

# Saudi women get law licenses, not allowed to drive

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Practice... if you can get to the courthouse

By Julie L. Kessler

In a historic groundbreaking move by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Justice, last week four Saudi women were granted licenses to practice law.

These law licenses allow the group of four to alter their status from "legal consultants" to attorneys. This occurred on the heels of a prior declaration that Saudi women could enter the courts and argue their own cases, open their own law offices, and for the first time ever, represent men.

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Make no mistake, this is an enormous, watershed moment for Saudi women. But what does it really mean in a society in which women still do not even possess the right to drive a car to the courtroom that they may now finally enter? In fact, Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that prohibits women from driving.

Back in 2011, a group of women in Saudi Arabia staged a minor revolt against the Saudi ban on women driving, coordinating their campaign on Facebook. These courageous women, wearing the traditional black abaya and thus covered from head to toe, got into their respective cars at different places in the capital city of Riyadh and simply drove. Several were consequently arrested, giving them an opportunity to say publicly that they were simply fed up with having to depend on male relatives or paid drivers to get around. They said then that this desire had nothing to do with religion. I believed them then. And I believe them now.

In fact, another "Women's Driving Campaign" occurred in Riyadh this past Saturday, following circulation of a petition that obtained over 16,000 signatures. Sixty women participated in the driving campaign throughout the capital despite warnings from ultraconservatives and Saudi police, with messages received by organizers that another 50 women drove in Riyadh. If these total numbers are correct, this will have been the largest public demonstration that Saudi Arabia has ever experienced, and one without any arrests or tickets issued.

There is no specific traffic

law that prohibits Saudi women from driving; however, religious edicts are often interpreted to mean that women are not allowed to operate a vehicle. Just last month, a leading Saudi cleric warned women that those who drove could cause damage to their ovaries and pelvises and were also at risk of having children born with "clinical problems."

Really? I wonder what his scientific explanation would be for all the healthy-ovary-produced children that Arab women who drive in other Muslim countries bear, and we women in the West manage to produce despite our reckless, driving ways.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, for those of us in the West who take these rights and privileges for granted every single day of our lives to even begin to imagine the kinds of proscriptions that affect nearly every aspect of Saudi women's waking hours. But as members of humanity (or rather womanity), try we must to appreciate the revolutionary nature of what has just transpired in Saudi Arabia with the law licensing of these first four courageous women. This is a very big moment indeed. Perhaps even more so in light of the fact that Saudi guardianship law provides that a woman cannot marry, work or travel abroad without the consent of a male relative.

Without a doubt, what remains to be seen is how, as a practical matter, the new rules respecting the law licenses will be applied. It has been suggested that strong resistance from judges and clients may render the women's practice certificates useless. That would be akin to a Greek tragedy: to have worked that hard and come so far,

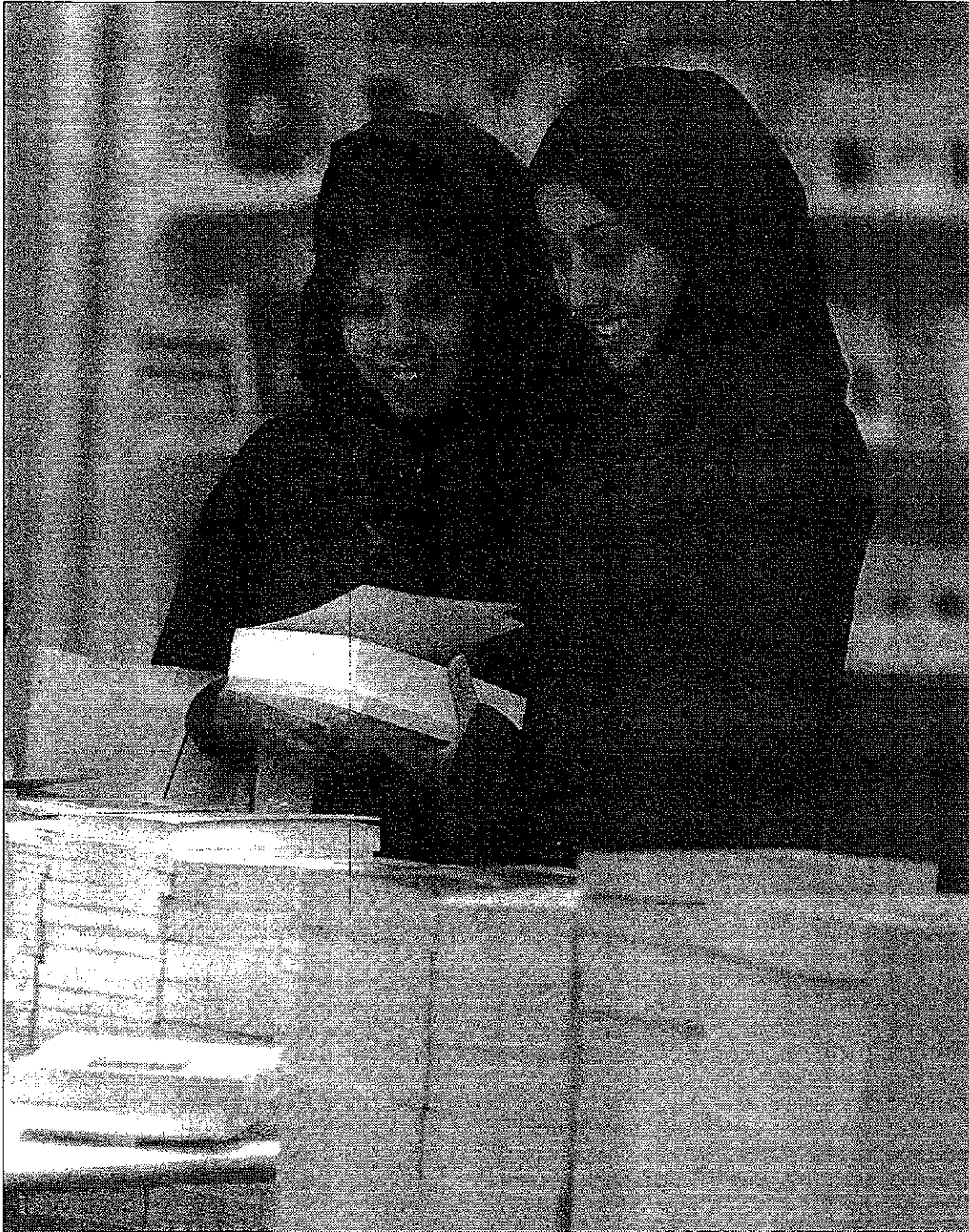
against all odds, and to be at the very precipice of your career, only to still be prevented from doing your job. And to know that the sole reason has nothing to do with your competence, your talent, your stamina, or your perseverance, but instead with the Las Vegas-style crap shoot of your completely random chromosomal inheritance.

To our Saudi sisters: I hope that one day very, very soon you too can experience what it means to drive a car (and pump gas, have a flat, go to the mechanic, and sit in traffic) and then get to the court house well in time to represent your clients, male and female, to the very best of your legal ability, in front of a judge and opposing counsel who will respect your talent, your intelligence, your grit, and your lawyering ways. Inshallah.

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In this March 3, 2009, file photo, Saudi women visit the 4th Riyadh International Book Fair in the Saudi capital Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.