

Saudi Arabia: Free Woman Who Dared to Drive

Stop Enforcing Ban on Women Behind the Wheel

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“Arresting a woman who drove her family around in a car and then showed it online opens Saudi Arabia to condemnation - and, in fact, to mockery - around the world. The longer she stays in prison, the more the kingdom will have to answer for.”

Christoph Wilcke, senior Middle East researcher at Human Rights Watch

(Beirut) - King Abdullah should immediately order the release of Manal al-Sharif, who was arrested on the morning of May 22, 2011, after she defied the kingdom's de facto ban on driving by women, Human Rights Watch said today.

She had posted a video on YouTube showing herself behind the wheel and describing the inconveniences not being able to drive causes women. Prosecutors charged al-Sharif with besmirching the kingdom's reputation abroad and stirring up public opinion, according to Saudi press reports. King Abdullah should lift the de facto ban, Human Rights Watch said.

“Arresting a woman who drove her family around in a car and then showed it online opens Saudi Arabia to condemnation - and, in fact, to mockery - around the world,” said Christoph Wilcke, senior Middle East researcher at Human Rights Watch. *“The longer she stays in prison, the more the kingdom will have to answer for.”*

Saudi women have begun a “women2drive” campaign, seeking the right to drive cars, and say they are planning a symbolic protest drive on June 17. Public transportation is sparse and gender segregated, and women have to rely on taxis, expensive full-time drivers, or their families to drive them around, severely impeding their ability to study, work, and participate in public life.

Traffic officers and religious policemen first arrested al-Sharif while she was driving in the eastern city of Khobar on May 21, but released her a few hours later. Around 2 a.m. on May 22, al-Sharif was rearrested at her home, after she posted the video on YouTube. The video is no longer available. She is being held in Dammam prison, a fellow prisoner told Human Rights Watch.

There is no law barring women from driving in Saudi Arabia, but senior government clerics have issued several fatwas, or religious rulings, saying women are prohibited from driving. In practice, Saudi officials bar women from driving and refuse to issue them driver's licenses, although women occasionally do drive without being arrested. Al-Sharif drove with her international driving license, which is recognized in the kingdom.

Al-Sharif, with two other persons in the car, first drove on May 19, and was not stopped or arrested, a person with knowledge of the affair told Human Rights Watch. On May 21, she drove family members around town again, but traffic police stopped her and called the religious police to the scene. The officials then arrested her and her brother, Muhammad al-Sharif, who was in the car, and took them to the police station. They were released a few hours later.

At around 2 a.m. on May 22, however, criminal investigation officers appeared at al-Sharif's home. She did not let them in, but called her brother, who arrived and let them in. The police immediately arrested both of them, and brought her to Dammam prison, but took Muhammad to the traffic department, the sources said.

The Eastern Province branch of the Bureau of Investigations and Public Prosecutions did not respond to calls by Human Rights Watch, which sought confirmation of the nature of the charges against al-Sharif.

Al-Sharif, a 32-year old information technology specialist at Aramco, the Saudi oil conglomerate, had posted on YouTube a video of her driving a car around town on May 19. In the video, she said that one day she left work very late and was unable to find a taxi to drive her home. She called her brother to pick her up, but he did not answer his phone. Al-Sharif said that she hired a chauffeur, but that it was an awkward experience for her. She added that not all Saudi women can afford to hire drivers.

Several attempts have been made to ease the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia. Senior ruling Saudi princes, including King Abdullah, Crown Prince Sultan, and Foreign Minister Prince Sa'ud, have supported removing the ban in principle, and members of the advisory Shura Council, an appointed body with some functions of parliament, have discussed proposals to ease the ban.

These proposals have included providing driver education for women, employing women as traffic police so women drivers would not have to interact with men, and certain prohibitions such as not allowing women under 30 to drive and not allowing women to drive at night or outside of towns and cities. These proposals were never formulated into a draft law.

Enforcing a policy against women driving violates Saudi Arabia's obligations under international law, in particular article 2 of the Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Saudi Arabia ratified in 2001. The article obliges the kingdom "to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women," including "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women [...] of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." Article 15(4) of CEDAW obliges states to "accord to men and women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons."

"King Abdullah should end Saudi Arabia's pariah status in the world as the sole country banning women from driving," Wilcke said. "Just as his predecessors made their mark by introducing education for girls, King Abdullah can shape his legacy by opening the roads to women drivers."

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* <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/05/23/saudi-arabia-free-woman-who-dared-drive>