

The Demonstration of The Saudi Arabian Women^(☆)



History teaches us that every crisis produces positive and negative side-effects. Maybe one of the positive side-effects of the Gulf Crisis is the unexpected outburst of seventy Saudi Arabian women demanding a simple and basic right: the right to drive in public.

According to Saudi laws, women may not appear in public except if accompanied by a male chaperon; and not just any chaperon, but the husband, father or brother. They cannot drive and are not allowed to board a car without a male chauffeur at the very least, in spite of having legitimate driver's licences from the Western countries in which they were schooled.

On November 6, 1990, approximately seventy Saudi women, of the upper class, sat in their Mercedes Benz or Buick and ordered their chauffeurs to take them to the central market of the city of Riyadh. There, they ordered their chauffeurs to get out of the car and took the wheels themselves. They drove their cars, alone, through the market. This outraged public opinion throughout the country.

Saudi women, in spite of the demonstration, are still bound to these laws. Whereas, Bedouin women in Saudi Arabia are given driver's licences to drive their cars in pursuit of their goat and sheep herds⁽¹⁾.

According to the Saudi demonstrators, the demand to drive does not contradict the codes of honor dictated by Islam. Hence, at the time of the Prophet, women were allowed to ride horses and donkeys. Therefore, what is the difference between a horse and a car?, said the

commentary⁽²⁾. In fact, the car is much more conservative because it is closed. On another hand, at the time of the Prophet, women went to war with men. (just like the Americans do today). They carried swords, and sustained injuries during battle.

In spite of all these claims, the Saudi government's response to the demonstration was to arrest these women and warn their husbands of harsher punishments if they should conduct any other public protest. Once again women's bondage to men was emphasized. The moral argument of the government was that for women to drive would contradict the codes of behavior of the Saudis who are protective of their honor (women).

Never mind!! an immediate outcome is not to be expected. For the time being, «many other Saudi women, while they are generally sympathetic to the cause, doubted that such odd demonstrations are really the best way to change men's minds. One woman said 'Many of us believe that it is better to work with the system than against it'»⁽³⁾.

Nevertheless, and maybe, the act of speaking up, for the first time, is in itself a step ahead for Saudi women. Things are eventually bound to change ●

(☆) «About the Demonstration of Saudi Women», *Newsletter, Association of Arab Women Solidarity*, No. 3, November 1990, p. 29.

(1) Ibid.

(2) Ibid.

(3) «Backlash?» *Newsweek*, November 19, 1990.