

She Drives Me Crazy

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I thought I was a teacher and freelance writer when I arrived in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) but the Ministry of Transportation had other plans for me. When they finally gave me a license to drive, they made me a housewife.

In the UAE, it's not only okay to categorize people by race and gender; it's mandatory to state their line of work on their drivers' licenses. If you're a woman on your husband's work visa, it won't matter what you do for a living, you are there because your husband brought you (hopefully willingly) and let's not get liberated about that.

I knew air traffic controllers, physicians, nurses, accountants, and lawyers, all of whom were licensed housewives. Of course I also knew of Russian ladies of the night who were hostesses according to their paperwork, but that is another column.

If you were under someone else's sponsorship, eight years of university were irrelevant to the government. But blood samples and almighty stamps on your licensing paperwork were not. The hoops that I had to jump through to get my license would make a show dog retire.

Despite what my license said, I got hired to teach

journalism at Abu Dhabi Women's College and one of my favorite activities was scouring the nation's paper, the *Gulf News*, for teaching material. Not long after I had exchanged my international driving permit for the UAE keeper, I came across an article to share with my students.

Special Report: Are Women Inept Behind the Wheel, had a lead worthy of much debate: "Men have long accused women of sending out mixed signals but



Photo Paul Linden

in Dubai, traffic police have come up with the statistics to prove it.”

According to the article, national women were obtaining drivers’ licenses in unprecedented numbers because they were working outside the home. Apparently the rise in UAE traffic violations had nothing to do with the male Emiratis’ need for speed and inherent above-the-law status, but could be directly attributed to the increased number of women on the road.

Then Deputy Director of the General Traffic Department, Colonel Mohammed Saif Al Zafeen, believed that advances in the automobile industry allowed women to learn to drive, given that physical strength was no longer needed to operate a vehicle.

Unfortunately, however, women’s “talkative” nature led them to distraction as they chatted on their mobile phones or touched up their makeup in their rearview mirrors. And let’s not forget that unfortunate hormonal influence.

According to the article, “When women are undergoing premenstrual syndrome, they are prone to lose their temper faster, drive more recklessly, and get into accidents.” Stomping around the house—maybe—but stomping on the gas?

When I shared this little treasure with my students, I expected outrage, but what I got was affirmation: Women and Road Rage, they go together. The ladies I taught ranged from 18-23 and they saw no problem with the, how shall we say it—hormonally unbalanced—slant of the article. At least we get to drive, they said.

And therein lies the greatest truth. Unlike their sisters in Saudi, prohibited from driving (heck, prohibited from walking alone), Emirati women have come a long way, baby. And as time passes and the doors of the once secretive, mysterious country swing wide open for tourists and reality TV, the gap between men and women, east and west, truth and fiction, narrows, and the distance that remains is rapidly traversed, especially in those Mercedes the women like to drive.

As for me, I liked to drive just about anything following my adventures in UAE cab taking. When I got my license, we bought a Nissan Pejaro, a functional little SUV that handled the slippery sand dunes as well as the furiously fast highway. It didn’t require a lot of muscle to maneuver, which was good for a petite woman like myself and it was an automatic, which came in handy, when with one hand on the wheel, I could cradle my mobile against my shoulder and call a girlfriend, leaving the other hand free to apply lip-gloss.

Colonel Al Zafeen—quoted as saying he preferred to see women driving in a more ladylike manner—would have approved.