

SAUDI ARABIA: How cycling is keeping the fight for women's rights moving in Saudi Arabia

Baraah Luhaid is determined to cycle freely, and she is encouraging other women to join Spokes Hub, her gender-inclusive cycling community.

By Sophie Hemery

The Guardian (11.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2wVXBwz> – Saudi Arabia remains one of the world's most repressive countries for women, where a man's consent is obligatory for women to access human rights, and feminist activists risk arrest. Some changes are creeping in: King Salman has loosened the grip of male guardianship, and is encouraging women to work. But they are still not allowed to drive.

There are, however, women who refuse to be still. Twenty-five-year-old Baraah Luhaid has always loved cycling. But although women's cycling was legalised in 2013, it is only allowed in parks or on beaches, and only with a male guardian present. Luhaid is striving to get women – and the fight for women's rights – moving. She founded Saudi Arabia's first gender-inclusive cycling community and business, Spokes Hub, last year, and now runs the kingdom's only cycling shop, with a cafe and workshops, for women.

As a Saudi woman peddling counterculture, Luhaid has long known that she would have to embrace the spirit of "I'll do it myself". After graduation, she longed to work in a bike shop – but no one would hire a woman. So last year, she went on a cycling trip to China with her brother. She returned to Riyadh determined to ride freely, but met with roadblocks. For one, her abaya – a traditional long, black robe – kept getting caught in the chains of her bike.

“But that wasn’t the most challenging part,” she says. “It’s the cultural barriers.” People regularly roll down their windows and shout insults and she is routinely stopped by the police. “Last week I was stopped because someone complained I was causing offence,” she laughs.

“When I started cycling, my best friends said: ‘Baraah, if we see you, we’re gonna Snapchat you, and we’re gonna laugh – you’re a girl, you’re not supposed to do this’,” she says. And, apart from her sister and brother – “one of very few male Saudi feminists” –, her family have been cautious. “My parents have a different mentality, and were worried about how the more conservative family would react,” she says. Her dream is for all Saudi women to cycle freely, but she has had to tread carefully. “Originally, I was confronted with aggression and negativity,” she says. Some women feared she would lead their daughters astray. Lacking allies, she decided to lead by example, and soon found that people came to her.

Since opening a women’s cycling centre was untenable, both legally and socially, Spokes Hub originally catered exclusively for men and remains located at the university her brother attends. As such, Luhaid is barred from her own business. She has found workarounds to include women and girls – such as offering Spokes Hub services from the back of a van. She has even designed a cycling abaya with legs, which is about to be patented.

In order to attract support, Spokes Hub can not be described as being “for women”, and her brother often has to represent the business. “Investors chuckle when they hear ‘female CEO of a sports business’,” says Luhaid. But while having to dilute her feminism can be disheartening, Luhaid finds comfort and inspiration in those who came before her. She devours books like Sue Macy’s *Wheels of Change*, which charts the role that cycling has played in the women’s rights movement.

Spokes Hub has recently won a kingdom-wide prize for start-ups, and Princess Reema – deputy president of Saudi Arabia’s

Women's Sports Authority – has publicly endorsed the project.

“I’m standing against something bigger than I originally thought,” says Luhaid. “When I advocate for women’s cycling, I’m advocating for women’s independence. Changing core beliefs requires slow, consistent work,” she says. “It’s challenging, but someone has to start.”

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