

Saudi women threaten to breastfeed drivers if they aren't allowed to drive

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Many were stunned when Saudi cleric Sheik Abdel Mohsen Obeikan recently issued a fatwa, or Islamic ruling, calling on women to give breast milk to their male colleagues or men they come into regular contact with so as to avoid illicit mixing between the sexes. But a group of Saudi women has taken the controversial decree a step further in a new campaign to gain the right to drive in the ultra-conservative kingdom, media reports say. If they're not granted the right to drive, the women are threatening to breastfeed their drivers to establish a symbolic maternal bond.

"Is this is all that is left to us to do: to give our breasts to the foreign drivers?" a Saudi woman named Fatima Shammmary was quoted as saying by Gulf News.

Obeikan argued in his decree that if the women give their drivers their breast milk, the chauffeurs would be able to mingle with all members of the family without having to worry about violating Islamic law. Some Islamic scholars frown on the mixing of unmarried men and women. Islamic tradition, or *hadith*, stipulates that breastfeeding establishes a maternal bond, even if a woman breastfeeds a child who is not her own.

Drawing from the cleric's advocacy, the women have reportedly chosen a slogan for their campaign that translates to, "We either be allowed to drive or breastfeed foreigners."

The current driving ban applies to all women in Saudi Arabia, regardless of their nationality, and it's been a topic of heated public debate in recent years.

The ban on driving was unofficial at first but was introduced as official legislation after 47 Saudi women drove cars through the streets of the Saudi capital, Riyadh, in 1990 in an attempt to challenge authorities.

The incident brought harsh consequences for the women, who were jailed for a day and had their passports confiscated. Many of them were said to have been forced to leave their jobs after the driving protest.

Still, every now and then, reports of Saudi women driving in defiance of the ban emerge in the media.

Two years ago, 125 women in Saudi Arabia signed a petition that called on the Saudi interior minister to lift the ban.

One of the Saudi female signatories, Wajeha Huwaider, posted a video of herself driving on YouTube in a direct appeal to the Saudi authorities to allow women to drive.

"For women to drive is not a political issue," Wajeha said as she sat behind the wheel. "It is not a religious issue. It is a social issue, and we know that many women of our society are capable of driving cars. We also know that many families will allow their women to drive."

Alexandra Sandels, in Beirut

P.S.

* Source, June 22, 2010:

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/06/saudi-women-use-fatwa-in-driving-bid.html>