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Women activists prepare to defy Saudi Arabian driving ban

Saudi Arabian authorities must stop treating women as second-class citizens and open the Kingdom's roads to women drivers, Amnesty International said today, as a group of Saudi Arabian women prepared to defy a decades-old ban on women driving.

An online campaign has called on women who hold international driving licences to start driving on Saudi Arabian roads on 17 June. The "Women2Drive" campaign has used Facebook and Twitter to encourage women to drive as part of their normal daily activities rather than converge in one place.

"Not allowing women behind the wheel in Saudi Arabia is an immense barrier to their freedom of movement, and severely limits their ability to carry out everyday activities as they see fit, such as going to work or the supermarket, or picking up their children from school," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Saudi Arabian authorities must not arrest licensed women drivers who choose to drive, and must grant them the same driving privileges as men.

"This is just one example of so many areas of life where women in Saudi Arabia have their human rights and their agency denied."

Saudi Arabian authorities have clamped down on recent attempts to defy the driving ban by women who hold international driving licences.

Authorities in the city of al-Khobar in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province last month arrested Manal al-Sharif, a 32-year-old computer security consultant, after she drove on more than one occasion and urged other women to drive in a video she posted to YouTube.

She was forced to sign a pledge that she would not drive again and was released after 10 days.

Since her arrest, several women have reportedly been arrested on various occasions for driving in different parts of Saudi Arabia and released shortly after signing pledges not to drive in future.

The Minister of Interior has formally banned women from driving in Saudi Arabia since 1990, when a group of women staged a driving protest to challenge a customary ban in place until then.

Women in Saudi Arabia face severe discrimination in both law and in practice. They are denied the right to vote, and must obtain the permission of a male guardian before they can travel, take paid work or enrol in higher education, or marry. Domestic violence against women is believed to be rife.

"In many significant areas of life, Saudi Arabian women face severe discrimination and must be allowed to peacefully challenge this status quo," said Philip Luther.