

Generations

Getting the right to drive

Last Sunday, halfway around the world, Saudi women were excitedly slipping behind the wheels of cars, some alone and others with female friends or family members and getting their first taste at driving on Saudi Arabian roadways.

Yes, it's difficult for us to believe that Saudi Arabia was the last country in the world to give in and allow women to share the road with men and to drive on their own if they chose to.

You couldn't resist smiling if you watched CNN's coverage of smiling women, dressed in chadors, and happily waving at the camera as they pulled away. The main difference between a chador and a burqa is that a burqa covers the face, whereas a chador wraps around and covers the head and hair but leaves the face exposed. Those beautiful, dark eyes were filled with fervor, no trepidation in sight.

We women take driving for granted because it has never been an issue for us but try and imagine your life without the car parked in your driveway. It's pretty impossible not to drive in this age of work, school, children's activities, doctor and dentist appointments, shopping and such. But Saudi women didn't have that luxury until now.

The inalienable right to drive for Saudi women didn't come easily. The landmark step was the culmination of years of activism and appeals from inside and outside the Gulf nation where many people were arrested and persecuted.

The movement in Saudi Arabia comes as part of a series of sweeping social and economic reforms known as Vision 2030 and spearheaded by Saudi Arabia's 32-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The end of the driving ban will allow many

more women to join the workforce, a key goal for the crown Prince. Until now, many Saudi women have had to employ male drivers, something that eats



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into their salaries and is prohibitive for some.

Aside from granting women the right to drive, over the past year, Saudi Arabia has opened its first cinema in decades and loosened several morality laws that discriminate against women, including its notorious rules requiring that women receive a male guardian's permission to travel, receive an education and sometimes work and receive health care.

Saudi mothers are now able to retain custody of their children after divorce without filing lawsuits. In granting this change in the law, Saudi Arabia broke ranks with several other countries in the region that heavily favor male guardianship.

In 2015, women cast ballots for the first time ever during municipal elections, a vote in which they were also allowed to campaign for public office. But female candidates weren't allowed to speak to male voters and couldn't have men and women mixing in their campaign offices. However, at least 17 women were elected during the 2015 municipal vote.

Saudi Arabia, which adheres to some of the strictest interpretations of Sunni Islam in the world, has long been accused of formal legal discrimination against women, but the prince seems to be on a make-or-break mission. Change will be slow, of course, but at least it's finally happening.

We hope the prince tackles other rights for women. For example,

women still are beholden to restrictive guardianship laws that govern nearly every aspect of their lives, despite recent moves to ease them. In cases where a woman's father is deceased or absent, her husband, a male relative, brother, or in some cases even a son must give his approval before a woman can obtain often basic entitlements.

Also, Saudi women still cannot mix freely with members of the opposite sex. Some exceptions are hospitals, banks and medical colleges. They also cannot appear in public without wearing a full-length black abaya, a loose robe meant to protect women's modesty in public.

Rights group Amnesty International welcomed the lifting of the driving ban as "a long-overdue, small step in the right direction" but said it "must now be followed by reforms to end a whole range of discriminatory laws and practices.

"It is outrageous that women are still treated like second-class citizens in Saudi Arabia. If Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman truly believes himself to be a reformer, he should free the women's-rights activists, and include activists and civil society members in Saudi Arabia's reform process."

Let's hope and pray the prince continues to do the right thing for Saudi women.

And as a side note, where business is business, in January, ride-hailing applications such as Uber and Careem, another transportation network company, said they were recruiting female drivers for when the ban lifts.

Uber driver? Sure, and this gives Saudi women another career choice to consider.

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