⁹ In its 2010 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, the U.S. Department of State noted that Saudi government discrimination against women is “a significant problem” and that Saudi women have few political rights as a result of these discriminatory policies. Human Rights Watch, in a report on the position of women in Saudi Arabia entitled *Perpetual Minors*, concluded forcefully that “the Saudi government sacrifices basic human rights to maintain male control over women.” This discrimination persists in spite of the fact that the Saudi government is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which the UN General Assembly adopted in 1979. When it did sign the convention, however, the Saudi government stipulated that none of its articles could override Islamic law, while paradoxically insisting that there were no contradictions or conflicts between the convention and Islam.

While it is clear that discrimination against women pervades all aspects of Saudi society, the position of Saudi women has varied both geographically and historically. Women in Riyadh and the conservative central desert region of Najd experience many more restrictions than women in Jeddah and the more cosmopolitan Red Sea coast region of Hijaz. And after 1979, with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the seizure of the Holy Mosque in Mecca, Saudi women throughout the country lost significant ground in their struggle to gain social, political, and legal equality with Saudi men and to become full citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Many efforts to understand the position of women in Saudi Arabia begin by asking whether it can be attributed to Saudi religion or Saudi culture—to Islam or to the patriarchal nature of the traditional Bedouin way of life. This dichotomy is misleading because it fails to acknowledge that Saudi culture, like all cultures, is a complex whole comprised of what Clifford Geertz has called “cultural systems”—a religious system, a kinship system, a legal system, a political system—all of which interact with each other in an intricate network of dialectical relationships that can never be reduced to simple relationships of cause and effect.¹⁰ Islam is no more inherently patriarchal than Christianity, and like Christianity, Islam can take different forms in different historical and cultural contexts.

Saudi women face significant discrimination as a result of both tradition and law. Their rights are most severely limited by the system of male guardianship, according to which every Saudi woman has a *mahram*, a male guardian. The term *mahram* means “taboo,” in the sense of both “sacred” and “forbidden.” It is derived from the same *h-r-m* Arabic root as the words

haram, which means “taboo,” in the sense of “sacred” or “holy,” and the word *haraam*, which also means “taboo,” but in the sense of “forbidden” or “impure.” If a woman is married, her *mahram* is her husband, the man with whom intercourse is sacred. If she is not married, her *mahram* is one of her male relatives, men she cannot marry and with whom intercourse is forbidden—her father, an uncle, a brother, or even a son.

A Saudi woman must have the permission of her *mahram* to engage in virtually any economic, political, or legal activity. She must have his permission to marry or divorce, to take a job or open a bank account, to start a business or obtain health care, to register at a hotel or rent an apartment, and to attend a university or travel abroad. Saudi women, in other words, are not legal adults; they do not enjoy even the limited rights of Saudi men. Saudi women remain legal minors all their lives. Although they are legally entitled to own property and receive financial support from their guardians, many Saudi women are not well informed of their legal rights, and they are often unable to take advantage of them because of informal cultural practices.

The position of women in Saudi society is most visibly marked by their dress. All Saudi women are expected to “cover” whenever they appear in public or in the presence of men who are not *mahram*. According to widely shared cultural norms that are strictly enforced by the religious police, the *mutawwa*. For a Saudi woman, “covering” means wearing a loose fitting, black, ankle-length *abaya*, as well as a black *hijab*, that covers her hair. Many Saudi women also cover their face (except for their eyes) with a *niqab*.

The prohibition against “gender mixing,” *ikhtilat*, which many Saudis believe is required by sharia law and ultimately the Quran, is strictly enforced throughout the Kingdom. Men and women are not permitted to interact socially in public spaces. This system of strict gender segregation is maintained in restaurants, malls, parks, schools, and businesses, which generally have separate hours or separate areas for men and women. Restaurants, for example either have a separate “women’s dining area,” where women can sit apart from men, or a separate “family dining area,” where family members can sit together apart from groups of unrelated men. Women also run the risk of being stopped by the *mutawwa* for riding in a private car driven by a male who is not a hired driver or a *mahram*.

The segregation of men and women throughout Saudi society has particularly dramatic effects in education and employment. Almost all schools, including universities, are strictly segregated by gender. One of the rare exceptions is the new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology,

a graduate-level research university founded in 2009, where women are allowed to attend class without covering, work together with men, and drive cars on campus. In spite of the gender discrimination and segregation that exist in the Saudi educational system, the women's literacy rate of 81 percent is close to that of men, and more than 58 percent of Saudi university students are women. Saudi Arabia is home to Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University, the world's largest women's university, which has over fifty thousand students and is located in Riyadh.

In spite of impressive progress in the field of education, Saudi women continue to suffer severe discrimination in employment as a direct result of the widespread Saudi prohibition against gender mixing. According to a 2010 estimate, in a total labor force that numbers over nine million, only thirty-six thousand Saudi women work in the public sector and only forty-eight thousand in the private sector. The vast majority of the 1.4 million women working in the country are foreign workers who experience even greater discrimination than Saudi women.

With some exceptions, including hospitals, some newspapers and advertising agencies, and international corporations such as Saudi Aramco, where men and women are allowed to work together on private compounds, most Saudi companies adhere to policies that require the separation of their male and female employees. Women are banned from working in some professions and must telework from home in others. The Ministry of Labor does encourage the employment of women in specific sectors of the economy, such as medicine and energy, but women who want to start their own businesses still need the permission of their *mahram*. In 2011, the ministry announced a widely publicized and controversial decision to require that all stores selling women's cosmetics and underwear must be staffed exclusively by women.

Saudi women also face serious discrimination when confronting the Saudi legal system. In court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women. All judges are male, and only in 2010 were women allowed to serve as lawyers representing other women in court. Family law is biased against women. Daughters only receive half the inheritance of sons, and a woman must have the permission of her *mahram* in order to marry. To obtain a divorce, a woman needs her husband's permission, or else she must present legal justification, such as proof of harm. A man, however, can divorce his wife without any legal grounds at all. Courts generally grant custody of children to their father in the case of divorce and to their father's family in the case of his death.

In cases of rape, the fate of Saudi women is particularly dire. According to the 2012 U.S. Department of State's report on human rights practices in Saudi Arabia, while rape is a criminal offense under sharia law, a female victim can be convicted for illegal "mixing of genders" whether or not the perpetrator is convicted. In addition, according to sharia law, spousal rape is not considered a crime. There have even been cases where court authorities have returned abused women directly to their legal guardians, who were the very men who had abused them.

Since King Abdullah assumed the throne in 2005, the position of Saudi women has gradually improved. Women have begun to play a more active role in some of the organizations that make up Saudi civil society; they have also increased their participation in charitable foundations, community groups, voluntary and professional associations, and other nongovernmental organizations. In 2008, the election of two women to the board of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry drew a great deal of attention, and in 2009 a woman was named as deputy minister for education, the highest position ever held by a woman in the Saudi government.

In another significant development, in 2013 King Abdullah appointed thirty women to serve for the first time on his 150-member advisory board, the Consultative Assembly. And although women campaigned unsuccessfully for the right to vote in 2011 municipal elections, King Abdullah announced that they would be eligible to vote and run for office in the country's 2015 municipal elections.¹¹ In the field of family law, women have also made progress. In 2005, forced marriage was banned, and in 2013 the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue organized a campaign entitled "No More Abuse" to combat domestic violence.

In spite of these signs of progress, Saudi women continue to face significant challenges in their quest to achieve all the rights—limited though they may be—that are their due as Saudi citizens. Fawzia al-Bakr, a well-known sociologist who teaches at King Saud University in Riyadh and who has been active in the struggle for women's rights, has issued this persuasive call for the equal treatment of women in the Kingdom:

I wish any man could experience these restrictions just for a while so that he can understand what it means to be enslaved by another man who dominates him and controls his destiny, his study, his work, his children, his subsistence, and his documents. . . . Women's destiny is dependent on the man's goodness and generosity; if he is good and decent, she is . . . protected, but if he is morally sick or of unsound mind, then she has no consolation.¹²

“EVIL WOMAN! HOW DARE YOU!”

Saudi Arabia is infamous for being the only country in the world where it is illegal for women to drive.¹³ This blanket statement is not, however, completely true. As is often the case with claims about Saudi Arabia, it is an overgeneralization. While it *is* true that women are not allowed to drive in Saudi cities, Bedouin women in rural areas have driven for decades. Driving is part of their everyday life; they drive pick-up trucks transporting water tanks, camels, and other goods from one settlement to another, sometimes carrying a handgun for safety.¹⁴ In the Province of Hail, an important agricultural region in the north of the country, women often drive out of economic necessity. The Saudi religious police, the *mutawwa*, recently asked provincial officials in Hail to arrest fifteen women for driving, but they simply ignored the *mutawwa*'s request. Arresting these women would have posed a serious threat to their families' livelihood.¹⁵

Some Saudis claim that the ban on driving is just a symbolic issue, a lightning rod that only diverts attention from the more serious problems women face, such as the guardianship system and the laws governing inheritance, divorce, and travel. Others disagree, arguing that the ban on women driving creates serious economic problems at both the national and the household level. Since there is virtually no public transportation in Saudi cities, driving is the only viable means of travel.

Because women are not allowed to drive, they must hire drivers, most of whom are non-Saudis. According to some estimates, there are eight hundred thousand foreign drivers in the country, each earning several hundred dollars a month, in addition to room and board.¹⁶ A single woman may spend half her salary paying her driver to take her back and forth to work. The inability to drive, therefore, is a major obstacle to women's full participation in the workforce. If a woman can't afford to hire a driver, she has to depend on a close male relative for all her transportation needs. This inconvenience is a staple of conversation for both men and women. Some Saudi women go so far as to leave the country to work in one of the other Gulf States, where such drastic restrictions on their mobility and their right to work do not exist.

The issue of women driving, long a taboo subject in the Kingdom, suddenly broke into public consciousness in November 1990, when a group of professional women from respected Saudi families engaged in a controversial act of civil disobedience—"driving while female" through the streets of Riyadh. These women were both angered and inspired by the sight of female

American military personnel driving jeeps, trucks, and even tanks freely through Saudi cities during the First Gulf War. This protest provoked an immediate response. Leaders of the group were arrested by the *mutawwa*, but they were quickly released by Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh. After the Saudi religious establishment published their names and phone numbers, the protesters were subject to a campaign of vilification, in which they were viciously denounced and accused of trying to destroy Saudi society. As a result, many of these women lost their jobs and were denied permission to travel abroad.

One of the participants in the 1990 protest was Dr. Aisha al-Mana. After receiving a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Colorado in 1980, al-Mana returned to Saudi Arabia, where she established a company that helped women find jobs in the field of scientific research and technology. When we spoke with her in Dhahran in May 2012, al-Mana was the director of the Mohammed al-Mana College of Health Sciences in al-Khobar.

“Our main obstacle was mobility,” she said. “The lack of mobility hindered women from working. One night two women came to my office. We had coffee and talked about women’s rights. This was November 1990, during the Kuwait War. I had recently been traveling from Bahrain to Dhahran, and I passed a convoy of American troops. I saw American women driving trucks. And I can’t even drive my car?”

“I said to myself, ‘I’m going to drive and tell the Americans to go back home.’ Americans here are doing whatever they want. They talk about democracy. It’s democratic for them, but not for us. So I just drove from Dhahran to Riyadh. Then I called the minister of the interior. I said, ‘If anyone reported that they saw me driving, I was.’”

“The next day forty-five women—young women in their twenties and thirties, students, wives, employees—got together. ‘We want our rights. There need to be changes for women. Now is the time for driving.’”

“We met again and wrote a letter to the governor of Riyadh: ‘We want permits to drive.’”

“One week later on Tuesday, November 6, we went out into the streets. We had to be conservative and wear our *abayas*. We picked a supermarket parking lot, a Safeway parking lot. We started driving at prayer time, in the afternoon when the *mutawwa* were all praying in the mosques. When they began the call to prayer, when they said ‘Allahu Akbar,’ we started driving. Fourteen cars, forty-five women, and three children.

“One woman’s husband told her she couldn’t protest, so she just said she was going shopping. She took her children, went to the supermarket, and joined the protest.”

Madeha al-Arjoush, the daughter of a Saudi diplomat, was also involved in the 1990 protest. Growing up in New York City, she had witnessed firsthand the power of the women’s movement and the civil rights movement in the United States. When she returned to Saudi Arabia with her husband, a professor of mathematics at King Saud University in Riyadh, she attempted to establish a career as a professional photographer, but as a woman she had difficulty opening her own studio and growing professionally.

“So I became an advocate of women’s rights,” al-Arjoush told me, when we spoke at her home in Riyadh.

“There were many women’s issues in the Kingdom, but the king refused to meet with us. He just ignored us. We chose driving; it was a perfect symbol—to be out in the streets and be protected by a car. It was dangerous at the time. The religious people were at the height of their power.

“We met at a local supermarket. All the men got out of the cars. All the women got in the driver’s seat. At 4:30 on November 6, 1990, after the *asr* prayer, we started driving.

“The police stopped me.

“‘Where are you going?’ they asked.

“‘I’ve been waiting for you to catch me,’ I said.

“‘You must have an emergency.’ He was making excuses for me; he couldn’t comprehend the idea of a peaceful protest.

“‘I’m waiting for you to arrest me.’

“Then someone reported us to the *mutawwa*; they were there in seconds. The police were confused. We closed the windows. The *mutawwa* were pounding on our cars and shouting, ‘Evil women! How dare you!’

“We didn’t know what would happen to us. Our husbands were watching; they were afraid a fight would break out. There were negotiations about how to get us to the police station. What would they do with forty-five women at the police station? We couldn’t all fit.

“The Gulf War journalists were here in Saudi Arabia. Reuters and the international press wrote about us. That was our savior.”

In Dhahran, Aisha al-Mana had told me what happened next.

“They interrogated us: ‘Who was behind you? Why did you do it?’

“It’s simple,’ we said. ‘It’s a right we want. No one’s listening to us. We need it, and we did it.’

“The interrogation lasted all night. The whole country was up in arms. For women to demonstrate was a little too much. Fourteen Ph.D.s, university professors, doctors, teachers—all mature women; there were a few young ladies. We were very demanding. Finally they let us go.

“The next day the religious fundamentalists started a campaign against us. They sent out faxes saying we should be killed. We were ostracized; we were prohibited from working, from traveling. All our businesses were closed; they took our passports away. They stopped me from traveling for a year. Two years later we got back the right to work. The women who drove twenty years ago still haven’t been promoted to positions they deserve. Most of them are still suffering. We celebrate every year on the anniversary of the protest by having dinner together.”

Madeha al-Arjoush explained how much she herself had suffered professionally.

“I was stopped from working for several years. They burned all my photographs and negatives. I lost my studio; that was my main source of income. I was ready for flogging, for prison, but you can’t kill a photographer if he still has eyes.

“They talked about us in the mosques: ‘They’re evil women. They’re not Muslims.’ Every horrible thing. They attacked our honor. They tried to take away the power of the act.”

Fawzia al-Bakr, another sociologist, joined us at the home of Madeha al-Arjoush. She had also participated in the protest.

“In the time of Muhammad,” al-Bakr said, “women drove camels. Women can drive wearing the *niqab*. Driving means you’re mobile. You have access to education and employment; you’re independent. Segregation of the sexes destroys the relationship between men and women; there’s no understanding between them. Men will either protect you or eat you. Men can’t challenge the government—they have no power in public—so they go home and behave like kings toward their women.

“Saudi women are minors until they die,” she continued. “You can’t marry or work or travel. If your husband gets angry, you could be out in the street. If you’re under the care of your father or brother, you’re oppressed as much as a woman in the street. If you’re divorced, you lose everything. As an individual I don’t have the authority to be myself. I had to transfer land to my husband’s name in order to get a loan from the bank.

“This is not Islam,” insisted Madeha al-Arjoush. “What feminists are trying to do is show real believers that the main concept of Islam is equality. Throughout history, it’s men who’ve been interpreting the Quran. Now women are going through and reinterpreting the Quran and the hadith to see what’s possible. If we do it from within Islam, we’ll be more successful. If we don’t, then we’ll be rejected. We can’t take over unless we empower women to interpret the Quran themselves.”

“NO MORE VIRGINS!”

The Saudi government made significant efforts to suppress all knowledge of the protest. Saleh al-Azzaz, a well-known Saudi photographer and journalist, was present at the Safeway parking lot to document the protest. Later that day, he took his notes and photographs to the Intercontinental Hotel in Riyadh, where he had arranged to meet Thomas Friedman of the New York Times. At the reception desk, a man approached him and asked him to step outside into the street. Then he put al-Azzaz in a car and drove him away. Later that day, the secret police searched his house and confiscated all his photographs and cameras. Al-Azzaz was released from prison several months later.

The response of the Saudi *ulama*, the country’s leading religious council, was immediate, forceful, and negative. Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia and the country’s highest religious authority, issued the most famous and controversial fatwa of his career. He ruled that the ban against women driving was supported by the Quran and should remain in force. Ibn Baz declared that people who advocated lifting the ban were “evil mongers,” and that allowing women to drive would provoke the “wrath of Allah.” According to Ibn Baz, if women were allowed to drive, they would be tempted to remove their veils, mix with men, commit adultery, and engage in other forbidden acts.

In his fatwa, Ibn Baz supported his ruling by citing two specific hadith, statements attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that have been gathered into collections by Islamic scholars over the centuries: “Allah (glorified and exalted be he) commanded the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and all believing women to remain in their homes”; and “The Prophet (peace be upon him) also said: ‘No man sits alone with a woman except that Satan is the third party.’” The unambiguous conclusions of Ibn Baz’s fatwa were that “Allah’s sacred sharia prohibits all things that lead to vice,” and that “allowing

women to drive contributes to the downfall of the society.”¹⁷ Other members of the Saudi *ulama* agreed, declaring that ending the ban on women driving would “provoke a surge in prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, and divorce.” They warned that within ten years of lifting the ban there would be “no more virgins” in the Kingdom.¹⁸

In April 1991, Crown Prince Nayef, the conservative and widely feared minister of interior, issued a statement in support of Ibn Baz’s fatwa, declaring that it was “inadmissible for women to drive cars,” and that it was necessary “to punish those who do drive cars in order to restrain signs of evil.” The fatwa, Nayef said, cited “legitimate religious evidence that requires banning that which might expose women to temptation.” In this “clarification,” Nayef confirmed that “all women are strictly prohibited from driving in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” and stressed that all “violations of this prohibition will receive deterrent punishment.”¹⁹

Some Saudi religious leaders disagreed with Ibn Baz’s ruling. The head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Mecca declared that “clerics have studied the issue, and no one has come up with a verse [of the Quran] that would forbid female driving. I do not consider it to be forbidden.”²⁰ In fact, Ibn Baz’s own son, Sheikh Ahmed ibn Baz, an Islamic affairs researcher and important cleric in his own right, has stated that in his opinion it was not religiously forbidden for women to drive. He said that a fatwa was not the appropriate way to deal with the issue, and that women in Saudi Arabia should have the right to drive.²¹

In a televised interview with Barbara Walters of ABC News, which took place on October 14, 2005, King Abdullah himself seemed to offer some support, however tentative, for the right of Saudi women to drive. “I believe strongly in the rights of women,” the King told Walters. “My mother is a woman, my sister is a woman, my daughter is a woman, my wife is a woman. I believe the day will come when women drive. The issue will require patience. In time, I believe it will be possible.”²²

Like the views of Saudi religious and political authorities, public opinion is sharply divided on the subject of women driving. Conservatives who support the ban generally do so on moral or religious grounds. Lifting the ban, they argue, will lead to increased mixing of the sexes, flirting, dating, and general moral decay. If a woman driving alone has a breakdown or an accident, she will be at the mercy of strange men.

A young Saudi male explained to a BBC interviewer why he thought women should not be allowed to drive: “If you start now to let women drive,

if you let them go wherever they want, then Saudi Arabia will be like New York. It's about Islam. We've got a generation who were raised watching *Gossip Girls*. They only want to be like that, dress like that, drive like that. It's not about need. Now it's driving. In five years it will be taking off the *abaya*; in ten years they will ask to be allowed to wear short skirts."²³

One conservative female Saudi activist, Rawdah al-Yousif, has enraged opponents of the ban by arguing that Saudi society was "not ready yet to accept the idea of women driving cars." As she put it in one public statement, "I hope there will be no decision to allow women to drive at this stage because we have first to respect the wish of the people and the society."²⁴ In 2008, al-Yousif organized a campaign to maintain the Saudi guardianship system entitled "My Guardian Knows What's Best for Me." In two years it gathered over five thousand signatures.²⁵

Saudis who support women's right to drive dismiss out of hand the argument that it is a religious issue. With an admirable sense of humor, they point out that in the time of the Prophet women were allowed to ride donkeys and that now in the twenty-first century they are allowed to fly planes. Both these activities, they note, take considerably more skill than driving a car. Supporters also mock the hypocrisy of people whose efforts to protect women from harassment and prevent mixing of the sexes lead to situations in which women must be driven by unrelated, non-Saudi men, because they are not allowed to drive themselves.

Many Saudi women understand perfectly well why women are not allowed to drive. They realize it has nothing to do with religion; it's simply an attempt by the government to control women's lives. As Farzaneh Milani, an Iranian American translator, poet, and literary critic, put it: "The driving ban stems from universal anxiety over women's unrestrained mobility. . . . Gender apartheid is not about piety. It is about dominating, excluding and subordinating women. It is about barring them from political activities, preventing their active participation in the public sector, and making it difficult for them to fully exercise the rights Islam grants them to own and manage their own property. It is about denying women the basic human right to move about freely."²⁶

#WOMEN2DRIVE

Manal al-Sharif, who has come to be known as the "Rosa Parks of Saudi Arabia," does not have what King Abdullah would consider the requisite

patience. She spoke with me about her work on behalf of women's rights when she visited Bates College at my invitation in September 2013.

Al-Sharif is a member of a tribe believed to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad. She was born in 1979 to conservative religious parents in a working-class neighborhood in Mecca. Her mother was from Libya; her father was a truck driver. The family home had two entrances, one for men and one for women. As a child, al-Sharif dreamed about being the first female minister in the Saudi government. Her friends jokingly call her "your excellency." When she was ten years old she decided to cover herself by wearing both a *hijab* and a *niqab*.

Al-Sharif graduated from King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah in 2002 with a degree in computer science. She was the first Saudi woman to be named a "certified ethical hacker." When she took courses taught by male professors, she watched their lectures on closed circuit television from a remote classroom. After her graduation, she decided to stop wearing the *niqab*, but she still avoided speaking to men in public. When al-Sharif started working as an information technology systems analyst and security consultant for Saudi Aramco, she wore a brightly colored *hijab*; all the other women in her office wore black *hijabs*. In 2004, al-Sharif married a fellow Aramco employee. He asked her to cover herself again, completely, and she did.

"When I started wearing the *niqab* at Aramco," she said, "the men I worked with thanked me. They were relieved that I was wearing it because it made them feel more comfortable. But my face is my identity. I couldn't communicate how I was feeling with my mouth. So during meetings I drew a little smiley face on one side of my pencil eraser and a little frowny face on the other. I would hold up the pencil one way or the other to show them how I was feeling."

Three years later, when she and her husband were divorced, al-Sharif was angry. She stopped wearing her *hijab* at work, and stopped wearing the *niqab* entirely.

"In 2009, I went to the United States, to New Hampshire, on an Aramco-funded internship. Every year on my birthday, I do crazy things. So that year I got my driver's license and went skydiving. With the right to drive I was an adult; I could live a normal life. I didn't have to ask my father every time I wanted to do something. The United States opened my life. I had problems going back to Saudi the next year; I was less mobile there."

In early 2011, al-Sharif launched #Women2Drive, a social media campaign urging Saudi women to drive on Friday, June 17, 2011. With the slogan "Teach

me how to drive so I can protect myself” and bumper stickers proclaiming that “Real Women Drive Cars,” the #Women2Drive campaign drew tens of thousands of followers on Facebook and Twitter.

“We’re not alone,” al-Sharif told me. “The Internet changed everything; it’s our window to the world. Social media has created a global support system for us. We used it to start a revolution. Twitter is our parliament; it lets citizens act as journalists in states where the government controls the media.”

A short YouTube video promoting the #Women2Drive campaign opens with a close-up of a woman’s hand holding a set of keys in front of the door of a shiny red sports car.²⁷ Al-Sharif then describes what she hopes her followers will do on the appointed day. Insisting that her campaign is not intended to provoke any kind of public protest or demonstration, she invites women who have a valid international driver’s license to go about their daily routine—with one significant difference. She asks them to drive themselves, instead of having their driver or a male relative drive them. She suggests they dress modestly, wear a seatbelt, and drive safely. Finally, she encourages them to record themselves and upload the video to YouTube.²⁸

On May 19, 2011, almost a month before the scheduled protest, al-Sharif decided to take action herself. She wanted to see how the police would react when they caught a woman driving. She also wanted to prove that men were not wolves.

“I’m going to do something crazy,” she told her brother.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m going to go out and drive,” she replied.

“I’ll come videotape you,” he said.

But when her brother overslept, al-Sharif asked Wajeha al-Huwaider, a cofounder of the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia, who like al-Sharif lived in the Aramco compound in Dhahran, to join her and record the event.

“You know when you have a bird and it’s been in a cage all its life?” al-Sharif told a reporter later. “When you open the cage door, it doesn’t want to leave. It was *that* moment.”

For over an hour, al-Sharif drove her Cadillac SUV through the streets of al-Khobar while al-Huwaider videotaped the trip with her iPhone. In her purse, al-Sharif had a valid New Hampshire driver’s license. As soon as a traffic policeman stopped her, he was joined by a group of *mutawwa* who surrounded her car.

“Girl!” they screamed. “Get out! We don’t allow women to drive!”

Al-Sharif was arrested and detained for six hours. Then she was released. No charges were filed against her.

"Sir, what law did I break?" she kept asking the policemen.

"You didn't break any law," they said. "You violated *urf*—custom."²⁹

They next day the #Women2Drive team uploaded al-Huwaider's video to YouTube. With seven hundred thousand views in twenty-four hours, it was the most-viewed video in the world that day. Al-Sharif couldn't believe it.

"I started receiving phone calls, death threats. I had four hundred emails, hateful emails. Someone at Aramco must have put my business email out there. I received phone calls from Riyadh: 'You are digging your grave.' It was very annoying.

"A colleague at Aramco came running into my office: 'Oh my God, I saw your video.' And it was trending. I didn't know it would cause all this hate. It was just a woman driving. It's not *haraam*, there isn't any law against it.

"My boss at Aramco called me into his office. 'Manal,' he said, 'do you realize what you're doing. You're going to put yourself in so much trouble.' I'm like, 'I can take the trouble, but I don't want to lose my job.' And he said 'Are you sure about what you doing? Just don't bring in the Aramco name.'

"I told him, 'This is the year the whole world is changing, and we're part of that change.'"

Two days later, on May 21, al-Sharif decided to drive again. She wanted to check the response of the police and the government. She didn't want June 17 to come and have women be sent to jail.

"It was me and my brother and my whole family; we went out for lunch. My brother drove. When we arrived at the parking lot at the mall, I said 'Can I drive? Can I take the wheel?' He said, 'Of course.' We'd talked about it before.

"My son, my sister-in-law, and my nephew were all sitting in the back seat; my brother was in the passenger seat. I was driving. We drove around for maybe half an hour. It was amazing. No one shouted at me; no one. People just gave me these looks when I stopped in traffic. That was it. A lot of people saw me driving, but no one followed me.

"A police officer stopped me on the Corniche road. He didn't know what to do, so we knew he didn't have orders from the government. He just said 'Are you aware that in Saudi Arabia women are not allowed to drive?' And I'm like: 'Sir, are you aware there is no law? I have a driver's license, and I'm not breaking any law.' He smiled; he didn't know what to do. He told me he'd give me a ticket and let me go. That's what they usually do. They make you and your guardian sign a pledge promising not to drive again.

“And then another car stopped. They guy said ‘Who’s that driving?’ ‘Her name is Manal al-Sharif.’ He’d seen the video, so right away he called the *mutawwa*. It wasn’t the traffic police that called, it was a citizen.

“The *mutawwa* came in ten minutes. They were shouting, dragging us out of car, and making a big scene. My brother said, ‘Please don’t make a scene in the street, take us to the police station.’ So they drove our car to the police station. They interrogated me for six hours. I told them I just wanted to drive. They gave me a pledge to sign. I’m like, ‘I’m not going to sign this.’ I was laughing at them.

“We were in the police station from four to eleven. Then they let us go. I didn’t know the whole country was talking about it. I had an interview that night on TV. Saudis were so mad. The girls on my team started a page called ‘Free Manal,’ and a thousand people joined in just a few hours. It was unbelievable.

“I was in detention with my brother; I had no clue what was happening outside. After two hours this police guy said, ‘Do you want to go home and spend the night with your son, or do you want to spend the night alone here with us?’ You need to sign this. So I signed it. I said, ‘I’m going to sign it, but I don’t believe it. I’m going to drive again; I’m just signing it to leave.’

“The police were so nice and kind: ‘We’re sorry to delay you. These are formalities we have to go through.’ So we left; we went home. Apparently Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, the Prince of ash-Sharqiyah, the Eastern Province, was really mad when he heard the news. He gave the order to arrest me and send me to jail right away.

“We got home at midnight. At two A.M. the religious police with Aramco security knocked on the door.

“Is this the house of Manal al-Sharif?’

“Yes.’

“My brother was with me and his wife and four kids.

“We need her to come with us.’

“Who are you?’

“We just we need her to make a statement and sign some more papers. She can return in the morning.’

“I panicked, but I had to go with them. They sent me to jail without a single word. I found myself completely naked being searched. They didn’t even have enough cells. They cram everyone into this old jail—drug dealers, hookers, thieves—and then this woman who didn’t commit any crime, me. I was really shocked; I didn’t know I’d go to jail. In Saudi Arabia if you’re put

in jail, you could stay forever, because there are no trials. Once you're locked up, your life is over.

"I felt shock and anger. They didn't give me a blanket or a place to sleep. I couldn't sleep for two days; I was so tired and confused. Most of the women in jail didn't speak Arabic. Only a few of them were Saudi. One was a drug dealer, one helped her son kill her husband, one was raped by her father. A Saudi woman came and calmed me down. She brought me water and started asking about my story. That helped.

"You're the girl on YouTube," she said.

"I was like 'Wow! Even in the most closed places in the country they know about the woman who drove.'

"I kept my *abaya* on the whole time. They kept telling me to take it off. But I was so sure I was leaving. I wasn't a criminal.

"Right away my father went to the prince—apologizing, apologizing, apologizing. For nine days he didn't do anything else. They wanted an apology to the king from our clan to get me out of jail. My family called and said, 'We'll do whatever you want to release our daughter.' I think that support was huge. I come from a big tribe, a very honorable tribe. I had no clue they would stand by me; I thought they'd just like let me rot. But they stood up for me. Even today a lot of people from the Sharif tribe contact me on line and say, 'We're proud of you, cousin.' In Saudi Arabia you need a tribe.

"Dad begged the people in ash-Sharqiyah for a week, but nothing happened. People from the Human Rights Association came to interview me. After that, they started to treat me better. They let me use the phone; they let me see my family. I told my Mom not to come. I'm like, 'She's not going to see me here in jail behind bars.' Manour, my sister-in-law, came, and I passed her a small piece of paper. It said 'Dad should see the king; if he doesn't, I'll be here forever.' I'm like 'Don't read this now. Hide it.' She had to put the piece of paper in her bra. It was so funny.

"Right away they booked Dad on a flight to Jeddah, and he went to the king's palace. The guards knew who he was.

"They said, 'You're Manal al-Sharif's father.'

"He said, 'Yes. I came to talk to the king.'

"The king can't see you now. He can only see you on Friday.'

"That was the response. So my father wrote a letter to the king. Then he went to see him on Monday; Friday was far away. But on Monday, the king gave the order to release me even before my father went to see him, just based on his letter. On Friday, my whole family went to see the king.

“I asked Dad ‘What did the king tell you when you went to see him?’

“The king said one word: ‘Advise her. Advise her. Advise her.’

“The prince—we have a prince of our family, not a royal prince, a tribal prince—and the sheikhs of the family met the king on Friday. The king gave Dad a check; he gave him money—ten thousand dollars—because he knew that Dad was a truck driver and that he wasn’t working. We were so taken by his generosity and his kindness. He took action right away. He was unhappy that I was in jail. This is what I heard from his daughter’s assistant. I was like ‘Wow. He let me out.’

“While I was in jail, the whole world went into a frenzy. ‘How could this horrible country jail this woman?’ Wahhabi Islam is an ideology of hate. Wahhabi officials take weak hadith and use them to justify their views repressing women. It’s interesting; I had my picture on my Facebook page. Usually Saudi women cover their face and don’t use their real name or their picture in public. ‘But this woman has a picture; she has a face.’ That’s what created the sympathy for me.”

Amnesty International declared al-Sharif a prisoner of conscience and demanded her immediate and unconditional release. A letter from the Saudi Women for Driving Coalition referred to Saudi Arabia as “the world’s largest women’s prison.”³⁰ Then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton stated that she was moved by the protest and that she supported Saudi women in their effort to gain the right to drive. “I want to underscore the fact,” she said, “that this is not coming from outside of their country. This is the women themselves, seeking to be recognized.” Finally, Clinton said, she and other U.S. officials had raised the matter with officials “at the highest level of the Saudi government.”³¹

Al-Sharif was released from prison on May 30. She had been charged with multiple offenses: driving a car within the city of al-Khobar, allowing a journalist to interview her while driving, disseminating a video of the event to the media, disturbing the public order, and inciting public opposition to government regulations by encouraging Saudi women to drive.³² Within days, her Facebook campaign was taken down, and her YouTube video, which had become the most popular video in Saudi Arabia and was trending around the world, became unavailable at its original location. It has since been reposted many times and is now easily accessible. The #Women2Drive movement estimated that in the weeks following her release over a million people around the world changed their Facebook picture to al-Sharif’s portrait in a gesture of support. Some people began referring to her as “the female Che Guevara.”³³

Hackers altered al-Sharif's Twitter account to suggest that she had called off the campaign and admitted that "foreign forces" had incited her to act against the best interests of her country. Then someone pretending to be al-Sharif announced that she had repented because she realized that #Women2Drive was "an atheist conspiracy that would lead to moral decadence," but the deception was quickly exposed.³⁴ Al-Sharif responded publicly that she had started her campaign because she loved her country and believed that her society would not be free unless its women were free.

"When I was released from jail," al-Sharif told me, "I started calling everyone. I wanted June 17 to happen. I didn't want it to stop because girls were so terrified that they'd get sent to jail. The police told me this while they were interrogating me: 'The use of YouTube, that's what got you in trouble.' Their harsh response shows how insecure they are and how afraid they are of people using social media. We found out what a treasure social media is; we found out that it really scares them."

In a CNN interview al-Sharif said, "We're not doing anything that is breaking the law. We have a saying, 'The rain starts with a single drop.' This is a really symbolic thing for us women, driving. It is a very basic thing."³⁵

During the year after her arrest, al-Sharif's relationships with her employer, Saudi Aramco, grew increasingly strained.

"After my release from jail, a manager at Aramco shook my hand and said, 'Shall I buy a car for my daughter now?' He thanked me; he supported our efforts, but only privately. My boss said, 'Manal, when you were in jail, I couldn't sleep. Every morning I went to places I don't usually go on line just to follow your news. And when you were released, I could breathe again.'

"I was really touched when he told me that. He's an Aramcon. Later he had to be harsh with me; he had to fire me because the government didn't want me to work there.

"People at Aramco warned me not to do interviews, not to speak at conferences, not to do anything. They refused my requests for time off because they were afraid I'd speak out. It was a constant struggle. My job was my only source of income. They kept pressuring me to shut up, but I couldn't. You can't shut up. You've been sent to jail; you've been smeared all over the local media. The imams have been saying horrible things about you every Friday in the mosques.

"The people at Aramco said, 'We don't want your name to be associated with us.'

"I'm like, 'I don't talk about Aramco.'

“They said, ‘Whether you like it or not, your name is associated with us.’

“Aramco is like the government. They don’t want to hear anything about themselves in the news. I was a very successful engineer with Aramco, but they marginalized me. They removed me from the information security department and put me in archiving. It has nothing to do with my degree. They pressure you. They pressure you until you just . . .

“I have two hundred thousand followers on social media now. You have to look at the lives you touch positively. You’re a villain to some people and a hero to others. The people who see you as a hero are afraid of the people who attack you. They’ll tell you they’re proud of you in private, but they won’t say anything in public. They come up and shake your hand with tears in their eyes, and they tell you what you’re doing is brave and inspiring. So you have to live with these two vastly different images of yourself.”

The video of al-Sharif driving her car through the streets of al-Khobar would be remarkable for its banality, if it weren’t illegal for women to drive in Saudi Arabia. Wearing a black *abaya* and *hijab* and large, stylish dark glasses, al-Sharif turns the steering wheel back and forth and checks her rear-view mirror, occasionally adjusting her *hijab* and repositioning her glasses. Everyday street scenes flash by out the driver’s side window. Al-Sharif and al-Huwaider discuss the frustrations of not being able to drive and complain good naturedly about the expense of hiring a driver, the inconvenience of trying to find a taxi during rush hour, and the indignity of being so completely dependent on male relatives.

“We’re ignorant and illiterate women when it comes to driving,” al-Sharif tells al-Huwaider in the video. “You’ll find a woman with a Ph.D., a professor at a university, and she doesn’t know how to drive. During an emergency what’s she going to do? God forbid her husband’s with her, and he has a heart attack. I went to take my car to renew the registration. It was about to expire, and I had to beg somebody to take it in for an inspection. This is my car, and it’s under my name. Oh, my heart! Never mind! Things will change. *Inshallah*, God willing.”

While al-Sharif’s campaign generated a huge outpouring of support on the Internet, the actual turnout on June 17 was less impressive. *The Arab News*, an English language daily published in Jeddah, characterized the protest as a “nonevent.”³⁶ According to various reports, between twenty-five and a hundred women drove with relative impunity. The streets were full of both traffic police and *mutawwa*, but there were few confrontations. Half a dozen women were stopped, escorted home, and told not to drive again, but none

of them were arrested. One woman, unafraid and well prepared, had brought a change of clothes and a prayer rug with her, just in case she was detained by the police overnight.³⁷

While the #Women2Drive campaign did receive some support from human rights organizations and women's groups in Saudi Arabia, public reaction within the country was strong and largely negative. A political cartoon depicted a set of car keys in a woman's hand linked to a grenade. Al-Sharif herself was called a traitor, a slut, a Shia, a Zionist, and a "Westernized woman seeking to Westernize the country." She received more threatening phone calls and email messages. The worst one read: "Your grave is waiting."³⁸

Conservative religious figures accused her of "besmirching the Kingdom's reputation," "betraying her country and her culture," and called for her to be flogged or beheaded. One cleric told her "You've just opened the gates of Hell on yourself." Another said "God willing these women will die."³⁹ An Internet campaign called for men to punish any woman they found driving by beating her with their *agal*, the black cords Saudi men wear to hold their *shemagh* in place. Other critics engaged in a campaign of fear, warning women of the terrible fate that awaited them should they attempt to drive by themselves. "There are wolves in the street," they said, "and they'll rape you if you drive." In response to all these threats, al-Sharif said: "There needed to be one person who could break that wall, to make the others understand that it's OK, you can drive in the street. No one will rape you."⁴⁰

In late September 2011, as the controversy over the right of Saudi women to drive continued to attract public attention within the country and embarrass the Kingdom internationally, King Abdullah made a surprising announcement. "Because we refuse to marginalize women," he declared, "we have decided to involve women in the Shura Council as members, starting from the next term." King Abdullah also announced that women would be allowed to run as candidates in the 2015 municipal election and that they would even have the right to vote.⁴¹

Since the Shura Council, like the municipal councils, has little real power, some observers considered the king's announcement nothing more than a superficial gesture; others thought it was an important step toward granting Saudi women full civil rights. Still others thought that Abdullah's decision was part of a skillful balancing act in which he promised women increased civil rights at some point in the indefinite future, while ignoring the more significant issues of women driving and male guardianship. In this way, the

king hoped to placate demands for increased liberalization without angering conservative religious leaders.

The next step in al-Sharif's campaign was to encourage women to apply for driver's licenses.

"Because there's no law against it," she told me, "I went and applied for a Saudi driver's license. They rejected my application, but I kept the papers. We were hoping to get at least ten women from each major city to apply. I published a video with all the documentation on how to do it; I even offered them legal consultation. Only three other women applied, but when the time came to take their papers to the court, all three backed out. I went to court alone. I filed my lawsuit in November 2011.

"It's fear that stops women from taking action. We need to break that fear. People are always saying, 'No. No. No. We're waiting until they *let* us drive.'

"I'm like, 'They'll never *let* you drive.' You need to create pressure. If you don't create pressure, you won't get anything. No one will give you your rights on a silver plate.

"I didn't know how influential I was, until I saw the reactions to my tweets and my articles. One guy sent me an email. He said, 'You ruined my life. After my girlfriend read your article, she dumped me.'

"I was like, 'Yes. She's a strong woman. Maybe you deserved it.'

"When I was married, they kept telling me, 'You're a woman. You have to obey the man in your life.'

"But he's insulting me; he's disrespectful to me; he doesn't help me at all. Why should I have to obey him and get nothing in return? They say, 'No. No. No. You're a woman; you can't talk back. You can't say anything. His wishes are your orders.'

"So you go through all this brainwashing, and you feel guilty the whole time. But something inside you says, 'No, *I'm* not doing anything wrong. *He's* doing something wrong. *This society* is doing something wrong.'

"Women just need someone to tell them, 'It's your right to ask for custody of your child; it's your right to go to court and ask for child support; it's your right to pursue your education and get a job.'"

In February 2012, al-Sharif sued the Saudi government for refusing to issue her a driver's license and not allowing her to drive a car. She filed a lawsuit with the Board of Grievances of the Eastern Province against the General Directorate of Traffic, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Several other Saudi women joined her in the case; it was the first of its kind to be heard in a Saudi court.⁴²

Although he agreed to take her case, the head of the Board of Grievances indicated he would ultimately have to reject her plea. In response to her lawyer's argument that there was no law in Saudi Arabia against issuing driver's licenses to women, the judge said that his court remained controlled by social norms and that Saudi society was not ready yet to accept women driving. He added that even if Saudi society *were* ready to accept such a change, final approval would be needed from the king himself.⁴³

By now al-Sharif had begun to receive considerable international acclaim. In 2011, *Forbes* named her one of "The 10 Women Who Rocked the World." Just two months later *Foreign Policy* named her one of "The Top 100 Global Thinkers." The following year she was chosen one of "The 100 Most Influential People in the World" by *Time*. The same year the Oslo Freedom Forum awarded her its first annual Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent.⁴⁴

In May 2012, al-Sharif went to Oslo to receive the Havel Prize. To do so she needed the written permission of her father, who had become her guardian again after her divorce. Her acceptance speech was entitled "The Drive for Freedom." By June the video of her speech, available on YouTube, had been seen by almost four hundred thousand people.⁴⁵ Wearing a dark blue *hijab*, a white jacket over a long print shirt, dark blue pants, and high heels, al-Sharif described growing up in a conservative religious environment in the shadow of the siege of the Holy Mosque in Mecca in 1979, the year she was born.

For these extremists, al-Sharif said, women are *awrah*—imperfect, defective, sinful—and must be covered.

"For them, I was *awrah*. My face was *awrah*; my voice was *awrah*; even my name was *awrah*. So we were faceless; we were voiceless; we were nameless. We were just invisible."

"Do you remember the first time you listened to music?" al-Sharif asked her audience. That was the first turning point in her life. The plaintive sound of electric guitars and young male voices filled the large auditorium in Oslo where she was speaking.

"Do you remember the first song you ever listened to? I remember. I was twenty-one years old. It was the first time in my life I allowed myself to listen to music. I remember the song; it was 'Show Me the Meaning of Being Lonely' by the Back Street Boys."

Al-Sharif smiled, as laughter rippled through the audience.

"I used to burn my brother's music cassettes in the oven. Sorry, brother. I was that extreme. They had been telling us music is Satan's flute, a path to

adultery. But this song sounded so pure, so beautiful, so angelic. That day I realized how lonely I was in the world I isolated myself in.”

The second turning point in al-Sharif’s life occurred on September 11, 2001. Displayed on a huge screen behind her was a horrifying photograph of a man falling head first to his death from one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Al-Sharif described the traumatic moment when she realized that Osama bin Laden and the other men she’d thought were her heroes, were in fact “nothing but bloody terrorists.”

At that point in her talk, she skipped ahead ten years to describe her “Driving for Freedom” campaign.

“I used my face, my voice, and my real name,” she said. “I used to be ashamed of who I am—a woman. But not any more. The child cannot be free if his mother is not free. The husband cannot be free if his wife is not free. Society is nothing if women are nothing.

“Here, I am free,” al-Sharif concluded, her voice filled with dignity and passion. “But when I go back home to Saudi Arabia, the struggle has just begun. I don’t know how long it will last, and I don’t know when it will end. But for me the struggle is not about driving a car. It’s about being in the driver’s seat of our destiny.”

After her speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum, campaigns were mounted on Twitter both for and against her. A campaign attacking her, #OsloTraitor, received 9,380 tweets, while a campaign supporting her, #OsloHero, received only 120. In another Internet poll, 90 percent of the thirteen thousand participants thought she had betrayed her country in Oslo; only 4 percent of them were proud of her speech there.

Al-Sharif’s work on behalf of Saudi women’s right to drive has not been without serious personal cost to both her and her family. In the year between her arrest and her appearance at the Oslo Freedom Forum, al-Sharif received several invitations to appear at international conferences. Each time her employer, Saudi Aramco, denied her request for time off. When she asked for permission to travel to Oslo to accept the Havel Prize, her request was again denied.

The executive director of her division told al-Sharif, “We don’t want your name to be associated with us.” Her manager was more blunt: “What the hell are you doing?” She left him a message on her office blackboard: “2011. Mark this year! It will change every single rule that you know.”⁴⁶ While Saudi Aramco did not actually fire her, al-Sharif says she was “increasingly marginalized at the company for her activism.” So she resigned.

“It wasn’t about Manal,” she told me. “It was about all the women who call for their rights, so they’ll be afraid because they saw what happened to me. I don’t want to tell my son in twenty years that I chickened. I couldn’t. I had to make the hard decision. It was either my work at Aramco or what I was doing. I’d saved enough for about ten years, so I was brave, and I submitted my resignation so I could go and give my Oslo Freedom speech.”

When al-Sharif left Saudi Aramco, she lost the one-bedroom, company-owned apartment in the Dhahran compound where she lived with her young son, Abdullah.⁴⁷ He too had been having a difficult time. One day he came home from elementary school with bruises on his face. Two of his classmates had seen pictures of his mother on Facebook. They beat him up because he was the son of the woman who had driven a car. They told him his mother should be in jail.⁴⁸

Al-Sharif now lives in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, with her second husband, a computer security expert from Brazil whom she met when they both worked for Aramco. Even though he converted to Islam, al-Sharif had to request special permission from the Saudi Minister of the Interior to marry him because he was not a Saudi citizen. Her request was denied. Now she has to return to Dhahran from Dubai every weekend in order to see her son because her first husband refuses to allow him to travel outside the Kingdom with her.

With the support of other Saudi women involved in the #Right2Dignity campaign, al-Sharif signed an appeal to King Abdullah in June 2012, asking him to take a stand in support of women’s right to drive. The appeal was based on the argument that denying women the right to drive is “based on customs and traditions that do not come from God.”⁴⁹ Four times the #Right2Dignity campaign submitted a similar petition with over three thousand signatures to the Shura Council, which serves as the formal advisory body to the king, but it was rejected each time. On the fifth try it was finally accepted.

Later the same year, al-Sharif traveled to California to address the San Francisco Freedom Forum. Her presentation was entitled “The Saudi Women’s Spring.”

“My name is Manal al-Sharif,” she began. “I come from the Kingdom of Saudi men.”

She explained to her audience why lifting the ban on women driving would have such significant social, political, and economic consequences in her country, and she stressed the pivotal role that YouTube and Twitter have

played in her #Right2Dignity campaign. Since Saudi citizens have no other means to express their political views publicly, she said, “social media have become a democratic sandbox, our personal bully pulpit, and, yes, our comfort blanket and shield.”⁵⁰

Al-Sharif told the audience how moved she’s been by all the support she’s received from artists all over the world. She cited one artist and one work in particular, “the beautiful pop star from England M.I.A. and her song ‘Bad Girls.’”

“All we want,” she concluded, “is a Saudi Arabia that respects the humanity of women. Because I’m proud to be a Saudi woman and because I love my country, I will not wait. Women’s rights are not a special interest or a privilege. Women rights, or the lack of them, affect the whole society! And societies that keep women in the back seat will always be on the wrong side of history.”

As she left the stage to enthusiastic applause, familiar images of women dressed in gold-lamé caftans dancing provocatively around an old car in a dusty alley appeared on the large screen behind the podium where al-Sharif had just finished speaking. And M.I.A. sitting in the driver’s seat of a car stroking the steering wheel sensually began to sing:

Live fast, die young,
Bad girls do it well.

In September 2013, the prospects that Saudi women might be allowed to drive at some point seemed to improve when the new head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice stated that sharia law contained no text forbidding women from driving. He also noted somewhat paradoxically that while he did not have the authority to change the Kingdom’s policies on women driving, no women had been stopped for driving since King Abdullah had appointed him to office a year earlier.⁵¹ Perhaps in reaction to this small, but significant, shift in government policy, Sheikh Saleh al-Loheidan, a leading Saudi cleric, forcefully condemned women driving. “Medical studies,” he said, “show that [driving] would affect a woman’s ovaries and that it pushes the pelvis upward. We find that for women who continuously drive cars, their children are born with varying degrees of clinical problems.”⁵²

At about this time, a new campaign began, which invited Saudi women to participate in another “day of defiance” against the ban on women driving. A petition entitled “October 26th, Driving for Women” appeared online

encouraging women to drive and post videos of themselves in the act. The first woman to announce her commitment to join the protest was Madeha al-Ajroush, when she tweeted, “Yes, I will drive again on October 26.” Within two days over eight thousand women had signed the petition.⁵³

Several ominous developments took place in the days leading up to this most recent protest. The Saudi Ministry of the Interior reaffirmed its determination to uphold the prohibition against women driving. This announcement and the scare tactics the Saudi government used to enforce the ban—harassing phone calls, travel restrictions, and arbitrary detentions—were widely criticized by international human rights organizations. In addition, several well-known women’s rights activists reportedly received phone calls from someone claiming to be associated with the Ministry of the Interior who warned them explicitly not to participate in the protest. And finally, the day before the protest, hackers took down the oct26driving.org website and replaced it with the message “Drop the leadership of Saudi women . . . Accident.”⁵⁴

Accurate information about what actually happened on October 26, 2013, is hard to come by. Organizers of the protest reported that over sixty women from across the country had driven that day. They also reported that the police had not set up any roadblocks or checkpoints and that no one had been stopped, ticketed, or fined. According to other reports, more than sixteen women were arrested and forced to sign statements promising not to drive again. A spokesman from the Ministry of the Interior said that October 26, 2013, was a “normal day, just like every Saturday.”⁵⁵

The day after the protest, a video of a song entitled “No Woman, No Drive” appeared on the oct26driving.org website featuring Hisham Fageeh, a young Saudi comedian and social activist who is well known for his satirical YouTube videos. Within five days, seven million people had watched Fageeh offer a devastating critique of the Saudi ban on women driving with his parody of Bob Marley’s famous reggae anthem “No Woman, No Cry.”⁵⁶

In the original 1975 version of the song, Marley offers comfort to women living in desperate poverty in the projects of Kingston, Jamaica. Shaking his thick dreadlocks angrily, Marley closes his eyes and points to the sky as if in a trance. With a voice full of pain and agony, he sings:

No woman, no cry.
Say, say, say,

I remember when we used to sit
In a government yard in Trenchtown,
Oba-obaserving the hypocrites
As they mingled with the good people we meet.
Good friends we had, and good friends we've lost along the way.
In this great future, you can't forget your past,
So dry your tears.
Hey, little sister, don't shed no tears.
No woman, no cry.

In his 2013 parody, Hisham Fageeh, with an air of smug satisfaction, patiently explains to Saudi women why it's not a good idea for them to drive. Wearing a white *thobe*, a red-and-white checkered *shemagh*, and large glasses, Fageeh sings an upbeat acappella version of Marley's song. Whistling, smiling, and snapping his fingers, Fageeh is a Saudi hipster, a Wahhabi Whiffenpoof.

No woman, no drive.
Say, say, say,
I remember when you used to sit
In the family car, but backseat.
Ova-ovaries all safe and well
So you can make lots and lots of babies.
Good friends we had, and good friends we've lost on the highway.
In this bright future, you can't forget your past,
So put your car key away.
Hey, little sister, don't touch that wheel.
No woman, no drive.

When asked about the song in an interview, Fageeh said simply "We do entertainment. We don't have a specific political agenda." Fageeh just wants to show the world that Saudis have a sense of humor too.⁵⁷

MOCKING YOUR OPPRESSOR

In her "Bad Girls" video, M.I.A. sings provocatively about having sex in a car while "drifting" wildly down an exotic—and imaginary—Saudi street. In her #Women2Drive video, Manal al-Sharif speaks with frustration about the restrictions she faces every day as a Saudi woman while driving carefully down a mundane—and very real—Saudi street. In her speech at the 2012

Oslo Freedom Forum, al-Sharif speaks movingly about her courageous act of civil disobedience while standing on an international stage addressing a worldwide audience. And in “No Woman, No Cry,” Hisham Fageeh parodies Bob Marley’s powerful protest against social injustice in order to express his support for Saudi women’s right to drive.

Each of these four acts is transgressive; each threatens to subvert the Saudi social order, but in very different ways. M.I.A.’s defiant sexuality is a perverse fulfillment of Saudi clerics’ worst nightmare; it’s a fantasy of exactly what they are afraid will happen if Saudi women are allowed to drive. In any other country in the world, al-Sharif’s #Women2Drive video, with her modest dress, safe driving, and everyday conversation, would be unremarkable. In the Saudi context, however, it too is profoundly transgressive. Al-Sharif is not violating Saudi traffic rules; she is violating Saudi gender norms. She is guilty of “driving while female.” In her Oslo speech, al-Sharif expresses her opposition to the Saudi ban on women driving with straightforward, even blunt language. Fageeh uses the complexity and indirectness of humor to test the limits of the Saudi government’s efforts at censorship and social control.

To many western observers, the veil is the quintessential sign of women’s oppression in the Muslim, Arab world. The issue of “covering,” however, is much more complex. Veiling occurs in many different contexts and has many different meanings. But in Saudi Arabia, driving is a very different and much simpler matter. For Saudi women, the ban on driving, like the restrictions imposed on them by the guardianship system, imposes a serious infringement on their personal freedom. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, both the government and the religious establishment on which its legitimacy depends continue to uphold the ban against women driving. In this way they continue to deny Saudi women freedom of movement and full participation in Saudi society.

“In Saudi Arabia,” al-Sharif told me, “women are treated like cars. They have to be registered to someone. The guardianship system is the umbrella of all evil. But nothing is more powerful than mocking your oppressor.”