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## Saudi Women Petition for Right to Drive

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Challenge Poses Risks in Sole Country Where Only Men May Take the Wheel

By Faiza Saleh Ambah  
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DHAHRAN, [Saudi Arabia](#), Sept. 23 -- For the first time since a demonstration in 1990, a group of Saudi women is campaigning for the right to drive in this conservative kingdom, the only country in the world that prohibits female drivers.

After spreading the idea through text messages and e-mails, the group's leaders said they collected more than 1,100 signatures online and at shopping malls for a petition sent to [King Abdullah](#) on Sunday.

"We don't expect an answer right away," said Wajeha al-Huwaider, 45, an education analyst who co-founded the group. "But we will not stop campaigning until we get the right to drive."

The kingdom follows one of the world's strictest interpretations of Islam. Women in [Saudi Arabia](#), a deeply patriarchal society, cannot travel, marry or rent lodging without permission from a male guardian.

Powerful clerics in Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest shrines, say that allowing women to drive would lead to Western-style freedoms and an erosion of traditional values.

The driving ban applies to all women, Saudi and foreign.

Public transportation is limited, and though taxis are common in major cities, women tend not to use them because riding with male strangers is deemed unsafe.

Some women can afford to hire live-in drivers; others rely on male relatives to drive them.

Though live-in chauffeurs are all male, they are not viewed as a threat because they are foreigners, often from [the Philippines](#) or the Indian subcontinent, and are considered unlikely to develop relationships with the women.

Many women reject this argument. "Women and their children are at the mercy of sexual harassment by these foreign drivers, and we know many incidents of this happening," said Fouzia al-Ayouni, a retired school administrator. "It is much safer, and more appropriate, for women to chauffeur themselves and their children around."

When she was first married, Ayouni recalled, her baby became ill one night. Her husband, a democracy advocate, was in jail, so she went out into the street at 2 a.m., holding the sick child and trying to find a ride to the hospital. She finally reached a brother-in-law, who drove her to the emergency room.

The last time Saudi women lobbied for the right to drive was in 1990 during the Iraqi invasion of [Kuwait](#). Forty-seven women were briefly detained for driving in a convoy of 15 cars in the capital, [Riyadh](#). The women were banned from traveling, lost their jobs and were ostracized by their families and acquaintances.

Though no laws explicitly ban people from gathering signatures or circulating petitions, independent political or social activity is frowned upon in Saudi Arabia, and rights activists are routinely imprisoned.

Ayouni, a 48-year-old mother of three, counted the possible consequences of agitating for change. "We could be detained, we could lose our jobs, and we could be banned from traveling," she said. "But if we get the right to drive, it would be worth it."

The petition has received more attention overseas than in Saudi Arabia, where the news media are government-controlled and the issue was taboo until several years ago.

But Saudi Arabia has slowly become more open since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Ayouni said. The shock of Saudis being largely involved in the attacks forced the country to reevaluate its ultraconservative lifestyle, and many subjects that had been off-limits are now discussed more openly in the media.

"The Internet and satellite television have also brought new ideas," said Ayouni, whose 16-year-old daughter also signed the petition.

Letters to al-Watan newspaper on Saturday responding to an article about the petition were almost equally divided for and against.

"Allowing women to drive will only bring sin. The evils it would bring, mixing between the genders, temptations, and tarnishing the reputation of devout Muslim women, outweigh the benefits," wrote one man.

Others expressed admiration for what one called the group's "daring and courage" in tackling the issue.

Huwaider, the group's co-founder, is no stranger to controversy. During last year's war in [Lebanon](#), she stood on the bridge between [Bahrain](#) and Saudi Arabia, holding a placard addressed to King Abdullah. "Give Saudi Women Their Rights," it said.

She was detained and interrogated, and had to sign a petition pledging not to demonstrate again. But the most humiliating part, she said, was waiting at the police station until her male guardian, her brother, could arrive to pick her up.

"The whole Arab world was inflamed at what was happening in Lebanon," she said. "And I wanted to say: Yes, that's bad, but why don't you look closer to home and see how bad our lives are here?"

At a meeting at Huwaider's house last week, the women in the group, the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia, went over their campaign. Ayouni, in black pants and a long black-and-gold top, paced back and forth in platform sandals as she spoke on her cellphone with a [BBC](#) reporter calling from the [United Arab Emirates](#).

"It's not a luxury, it's a necessity," she said. "Many women support their entire families and can't afford paying half their salary to a driver."

Ayouni said her group had at least "broken a barrier of fear that Saudi women had of asking for their rights."

"That has been our major achievement. And we want the authorities to know that we're here, that we want to drive, and that many people feel the way we do," she said.

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