

Women In Driving Seat

Author: [Parween Tulwasa](#)

Kabul women say driving lessons are helping to give them a new lease of life.

Her Volkswagen is as old as she is, but 34-year-old Fouzia thinks she is the luckiest woman on earth.

Now that she's completed Afghanistan's new women's driving course, Fouzia can drive herself to work and take her children to school. And her husband doesn't object to this independence - although he won't ride with her.

"Even though my car is out of fashion, it's of great value to me because I can solve my problems myself," she said. "When I am driving my car I feel like I am a pilot of a jet - it's a dream come true."

The only problem is that her husband, who's never learned to drive, still takes the bus. "He will not get in my car when I am driving," Fouzia admitted. "He says that if his friends see him in the car with me while I am driving, they will say that he is impotent."

The Ministry of Women's Affairs recently launched the three-month course for women with the help of the German aid organization GTZ and Kabul's traffic police department. The first 30 women graduated this fall, and the second intake has just finished classroom lessons and begun their on-the-road training.

It isn't the first time that women in Afghanistan have taken to the roads. In the 1970s, they even drove buses in Kabul. But civil war and conservative regimes, particularly the Taliban, confined them to the home.

Mohammed Asif, one of the teachers on the course, said that the women need more practical training than men. "Women are more cowardly and are frightened during the driving," he said.

Though newly-trained traffic police attempt to regulate Kabul's busy streets, a heavy flow of taxis, bicycles and trucks weave in and out with little regard for standard signaling. Even experienced drivers find it hazardous.

Tahira, a recent graduate from the course, said she had once dreaded the idea of driving by herself since "during the Taliban era women not only couldn't drive, but didn't have the right to leave their homes." But after taking the course, she said she felt quite confident getting behind the wheel.

Sajida, a student driver, said she plans to buy a car and commute to work once she gets her license, so that she can get to the office on time and not have to depend on slow, crowded public transport. Being able to drive will enable women to become more self-reliant, she said.

Such independence for women is not always well-received by men. Women drivers are a rare sight - even in relatively progressive Kabul. They endure glares and shouts from men. Outside of the city, in conservative rural areas, driving is downright risky for women - most wouldn't even consider it, fearing that they'd be physically attacked.

Many of the driving students don't even tell their families that they're taking the course. Women can participate in secret because it is held inside the women affairs ministry during business hours, when they have an excuse for being away from home.

Khaatera said she signed up for the course out of curiosity. "My family did not agree, but I joined it anyway," she said. "I don't dare to drive outside the class, in public, but I took this course because it is a good opportunity for me to learn to drive." She hopes that perhaps she'll find a use for the skill someday.

Officials at the city's traffic department take a somewhat patronising view, saying that women need to be especially careful. Traffic officer Mirajuddin said, "We will try to be cooperative with women drivers, but they must be aware of all the traffic laws and drive carefully, as if they make a small mistake, they will injure themselves and other people."

Another driving student, Humairaa, agrees with the advice. "When we get our license and we begin driving, we should be very cool and patient," she said. "We might face distractions and bad reactions from men, but we shouldn't lose confidence. We should be ready to face anything."

Parween Tulwasa is an independent journalist in Kabul.

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