

# Mexico City considers plan for female taxi line

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MEXICO CITY --

Alejandra Olvera said she's been a taxi victim twice.

Fifteen years ago, she said, she was a passenger when a taxi driver pulled into a dark industrial district and tried to grope her before she pushed him away and escaped.

Now, as one of a handful of female taxi drivers in this sprawling megalopolis of 23 million, Olvera recently pulled over for a male passenger. He gruffly waved her on, telling her no female would drive him.

"It made me laugh," Olvera said. "Mexico is such a macho country."

Olvera isn't Mexico City's first female taxi driver, but her stories help explain why some Mexico City lawmakers are proposing a new all-women taxi service. Their belief: Women are safer with drivers and passengers of the same sex.

The capital's government estimated that at least 400 women last year were assaulted in taxis. But that number is unreliable because many women don't report assaults, let alone offensive ogling or flagrant flirtation.

It's not the first time that Mexico City has made moves to safeguard women: Certain platforms and cars in Mexico City's subway system are reserved for women and children and have been for decades. And Mexico City isn't the first city with such a service: A private venture in London known as Ladies Taxi offers gender-exclusive rides.

But the proposed municipal intervention underscores the concern about taxi safety in a capital city where rising crime has prompted official warnings for people to steer clear of taxis cruising the streets for passengers.

Amid high-profile liberal changes such as the approval of gay civil unions and first-trimester abortions, lawmakers hail the all-women taxi service as a small, if important, step in empowering women in Mexico's traditionally male culture. There are only about 70 or so registered female taxi drivers in Mexico City, a droplet in a sea of 104,000 registered taxi drivers.

Under the proposal by Mexico City assemblyman Humberto Morgan, female drivers would form a loose government-sponsored collective organization that would operate primarily in business corridors with high concentrations of female workers. The drivers would undergo criminal background checks, and their cars would be equipped with radios to connect them directly to police dispatchers.

And instead of the old green-and-white Volkswagen Beetle or the newer red-and-white sedans, each ladies' taxi would be painted pink.

"We need to change the perspectives of transportation here. We need better quality drivers, and, most of all, we need security," said Morgan, a member of the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution.

The bill has been presented to city assembly committees, and Morgan expects the full assembly will approve it sometime this summer.

Taxi safety is a perennial concern in the world's second-largest metropolis, where roughly half the 8.6 million residents are female.

Faced with the specter of kidnappers or robbers, tourists and residents are warned against hailing taxis from the street. Many instead call reputable companies to be picked up or catch cabs at official street sites.

"Taking a taxi is dangerous for women who travel by themselves," said Carmen Peralta, a Green Party city assembly member who added that she rarely takes taxis. "For us to get into a taxi with an unknown man is dangerous."

Elizabeth Rosas, 19, who said a driver once diverted her to an unknown neighborhood before she realized it and told him to stop, said she'd use the service.

Perla Anaya, 29, a clothing store manager who said she's accustomed to inappropriate comments from men, wasn't so sure. "Women don't know how to drive," she said.

There are questions from drivers, too. Some worry that the pink color will make them easier targets for assailants. Others want to know if they'll be allowed to pick up men. Olvera said she thinks it's unlikely that any Mexican man will want to ride in a pink taxi.

Olvera and her friend Luz Maria Ortega are the only female taxi drivers in the hilly Mexico City suburb of Magdalena Contreras.

Ortega worked for 16 years at an auto parts factory before she was laid off two years ago. At a high school reunion, she ran into Olvera, who'd become a taxi driver after she was laid off as an accountant. Olvera didn't have to work very hard to persuade Ortega to begin to drive.

"My father drove a small bus, and driving always reminded me of him," said Ortega, whose brother and nephew are also cabbies.

Both own their own private taxis: Ortega's is a cream 2007 Volkswagen, Olvera's a 2005 Volkswagen Derby. Both keep their hair short, so as not to attract too much attention.

Female clients, they say, often take down their phone numbers for future rides.

"They see I'm a woman and they feel more comfortable," Olvera said.