

Hailing Afghanistan's only woman taxi driver

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.12.15

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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. Photo: AP/Mustafa Najafizada

MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan — Sara Bahai is a brave woman: She is the only known female taxi driver in Afghanistan. In her country, women are discouraged from working outside the home, and sometimes threatened with violence if they do.

Bahai's unusual career choice was motivated by the need to support an extended family — and by her love of driving.

She still remembers her first time behind the wheel. "I felt like I was in the sky, and I totally fell in love with driving," she said.

"I Am Not Afraid"

In Afghanistan, women are still mostly regarded as inferior to men. Traditionally, they do not work outside the home and many people still believe they should not.

Bahai, who is about 40 years old, has been going against tradition for years. She has never married, because she had to support her parents and other family members, and feared a husband would prevent her from working.

With no children of her own she adopted two boys, now both in high school. After her brother-in-law was killed, 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.

Centuries-Old Customs Are Hard To Break

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, but beyond major cities, the old traditions prevail.

Many Afghans still feel strongly that women should not go out in public alone. Women who step out of their homes unaccompanied by male relatives often are harassed, verbally and sometimes physically. Girls are still married off against their will, often to much older men. Marriages are sometimes arranged to pay off debts or in exchange 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 to other countries alone, or even to live alone in major Afghan cities.

Building Confidence

Rula Ghani, Afghanistan's first lady, has been very active in public 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 pushed for women's issues.

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

Bahai believes things are slowly but surely getting better for Afghan women. She 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."

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3] LEAST summarizes the article as a whole?
- (A) She is the only known female taxi driver in Afghanistan.
 - (B) In her country, women are discouraged from working outside the home, and sometimes threatened with violence if they do.
 - (C) Bahai's unusual career choice was motivated by the need to support an extended family — and by her love of driving.
 - (D) "I felt like I was in the sky, and I totally fell in love with driving," she said.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the article that is the MOST important to include in a summary of the article.
- (A) She still remembers her first time behind the wheel. "I felt like I was in the sky, and I totally fell in love with driving," she said.
 - (B) 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.
 - (C) 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.
 - (D) Bahai believes things are slowly but surely getting better for Afghan women. She sees more and more young women attending school, graduating from college and living their own lives, as she has done.
- 3 Read this sentence from the article.

"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."

Which paragraph in the same section "I Am Not Afraid" explains an idea that might cause people to treat Bahai this way?

- 4 The article draws connections between all of the following EXCEPT:
- (A) Bahai's brother-in-law's death and her support of his children
 - (B) Millions of girls attending school and many graduating from universities
 - (C) Rula Ghani's support of women's issues and her public speech on International Women's Day
 - (D) Bahai's good luck charm and her belief that women should stand up for themselves

Answer Key

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- (A) She still remembers her first time behind the wheel. "I felt like I was in the sky, and I totally fell in love with driving," she said.
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Which paragraph in the same section "I Am Not Afraid" explains an idea that might cause people to treat Bahai this way?

Paragraph 3:
In Afghanistan, women are still mostly regarded as inferior to men. Traditionally, they do not work outside the home and many people still believe they should not.

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 - (D) **Bahai's good luck charm and her belief that women should stand up for themselves**