

Two years, Two percent: Why are Saudi women still not driving?

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83% of surveyed women indicated that the cost of car ownership was a major obstacle for them

62% of surveyed women indicated that driver's license costs were a major obstacle for them¹

25% of surveyed women indicated that road safety was a major obstacle for them

21% of surveyed women indicated that risk of harassment was a major obstacle for them

9% of surveyed women indicated that societal views were a major obstacle for them

6% of surveyed women indicated that family constraints were a major obstacle for them

Offering financial and logistical support to get driver license training increased the rate of licenses from **2% to 49%**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2018, Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on women driving. Two years later only 2% of women in Saudi Arabia had been issued a driving license. In a research collaboration between Alnahda Society, Duke University and Uber, our team conducted a study with low-income Saudi women interested in receiving a driving license. This study was initiated under the research engagement between Harvard's Kennedy School's Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development in Saudi Arabia. We surveyed them and, in collaboration with Uber, carried out a Randomized Controlled Trial offering some women financial and logistical assistance in getting a driving license. The results in this brief identify several factors affecting women's ability to drive. Constrained car ownership and the financial cost of obtaining a driving license were identified as key obstacles towards women driving, followed by road safety concerns. Family and societal normative constraints remain a major concern for a small fraction (6% and 9%, respectively) of our study sample.

Based on our findings, we believe that the following policy measures could help to reduce barriers in the acquisition of a license:

- Reduce the cost of driving training or offer financial assistance to low-income women
- Make it easier for women to get to and from driving training schools by opening more schools and offering group transport to get there
- Implement gender-sensitive road safety interventions and public awareness campaigns

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief discusses the potential reasons driving the low female uptake of driving. In June 2018, the ban on women driving was lifted by the Saudi government. This change would allow easier accessibility for women into the workforce and further the agenda of Vision 2030ⁱ, which has a broad aim of diversifying the economy — including increasing women's participation in the workforce to 30% by 2030. However, the take-up rate has

¹ This statistic comes from a 2018 survey conducted on a subsample of our study participants.



been partial. Until January 2020 – the date of the most recent official statistic – only 2% of Saudi women in Saudi Arabia had been issued a driving license (totaling 148,081 licenses).ⁱⁱ Given the importance of mobility for female participation in the workforce, it is important to understand the reasons behind the low percentage of women with a driving license in the country.

Through a research collaboration between Duke University and Alnahda Research Program, our research team has identified several factors affecting women's decisions in obtaining their licenses. This has been part of a larger effort to study the effect of driving on women's agency and empowerment including their social, economic, and civic engagement, as well as their aspirations for the future and attitudes and beliefs towards gender equality. This study was initiated under the research engagement between Harvard's Kennedy School's Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development in Saudi Arabia.

STUDY DESIGN

Our study is based in Riyadh, with a sample of six hundred low-income Saudi women who were recruited through NGO beneficiary networks, namely Alnahda Society, Mawadda, and Insan.

Women interested in receiving a license were randomized into two groups. The first group of women were offered driving training, transportation to and from the driving school, and up to two driving tests at no cost to them. The costs of this intervention were funded through a grant offered to Alnahda Society by Uber's Masaruki Initiative. A randomly selected control group did not receive assistance.

Both groups of women were surveyed on their mobility and economic engagement between May 2018 and 2019. At the time, the women who were surveyed did not have a license and could not drive legally. Their ages ranged from 16 to 78 years old, and they lived in households with an average income of SAR 2,500 (USD 800), 84% lower than the average in Riyadh region for Saudi households.ⁱⁱⁱ Most of them were unmarried (Figure 1) and had some level of high school education (Figure 2).

As part of our baseline survey, women were asked about their concerns towards driving. Through that, our research team has identified several factors affecting women's decisions in obtaining their licenses.

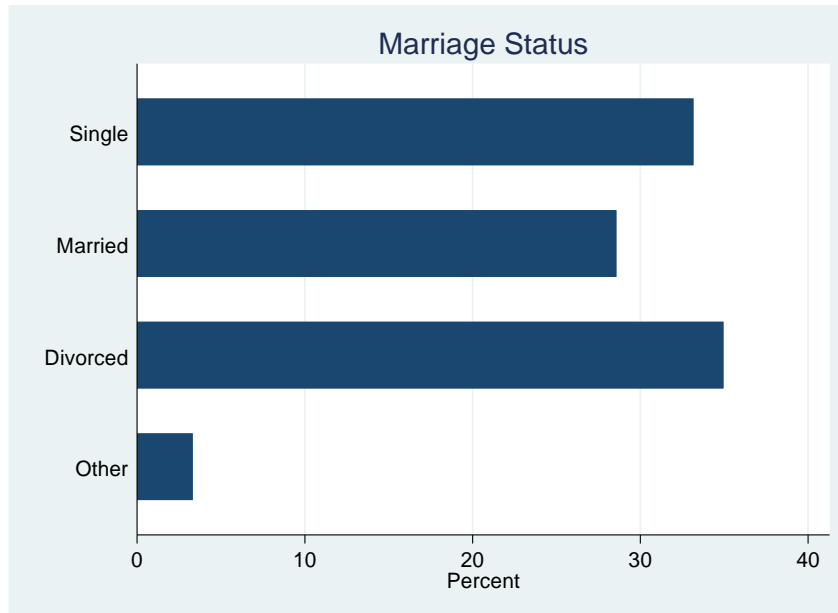


Figure 1. Source: Baseline and First Follow-up Surveys, 2018 and 2020
Marital status of women in sample²

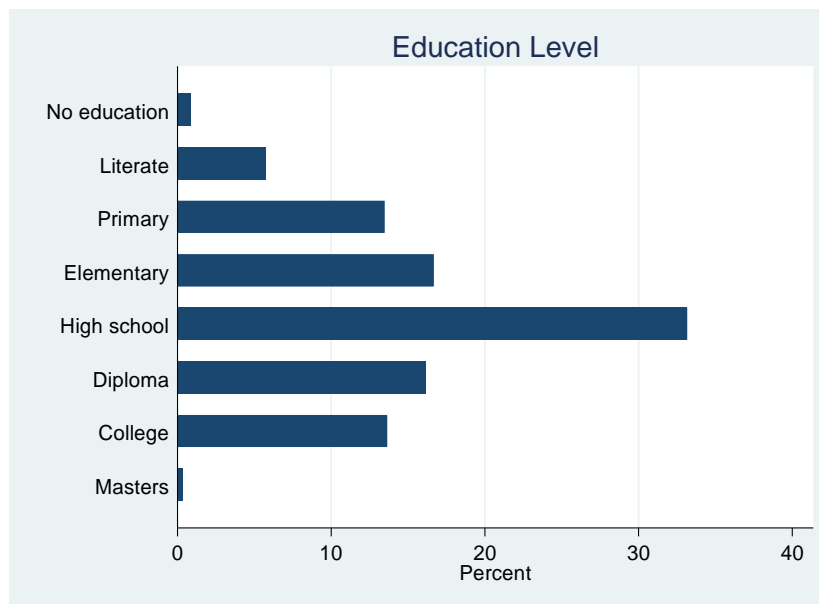


Figure 2. Source: Baseline and First Follow-up Surveys, 2018 and 2020
Highest level of schooling reached by women in sample

² 'Other' category includes women who are: widowed, abandoned, and family of a prisoner.

MOST WOMEN STILL DON'T HAVE LICENSES, WHY?

Financial Barriers

Our data suggest that financial barriers are a main factor behind the low percentage of women in our sample obtaining their licenses: An earlier survey of a study subsample in 2018 showed that 62% of women considered the high cost of driving training and issuing a driving license to be a major obstacle. Women are required to go through up to 30 hours of official training, which must be taken through a licensed training center. The cost of these driving lessons is higher for women compared to men. For women, driving lessons can cost up to SAR 3,000^{iv} (US \$800), which is equivalent to almost 50% of the average monthly salary for women in Saudi. ^v Men pay one-sixth of this cost, SAR 450 (US \$120), which corresponds to approximately 7% of their average monthly salary – an evident disparity in relative cost.^{iv} For women in our sample, the cost of the training represents more than what their entire household earns in a month.

Six months after the training, approximately 49% of women who were invited to receive free driving training received their licenses, compared to just 2% of women in the control group, who sought training on their own – which is comparable to the national average. Offering free driving training increased the probability of obtaining a license significantly (Figure 3). The group that received the free driving training not only received financial benefits, but also help in the coordination of all the steps required for obtaining a license as well as encouragement and follow up from Alnahda Society — which may also contribute to these effects.

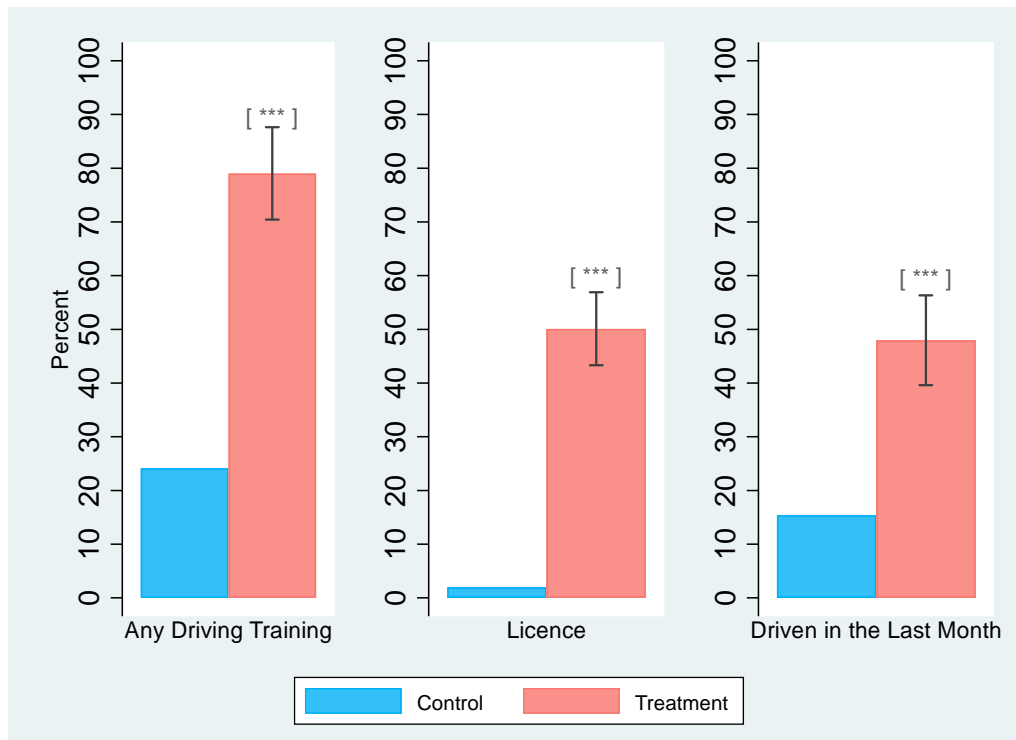


Figure 3. Assistance with getting the license dramatically increased women's probability of starting to drive. Source: First Follow-up Survey, 2020

Car Ownership

In addition to the driving license training costs, 83% of our sample indicated that the cost of acquiring a car was a major obstacle for them. An earlier analysis^{vi} conducted by the research team estimates the cost of investing in a car is SAR 1,139 per month for five years with an additional SAR 250 per month thereafter (for fuel and maintenance). When compared to other modes of transportation available in the city of Riyadh, including private drivers, taxis, e-hailing, and carpooling, investing in a car would be the cheapest option in the long term, since public transit is not yet provided. Nevertheless, the issues are affording the upfront cost of a car. While car ownership may be a first order obstacle to driving, having to negotiate its use among family members follows as another major barrier for women. 57% of our sample report having a shared car in the household as being a major obstacle.

Safety and Harassment Concerns

Safety concerns might also be a reason behind the low percentage of women with driving licenses. Approximately 25% of our sample indicated that risk of car accidents was a major obstacle for them. This percentage likely reflects under confidence in their ability to drive safely - road traffic accidents are one of the leading^{vii} causes of deaths in Saudi Arabia. It also reflects a concern about exposure to unknown men in the case of an accident; 21% of respondents mentioned that risk of harassment was a major obstacle. Improving safety on the road for female drivers is a necessary step in this ongoing effort.

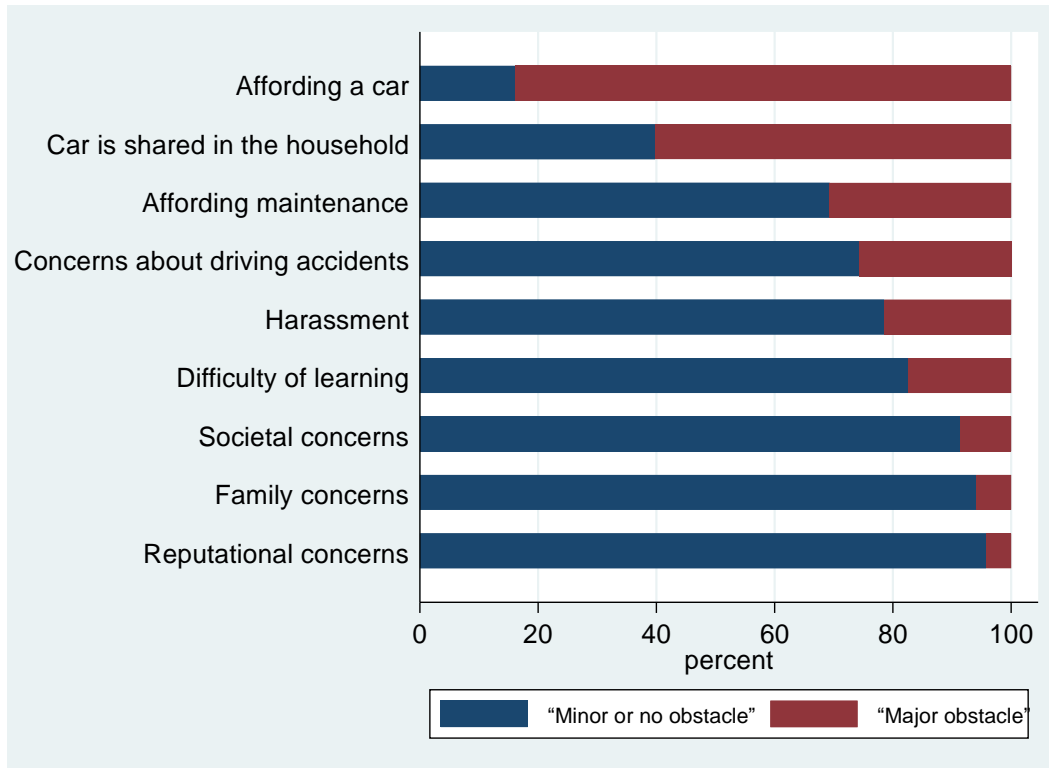


Figure 4. Source: Baseline and First Follow-up Surveys, 2018 and 2020
Obstacles to driving faced by women in the study sample.

CONCLUSION

Based on these findings, it seems that financial barriers are a key obstacle for low-income women to obtain their license in Saudi Arabia, and likely explain a part of the low uptake nationwide. As we have stated above, women were more likely to receive their licenses when offered free driving training. Thus, policy efforts should be focused on making the acquisition of a license easier by reducing the cost or offering financial assistance for driving training to low-income women. Additionally, reducing the cost of transportation to and from driving centers by funding transportation to and from the driving centers, facilitating group transport, and increasing the number and coverage of training centers nationwide would help reduce the overall cost of acquiring a license and potentially encourage more women to get one.

Finally, tackling women's concerns about road safety issues might decrease women's concerns towards driving. General road safety public awareness campaigns combined with improved road law enforcement may help in reducing road accidents^{viii}; however, any increase in enforcement should be implemented with care to ensure that it does not inadvertently lead to intimidating new women drivers and discouraging them from taking the wheel. Additional policies should address women's specific concerns about harassment or exposure in case of emergency on the road. As of 2019, the Kingdom has appointed^{ix} women traffic police officers; public awareness campaigns could spread

awareness about female officers and help women understand how to reach them in case of emergency. Road safety public awareness campaign could also include evidence of women who have driven safely, and this could potentially encourage more women to feel more empowered behind the wheel.

Next Steps

Using the randomized controlled trial as an exogenous variation in whether women have realized and exercised the right to drive, we plan to test whether driving changes women's and their families' attitudes, and women's social, economic and civic engagement.

ⁱ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017. Vision 2030. Riyadh.

ⁱⁱ General Authority for Statistics, 2018. Population Estimates.
General Authority for Statistics, 2020. Saudi Women Report.

ⁱⁱⁱ General Authority for Statistics, 2018. Household income and expenditure survey.

^{iv} Saudi Gazette. 2018. Women driving lessons cost 6 times more than for men. [online] Available at: <<https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/533463>> [Accessed 4 March 2021].

^v General Authority for Statistics, 2020. Labor market statistics Q3 2020.

^{vi} Field, E., Vyborny, K., Qiu, W., Abou Daher, C., Al Sudairy, J., Ali, N. and Ismail, G., n.d. Allowing Women to Drive in Saudi Arabia May Reduce Cost of Travel Case Study: Riyadh. [PDF] Boston: EPoDHarvard, p.3. Available at: <https://www.alnahda.org/files/research_programs/4.pdf>.

^{vii} Ansary, L., Esmail, S. and Adi, Y., 2021. Causes of death certification of adults: an exploratory cross-sectional study at a university hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. [online] US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health. Available at: <[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6081104/#:~:text=The%20WHO%20mortality%20country%20fact,and%20diabetes%20mellitus%20\(5%25\).](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6081104/#:~:text=The%20WHO%20mortality%20country%20fact,and%20diabetes%20mellitus%20(5%25).>)> [Accessed 4 March 2021].

^{viii} Phillips, R., Ulleberg, P. and Vaa, T., 2011. Meta-analysis of the effect of road safety campaigns on accidents. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 43(3), pp.1204-1218.

^{ix} Saudi Gazette. 2019. Female traffic cops to act as road safety observers. [online] Available at: <<https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/582364/SAUDI-ARABIA/Female-traffic-cops-to-act-as-road-safety-observers>> [Accessed 4 March 2021].