

The Road Ahead

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Writing Sample.

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Should Subaru support Saudi Arabian women in their campaign for the right to drive? Their Western sisters are crying out “Yes!” – but we should beware the danger of unintended consequences.

What is the gutsiest thing you have done behind the wheel of a car? Try to outrace a traffic cop? Clumsily attempt to rewind the odometer on dad’s Corvette after sneaking out for the night? Strap on a helmet and hit the test track in a supercharged Camaro?

Imagine if the very act of sliding into that driver’s seat constituted a crime in itself. Would you have the guts to drive a car as an act of civil disobedience? A small but defiant number of women have been doing just that in Saudi Arabia, the only country on Earth in which neither foreign women nor female citizens may drive.

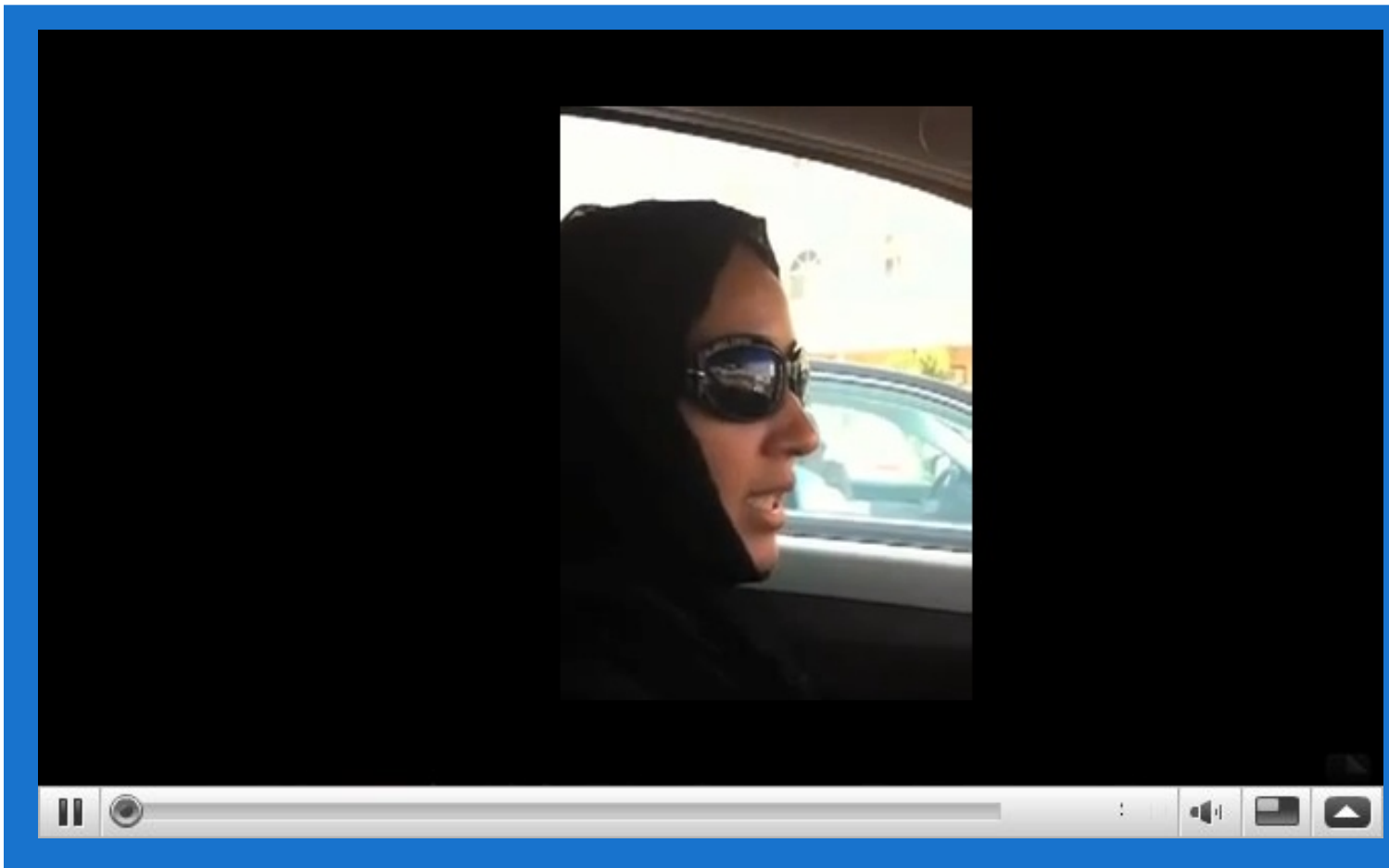
Reports indicate that official response is uneven, with some women facing arrest and jail time, while others get off with forced written pledges not to drive again, or (increasingly) just warnings.

It was the May arrest and 10-day detention of a young woman named Manal al-Sharif, in fact, that put the grassroots movement into high gear. The computer-security specialist and mother of a young son had dared to [drive her car on the streets of Khobar and post a YouTube video about it](#).

Although the story of the initial 17 June protests flit briefly across international news sites, it was quickly supplanted here at home by more pressing economic concerns. Still, what was an internal movement in Saudi Arabia has become – thanks to the immediacy of online interaction – an increasingly popular cause here in the West.

A petition on the social activist website Change.org calling for Subaru to [stop selling cars](#) where women can’t drive generated thousands of signatures a day at one point after its early-summer launch, hitting 75,000 names on 25 July.

The decision to target Subaru was a smart one. The progressive Japanese automaker aggressively markets to female car buyers with substantial sponsorship of women’s events, from the glamorous (surf festivals) to the serious (the Geological Society of America’s Outstanding Woman in Science Award).



Above: YouTube video of Manal al-Sharif driving in Saudi Arabia, with English subtitles. **Right:** Her 10-day detention sparked international calls for her release, and an end to the ban on women drivers.

Fashion yourself as a pro-woman company while selling to a market in which almost 13 million women are forbidden from using your product, and you should not be surprised at becoming a lightning rod for discontent.

New petitions related to the Saudi movement have sprung up in recent weeks, among them calls for the likes of Oprah and Angelina Jolie to join the [“Honk for Saudi Women Drivers” video campaign](#).

In late July, a bipartisan all-women group of senators jumped on the bandwagon, announcing their intent to send a letter to Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah urging him to end the ban on women driving. (Republicans Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine joined California’s Barbara Boxer and her Democratic colleagues in signing the letter.)

Digital signatures to the Subaru petition continue to climb at a steady albeit slower pace (83,000 as of this

writing). Yet as they do, the conversation is broadening. Turns out the issue is not as black and white as we in the West might think.

How easy it is for us to sit, heads bare, in coffee shops and offices where men and women mingle equally and summon up a shocked “No way!” reaction to the idea of someone taking away our right to drive. The issue is a political one (a human rights one, according to the activists) that understandably has a strong emotional component for all of us. The freedom to drive is one of the most obvious manifestations of the freedom of movement we enjoy here in the West, and especially in the United States. To most Americans – and especially readers of this magazine – freedom of movement is essential to how we choose to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

And how easy, too, it is to click the “Sign” button on a virtual petition and move on... on to the next e-mail, the next Facebook post, the next cause. All without learning more about the subtler aspects of the issue at hand – or the unintended consequences were a given petition to succeed.

Neither Subaru nor any other automaker the activists may target (GM has been mentioned) operate in a vacuum. If their presence serves as a quiet force for good – offering equal pay for the segregated male



and female employees, for example – that force is then removed.

If they provide needed jobs, those jobs would go away. If you were a Saudi woman and your job – or that of your husband or daughter or son – was to disappear thanks to activists abroad, how pleased would you be

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with the folks out there who say they are “helping” you?

Even more serious though is the possibility, however slight, that anti-reform clerics decide the women-driving movement is the final straw in a country becoming too Westernized. A religious backlash could leave Saudi women worrying about much more than cars.

Unintentional consequences can

be swift and unexpected, shockingly so when motivated by the best of reasons. Consider the case of the Southern employer being castigated in the early Sixties for the disparity between the number of blacks he employed and the percentage of blacks in the local population. Turns out he was employing *more* blacks than their ratio among city residents – so the “extras” were fired.

The risk of religious backlash is one the Saudi protestors themselves are clearly willing to accept. Is it one the rest of us should force on them? Where is the line between officious interference and welcome expressions of sisterhood and solidarity?

It is certainly much more difficult to discern that line when one group of women is free to drive, ski, bike, work, vote, and dress as they wish – and the other is not.

As one Saudi posted, after writing in passionate and polite terms that we Western women should, in essence, butt out, “This is between us and our men.”

Then again, even the most momentous changes in a society can be started with the simple act of sitting down – whether behind the wheel of a car or in the front seat of a bus. **AT**

Drive Smarter

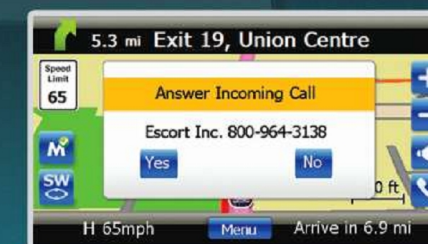
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