

Saudi Arabia: Free Nazia Quazi

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In most countries, a woman in her mid-20s is legally an adult. And in most countries, foreigners are free to leave when they like. In its flagrant rejection of these two principles, Saudi Arabia is unique, and that is a big problem for 24-year-old Nazia Quazi.

For more than two years Nazia, an IT specialist who graduated from the University of Ottawa and holds dual Canadian-Indian citizenship, has been trying to leave Riyadh and go home to Canada. Her troubles began on November 23, 2007, when she entered Saudi Arabia with her parents on a visitor's visa. In Saudi Arabia, foreign visitors must have a sponsor, a local man who handles their paperwork. Nazia's sponsor is her father, Quazi Malik Abdul Gaffar, an Indian citizen who has worked in Saudi Arabia for many years. At some point Nazia's father clandestinely switched her visitor's visa to a more permanent visa—one that requires that he, as her sponsor, approve her exit visa. This he refuses to do. No exit visa, no departure. Worse, Nazia says he has confiscated both her Indian and Canadian passports and all her identity documents—driver's license, health card, credit cards and so on—and refuses to return them. She is trapped.

Nazia's father is not only her sponsor; he is also her *mahram*, or guardian, the male relative who in the Saudi system controls nearly every moment of a woman's life. As detailed in a 2008 Human Rights Watch report, under this system a woman must seek her *mahram*'s permission to go to school, travel abroad, marry, open a bank account, hold a job, rent an apartment or even have elective surgery. (In June the Saudi government told the UN Human Rights Council that the guardianship system no longer exists, but HRW and the Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan* confirm that it does.) In effect, it makes women children for life—there are middle-aged Saudi women who are under the legal control of their own sons. Nazia's father thus has not only been able to force his daughter, through the sponsorship system, to remain in Riyadh; as her *mahram* he has total control of her life while she is there—even though neither Nazia nor her father is a Saudi citizen.

Nazia alleges that her parents, especially her father, have been physically and verbally abusive to her for years; a friend of hers told me in phone calls and e-mails that Nazia described various such incidents when she was living in Canada. In Saudi Arabia her situation has grown worse: in July 2008, she says, her father threatened her with a knife, saying he would kill her if she tried to leave. She also says that in order to break up her relationship with her boyfriend, whom her parents regard as insufficiently Muslim and too modern, her parents tried to force her to marry a stranger they had chosen for her. Not only her father but also her mother and her two brothers, both students in Canadian universities, are opposed to giving Nazia her freedom.

Nazia's passport problem is unusually complicated because of her dual citizenship. She was able to obtain an emergency Indian passport certificate, which is good for six months, but the Indian Embassy regards her father's withholding of the exit visa as a family matter and will not intervene. She applied for a new Canadian passport this past November, but since her father seized her IDs, all she has is a photocopy of her original passport, and embassy officials have told her this may not be enough. In any case, she's been told by the Canadian Embassy and the Saudi passport office she would still need an exit visa. Nazia has contacted the Saudi Human Rights Commission (HRC), a government agency, but so far it has not indicated that it will be able to help her. (That these

bureaucracies are so slow and convoluted adds to the frustration, of course. I've spent two weeks phoning the Indian and Canadian embassies and the Saudi HRC, invariably to be told, on the rare occasions when I reach an actual human being, that I am speaking to the wrong person.)

The good news is that Human Rights Watch has taken up Nazia's case. It has sent a letter to the Canadian Embassy in Riyadh urging it to protect Nazia and help her return home, and HRW's Toronto committee is deluging members of Parliament with letters on her behalf. Nazia is, after all, a Canadian citizen, and Canada should be as concerned about her rights and safety as about any Canadian held against her will in a foreign land. It should issue her a new passport immediately and whisk her out of Saudi Arabia, exit visa or no exit visa, because of the ongoing threat to her safety and denial of her basic human rights—rights that the Saudi government agreed to protect when it signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2001. Nazia's case offers the Canadian government a chance to redeem itself after its shocking refusal this past October to help Nathalie Morin, a Canadian living in Saudi Arabia whose husband refuses to let her and her children out of the country. Nazia's case is easier, in a way, because she is single and no children are involved. But more than one person I've talked with has suggested that the fact that the Quazis are Muslim is relevant: the embassy in Riyadh doesn't want to get involved in what it apparently views as a Muslim family dispute.

At one level, it is that. Nazia's father won't take my calls, but I've spoken with her older brother, who declined to comment for this story, and with her employer, a friend of her father's who claims he is trying to broker a solution. To them the fact that Nazia is a 24-year-old college graduate is irrelevant, as are her feelings, her fears, her wishes and her rights. What matters is her father's disapproval of her boyfriend.

But that's a problem for the Quazis. It's not a reason for Canada to allow Nazia to be deprived of her rights. How far have women come if a democratic, secular country like Canada permits a father to imprison his adult daughter in the cage of Saudi laws?

by KATHA POLLITT

P.S.

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