

Afghan woman drives taxi, defies threats

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Taxi driver Sara Bahai (right) waits for customers in Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of northern Balkh province, Afghanistan, March 3, 2015. For Bahai, becoming Afghanistan's first and only woman taxi driver in living memory was a pragmatic step rather than a brave one. AP/Mustafa Najafizada

MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan — Sara Bahai is a brave woman: She is the only known female taxi driver in Afghanistan, a country where women are discouraged from working outside the home. Her unusual career choice was motivated less by ideals of equality than by the need to support a large family — and by her love of driving.

She still remembers her first time behind the wheel. It was shortly after the brutal and ultra-conservative Taliban government was driven from power by the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. "I felt like I was in the sky, and I totally fell in love with driving," she said.

"I Don't Care What They Think"

Bahai, who is about 40 years old, has spent much of her life defying taboos in Afghanistan, where women are widely regarded as inferior to men.

She never married, she said, because she had to support her parents and other family members and she feared a husband would prevent her from working. With no children of her own, she adopted two boys, now both in high school. When Taliban rebels shot and killed her brother-in-law, she took in her sister and seven nieces and nephews, so she now supports a dozen people.

To put food on the table, she drives around the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif in a spotlessly clean, yellow and white Toyota Corolla. Its woven seat covers are sparkly and a good-luck charm hangs in the front window.

"I receive threats from unknown callers who tell me to not drive in the city because I am a woman, because it is against Islam. Some tell me that if I continue to work as a taxi driver they will kill me," she said.

"Male passengers are very jealous and often abuse me, but I don't care what they think of me, I am not afraid — I will change the country with whatever ability I have to do so," she said.

Change Is In The Slow Lane

Bahai got her driver's license in 2002 and is also a mechanic. She earned a university degree in education and now teaches other women to drive so they can be more independent.

Attitudes about women have been slowly changing in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban. Equality between men and women is now written into the constitution. Local authorities have been slow to adopt change, however, and outside major cities deeply conservative traditions prevail.

Women who step out of their homes unaccompanied by male relatives often face verbal and sometimes physical harassment. Girls are still married off against their will, often to much older men, as payment for debts or as swaps for property.

At the same time, millions of girls are now attending school, and many graduate from universities. It is no longer unusual for women to travel abroad alone, or even to live alone in major Afghan cities.

Afghan First Lady Speaks Up

Rula Ghani, Afghanistan's first lady, has adopted a rare public profile since her husband, President Ashraf Ghani, took office in September. She is the first wife of an Afghan leader to routinely appear in public and has campaigned for women's issues.

In a speech to mark International Women's Day on Sunday, she said "women should be respected both inside and outside their homes and play an active role in society as doctors, engineers, soldiers, police officers."

She also called on the world to rethink the widely held view that Afghan women are victims.

Bahai would agree with that call. The pioneering taxi driver sees more and more young women attending school, graduating from college and living their own lives, as she has done.

"They are building the confidence to live independently — step by step everything is going to be all right," she says. "My message for Afghan women is to stand up for yourselves, set goals and achieve them, and help to make Afghanistan a happy place to live."