



WHEEL DONE: Sanaa Mirza gets the show on the road. PHOTO: MIHAIR DAY

BRAKE-ING POINT

The Middle East is churning with unrest as rebels strive to overthrow autocrats. In Saudi Arabia though, there is a revolution of another kind as women take to the streets to break the ban on driving. More power to them, say the city's women

HEMAL ASHAR AND SUDESHNA CHOWDHURY
hemal@mid-day.com
sudeshna.chowdhury@mid-day.com

It is at times like these that the adage: the world is a small place, seems to be untrue. There are miles both metaphorical and literally between Saudi Arabia and other nations in the Middle East where women are on missions to the moon, in Saudi Arabia, they are not allowed to drive a car. As the Arab Spring erupts across the Middle East with blood flowing in the streets as rebels protest against autocratic rulers, another kind of revolution is in gear in Saudi Arabia. Since June, women have been defying the men-only driving rule. Driving is a right women take for granted in other countries. It is a shame and embarrassment that Saudi Arabia does not allow women to drive. Clerics couch their stance in ludicrous statements like driving would allow women to mix

with men and driving entails women to show their hands while at the steering wheel, the ban is one of the most regressive in the world and is soundly rebuffed by Muslim women in the city.

CONTROL
Asks Mirza Road resident Sanaa Mirza, who has been driving for more than a decade now, "What is the problem about women driving a car in Saudi Arabia? Of course, women should be allowed to drive. I think women know their limits. If they drive, they are hardly going to take the car to some dangerous place or some place illegal. When I hold the steering wheel in my hands, I have control of my destiny," says the mother of a young daughter, making a powerful statement. The former telephone operator at the Qatar Embassy, is a stay at home mom now, "Which makes it all the more important that I drive. I can do the errands on my own. I can go out by myself." As for the Saudi like that driving

would expose a woman's hands, Sanaa says, "the sharam (shame) should be in the eyes. A covering does not automatically make you into a good person. I know some people who are covered up in burkas but they are rotten people. There are others who do not cover fully but they are very good people, so covering is hardly an indicator of morality."

MINDSET
Dilshat Ahmed, a trainer at Porsche Travels & Logistics Pvt Ltd. in Andheri (E), thinks the problem is with the male mindset, which prevents women from becoming independent. For-She Travels & Logistics Pvt Ltd cabs provide cab service to various corporates, "but these cabs are unique at all of them have women drivers," says Ahmed. While Muslim men who lives in Chembur, claims that she has always admired women drivers.

FREEDOM
For Narasena Dawoodani, freedom is in India. "It is here that we are truly free," says the Dongri resident. "We can ride a bike or



INDEPENDENT: Narasena Dawoodani with her daughter



SCOOTER WISE: Tarannum Jarwalah, POC-SAVED SAMERA ARON



BOLD: Dilshat Ahmed, POC-SHE ASHNI

make their daughter really independent, they tend to understand." The company has a specific dress code for its drivers: "Women who prefer to wear a burka come to the office and wear a uniform (trousers and a shirt). After their duty hours, they wear the burka and go home," says Ahmed. Husaina Shabbir Mulani (31), a trainer with For-She cabs, has given up wearing the burka after she started driving. "Driving has given me a sense of independence. It has changed my outlook and given me a fresh perspective. I don't wear the burka anymore," says Mulani. After Mulani, her sister, Shabana Sheikh Anon (25) too enrolled for the driving class. Mulani, who lives in Chembur, claims that she has always admired women drivers.



TOP GEAR: Shirreen Syed drives on. POC-SAVED SAMERA ARON



CAR COOL: Zahara Lalani

five cars. I ride a scooter and find it so convenient with my six-month-old daughter, Falga. I can finish my work, go to the market myself. It makes me so self-sufficient. Nowhere has it been said I write in Islam that women should not drive, there is no restriction like this. The ban may be politically motivated as it has no religious basis."

Search Saudi Arabia and women's rights on the Internet and one is taken aback at the number of restrictions on women in the country. It is possible in the dark ages, yet, it has appeared (women included) to state that the West cannot use the religion to justify such bans. This ban must be challenged and broken. Women must have full rights," stresses Tarannum before zooming off on her scooter.

POLITICAL
Sahiba Munoor Ali Asari (33) has been riding an Activa (a scooter) for the past nine years. A primary school teacher, it was

her son's health, which prompted her to start riding her own vehicle. Said Asari, "My son has autism. I stay in Mumbai Central and the doctor who was treating my son was based in Dongri. Hence, I had to take him for treatment to Dongri. So, I started driving from one of my friends and it is now a lot easier. My parents were very encouraging." About Saudi Arabia Asari said, "What is happening in Saudi Arabia is more political. It has nothing to do with Islam."

For Zahara Lalani, it is her Scorpio, will travel. She says, "Today, women are flying planes,

so why can't they drive cars? There is nothing in the faith that says they cannot drive. This is a very narrow-minded view." For Zahara a car means independence. "To do my work, to drop off my children. I even drive to Pune in my family drive," says the Maharashtra resident.

PASSION
Fatiya Iffat Karmali says driving is a passion. "I have a very steady hand at the wheel and I may drive fast but I have great control of the car. All these reasons touted out for disallowing women to drive in Saudi Arabia are nothing but excuses. What religion does it ask for discipline from both men and women?" Karmali even participated in the Racecross held in February this year in Decatur, where, "I stood first among the women." In fact, says Karmali, "By not allowing women to drive, you are forcing them to take cabs. These are driven by unknown men, isn't it much safer that she drives

her own car?" asks the Bandra resident.

CAUTION
The International Travel Information on the US Department of State site has several cautionary notes for women about what to do when expected to travel or live in Saudi Arabia. From dressing very conservatively to warnings that even homosexuality is considered to be a criminal offense and those convicted may be sentenced to flogging, prison, or death, it has a list of social do's and don'ts with a section especially dedicated to women's rights.

ADMIRE
For Najma Kazi, principal of Anjuman-Isam, Saif Tayyib Girls' School (Udu medhni) in Mumbai Central, driving the car, is "No big deal as everybody in my family drives." Recalls Kazi, "I remember in 1971, when I was a student of the same school, our principal a woman used to drive a car. We used to

admire her so much and always wanted to be like her. She was none other than Ruqayya Mirza, tennis player Sanaa Mirza's grandmother."

Shirreen Syed, Alhamdullah resident who has visited Saudi Arabia in the past says, "It is frustrating for women to be at home and wait for the man to come home and take one out in the car. It makes women feel stranded at home or forces them to take cabs with unknown men as drivers. Moreover, many of these cab drivers come from foreign countries and do not know the law. Women must be allowed to drive there, there is nothing in the religion that forbids women from doing so. Even the Prophet's wife used to ride horses."

The steering wheel may have just become a symbol of women's rights to choose where they go in ultra conservative Saudi Arabia. From hold the reins to grasping the steering wheel, it is all about having control over one's life and eventually destiny.

SAUDIS TELL THE WEST TO INTERFERE

The traditional Muslim community line has been that the West stop 'interfering' in its affairs. This time though, the Saudi women themselves asked for interferences asking US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton to speak up on their behalf.

Clinton then lent her support and stressed though that the women were acting on their own, in behalf of their own rights and not at the behest of outsiders like herself. Clinton called them "brave" saying, "I am moved by it and support them." Saudi Women for Drive, which had asked Clinton for her backing, organized a show of defiance by women who drove in the country during 17 and encouraged them to continue getting driving cars. Even the European Union said that it supports Saudi women who stand up for their right to social treatment, wherever they are. The challenge came from the Office of the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Catherine Ashton. "The Saudi women who are taking to the road are exercising their right to demand that equality. They are courageous and have the right representation," she said. Several members of the US Congress, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Representative Tammy Balchewicz of Wisconsin, have backed the campaign.