

A Conversation With Saudi Women's Rights Campaigner Wajeha al-Huwaider

Friday 10 June 2011, by [Al-HUWAIDER Wajeha](#), [POLLITT Katha](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2011).

Wajeha al-Huwaider is perhaps the best-known Saudi campaigner for women's rights, human rights and democracy. She has protested energetically against the kingdom's lack of formal laws (the Koran is it) and basic freedoms and in particular against the guardianship system, under which every female, from birth to death, needs the permission of a male relative to make decisions in all important areas of life—education, travel, marriage, employment, finances, even surgery. In 2008 a video of her driving a car, which is forbidden for women in Saudi Arabia, created a sensation when it was posted on YouTube. Al-Huwaider is a strong supporter of the June 17 Movement, which calls on Saudi women to start driving on that date, and made the celebrated YouTube video of its co-founder, Manal al-Sherif, jailed for nine days in May for driving. While this interview was in preparation, she was briefly detained by the police when she tried to visit Nathalie Morin, a French-Canadian woman held captive with her children by her Saudi husband.

Katha Pollitt - Why the driving protests? And why now?

Wajeha al-Huwaider - The issue of women drivers has remained unresolved since the driving protests of 1990. Just before the launching of the June 17 campaign, a group of well-known women and men signed a letter to the Shura, or Consultative Assembly, asking to reopen the discussion. It was rejected. That was the spark for the current protest of Manal and the other women. The issue never goes away.

*** How much support do women drivers have?**

It's hard to know exactly but it's growing, and it might reach more than 50 percent of Saudi society.

*** I met a Saudi woman in Houston who mocked the focus on driving (she was driving me to a meeting at the time). She said the ban wasn't important because "everyone" has a driver. How does not being able to drive affect Saudi women?**

Not every family can afford to hire a driver. Many women have to rely on male relatives, who may not be available or willing when you need them. It's incredibly frustrating! Also, not everyone wants a driver. I don't have one, and neither does Manal. There's no public transportation system here, so I walk all the time, and take taxis home from shopping. But in many villages that taxi "luxury" is not available for women.

*** Isn't it strange that Saudi women can't be alone with an unrelated man—except their driver?**

Our rulers are willing to break their own laws to keep women isolated. In another country, a woman with a driver would look privileged—here, the message is that she is weak and untrustworthy. That kind of attitude travels down the generations—even after women get the right to drive it will take years to get rid of it.

*** In most Muslim countries, even monarchies like Morocco, women have more social freedom and legal rights than in Saudi Arabia. Why is Saudi Arabia so committed to repressing women?**

Actually they are committed to repressing everybody—men, women, Saudis, non-Saudis. That's why religious police are on the streets harassing and arresting people. Young men are beaten just for having long hair. But the police are more brutal with women, because women are half the society, and they raise the other half. So repressing and instilling fear in women is the most effective way to control the whole society.

Here is progress, Saudi-style: the Shura has just recommended that women be allowed to vote but not run in local elections, and the king decreed that women and only women can sell women's lingerie.

*** Some Muslim feminists are trying to reinterpret—they would say, correctly interpret—the Koran in a gender-egalitarian way. For instance, they point out the Koran says only that women should dress modestly, not that they need to be swathed from head to toe, or even cover their hair. Do you think there can be a feminist Islam?**

There is a feminist Islam, mainly led by Muslim women in the West. But they tend to forget that none of the monotheistic religions treat men and women equally, and there's a limit to what scholarship can do to change that. For example, daughters inherit half what sons inherit. Men are allowed to marry up to four wives. Two female witnesses equal one male. Secular society is a better bet for women—and men too.

*** Any chance of a Saudi Spring?**

Not now. Most people here are not well aware of their rights—there's no free press, no civil society and no NGOs or political groups to organize a movement.

Many people are brainwashed to believe ours is a "special" society—that's why we have laws that are un-Islamic but accepted, like preventing women from driving. However, thanks to the Internet, young women and men have a place to express themselves and develop their individuality. They're more open-minded than their elders, and that will shape Saudi society in the future.

*** President Obama has praised the uprisings in the Arab world, but the United States is firm friends with the Saudi government, despite its flagrant violations of human rights, lack of democracy and so on. What do you make of that?**

I have never expected any of the Western world leaders to talk about human rights violations in Saudi Arabia, and they've lived up to my expectations. The West needs our oil and we don't "need anything" from them. I learned to live with that bitter reality a long time ago.

*** Why do you think there's comparatively little activism among Saudi women? Or has there been more than is reported?**

Fear is the main reason. Also women are treated all their lives as property—that has an effect. But religion is another reason. Saudis are very devout, and the government is very good at using religion as a weapon to keep women down. Many women accept that. They're not happy, but they accept it.

Katha Pollitt

P.S.

* June 8, 2011 | This article appeared in the June 27, 2011 edition of The Nation.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/161224/conversation-saudi-womens-rights-campaigner-wajeha-al-huwaider>

* Katha Pollitt is well known for her wit and her keen sense of both the ridiculous and the sublime. Her “Subject to Debate” column, which debuted in 1995 and which the Washington Post called “the best place to go for original thinking on the left,” appears every other week in The Nation; it is frequently reprinted in newspapers across the country. In 2003, “Subject to Debate” won the National Magazine Award for Columns and Commentary. She is also a fellow at The Nation Institute.