The Road to Driving for Women in Saudi Arabia

For women in Saudi Arabia, the right to drive is both a symbol of a progressing society, and a functional necessity for the freedom they’ve been so long denied. The ban on driving for women, which was formally put into place in 1990, was finally lifted in late June of this year. Preceding was almost 30 years of struggle from women in the country (Jarbou 322). Prior to the lift, women could not drive under any circumstances, and had to be chauffeured or driven by a male relative. While this is a massive jump forward for the conservative country in terms of women’s rights, the heavily criticized guardianship system, which dictates that a male guardian makes almost all important decision in a woman’s life, still severely limits the freedom of Saudi women. Why is it then that the ban was lifted, what took it so long, and what can we take away from this moving forward? By looking at the cultural history and the effect of nongovernmental organizations within Saudi Arabia, the answers start to become clear.

When attempting to delve deeper into this subject, one must have an understanding of what factors contributed to the almost 30 year long ban on driving for women in Saudi Arabia. The lift of the ban took place for a variety of complex reasons, among the most important of these was the success of movements orchestrated by modern nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) within Saudi Arabia. Rana Jarbou, speaking about the success of the Women2Drive campaign, in which women would film themselves driving and post it to social media, writes, “The recent lift of the driving ban may have been a calculated political move, but it was expedient only because of the mounting images of women driving forward that became impossible to ignore.” (324). Jarbou clearly attributes a large portion of the success of the movement to its prevalence on social media. While this very well may have been the straw that broke the camel’s back on the subject of driving, it is also apparent that global economic changes stemming from the west had an impact.
In addition, constant pressure from the western world to improve conditions for women all but forced Saudi Arabia into loosening their ultra conservative view on women’s rights. A specific example of this can be seen in Saudi Arabia’s willingness to participate, or at least willingness to act like they are participating, in international human rights law. The most notable cooperation from Saudi Arabia, in this case, would be their ratification of the The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) treaty. As Merry makes the case for in her article, CEDAW is very effective in being a spark to ignite a fire of social change, which it helped to do in Saudi Arabia.

Another aspect of the former ban on driving that must be understood is the reason for its persistence, even despite relative cooperation from Saudi Arabia with the international community. This can be attributed partially to cultural relativism on the part of the Saudi’s. In 2008, the Saudi delegation stated that, “Islam holds that full likeness between men and women is contrary to the reality of their being,” a blatantly relativist view (Black 23). With this statement the Saudi’s are asserting that the idea of equality between men and women is fundamentally contrary to their entire legal system. Due to this cultural relativism, it is clear that the Saudis do not subscribe to the same universal human rights that have been instituted by the United Nations. This is directly contradictory however to the fact that Saudi Arabia had ratified CEDAW early 2001. The fundamental disagreement between the Islamic Shari’ah law enforced in Saudi Arabia and the values held by the UN was likely a major factor in the lack of effectiveness of this treaty. Raed A. Alhargan writes, “Saudi Arabia ratified these conventions in an attempt to avoid international shaming, to rebuff outside critics, and to signal to the international human rights network that Islamic law as applied in Saudi Arabia (and its local legal regulations) is not in contradiction with the ratified conventions,” referring to the ratification by Saudi Arabia of a variety of UN conventions including CEDAW (607). This demonstrates that the desire for Saudi Arabia to feign cooperation with the international community was more for the sake of reputation and in an attempt to justify Islam based law, rather than a true willingness to evolve as a culture and a society. Most certainly this contributed to the lengthy duration of the ban on driving for women.
Once one starts to understand the background of the situation for women in Saudi Arabia, the question inevitably comes up, what can we take from this moving forward? An extremely interesting aspect of the situation to look into is the effect of CEDAW. The idea that Saudi Arabia ratified CEDAW even despite being fundamentally at odds with the basis of the treaty, as well as being able to continually undermine its values, is a stark example of the deep issues with the UN system. The differences between the culture of the Islamic state that is Saudi Arabia and CEDAW are so great that it is difficult not to wonder why it is the Saudis bothered with the ratification of the treaty. This disparity calls into question whether Saudi Arabia should even be pressured to adopt CEDAW. When writing about CEDAW from the point of view of a cultural relativist, Lauren Bock Mullins wonders, “what if dismissing the norms or traditions of a culture from outside that culture can be considered disrespectful or ignorant?” (262). Franck would refute this by arguing that women’s rights are “grounded in modern transcultural, social, economic and scientific developments,” and therefore inherently universal (196-197). While the reasons as to why Saudi Arabia ratified the international treaty can only remain mostly speculative, it is reasonable to believe that they are remarkably similar to the reasons for lifting the ban on driving for women. Globalization and progression in education has given the Saudis no option but to attempt to improve the conditions for women.

How is it then that Saudi Arabia is able to get away with such egregious violations of CEDAW? It can simply be chalked up to a lack of enforcement. Merry writes, “CEDAW is law without sanctions,” a seemingly oxymoronic statement, however the reality of the situation (943). “Pressure is exerted through exposure, shaming, and appeal to the international standards articulated in the convention,” none of which is particularly effective against the ultraconservative state of Saudi Arabia (Merry 942). While CEDAW is rendered powerless in the sense of direct application, this is not to take away from its usefulness. This value is not in a direct sense as much as it is in the slow burn, being its cultural impact. As Merry describes in her article, CEDAW is often most valuable as a mechanism for a cultural dialogue, much of which was the case in Saudi Arabia. It could be said that the revolution of women’s rights that has been taking place in Saudi Arabia over the last 30 years was nudged towards its current trajectory
by the societal discussion caused by the ratification of the CEDAW treaty by Saudi Arabia in 2001, making a real case for the necessity of CEDAW on the international stage today.

Another valuable insight provided through a look at the road to driving for women in Saudi Arabia is the varied effectiveness of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). For example, when viewing the situation through the lens of Keck’s boomerang method, the strengths and weaknesses of TANs come to light (13). At first glance, it is easy to assume that TANs would be very effective for this particular case. This is due to the blockage of media and speech within the country; the most obvious solution is to bypass the Saudi government and apply pressure using an outside actor, which describes the boomerang method. The Saudi Arabia situation ends up serving as an example for the downfall of this method however, as it is not a state that is very susceptible to outside pressures. Because of Saudi Arabia’s position in the international economic landscape, there is little that larger countries can do in the way of pressure. Similar to the reason CEDAW couldn’t force Saudi Arabia’s hand, TANs showed meager progress.

As aforementioned, the deciding factor in the decision to lift the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia was likely NGOs such as the Women2Drive movement. The internet has for years been revolutionizing human rights; Franck writes in 2001, “The advent of globalization through CNN and the Internet has profoundly affected individual participation in discourses on foreign and domestic politics just as the invention of the printing press and the Gutenberg's vulgate Bible unleashed the social forces leading to the reformation.” (201). The progression in technology since Franck wrote this impactful statement can only be described as staggering. As described by Jarbou, NGOs that supported women’s rights made almost no headway from the start of the movement in 1990 until around the mid-2000s (320-323). The success of the movement was largely achieved through the utilization of the social media site, YouTube. On this site, around 100 videos were posted of Saudi women driving, combatting the main reason for the continuation of the ban, which was that women were, “not ready.” It was these videos that finally gave the movement its much needed exposure. Raed A. Alhargan corroborates this opinion to a certain extent, but believes that closer to the late 1990s
the Saudi government was in fact cooperating with internal NGOs (7). In any case, the use of technology provided a landmark precedent in terms of human rights all around the world. When for decades traditional NGOs couldn’t break through the iron curtain of suppression administered by the Saudi government, social media played a crucial role in providing the exposure that was needed. The boom of connectivity that has resulted from technological advancements in the past 15 years has wide reaching implications for suppressed peoples all around the world. The volume of the voices of regular people have been amplified so greatly that movements are being started from the comfort of a phone screen. The new era of technology that has been ushered in through this new level of connectivity also has the potential for being a new era of equality and freedom, so long as people are sure to use their voices.

In conclusion, as the women of Saudi Arabia celebrate their victory by using their newfound independence to drive wherever they wish, the international community can look at the situation with interest and optimism. While it was a long and hard fought battle for Saudi women, they have made major progress in the fight for rights, and the trend is only looking up. By understanding the factors contributing to the ban being lifted the universal conversation of human rights can become incrementally more informed. An analysis of the events that led up to the lifting of the ban helps to explain the usefulness of NGOs, and Saudi Arabia’s complicated relationship with international law. 

Proceeding, we can only hope the Saudi Arabia continues the trend of progressing women’s rights in the near future.


