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Saudi Arabia Debates Women's Right to Drive

By [HASSAN M. FATTAH](#)

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates Sept. 27 — In a recent episode of [Saudi Arabia's](#) most popular television show airing during Ramadan this month, a Saudi man of the future is seen sitting in his house as his daughter pulls into the driveway, her kids piled into the back of the car.

"Where have you been?" the father asks.

"The kids were bored, so I took them to the movies," she replies, matter-of-factly, as she gets out of the driver's seat.

In Saudi Arabia, where women are forbidden from driving — and, by the way, where there are no movie theaters, either — the skit portends something of a revolution. From a taboo about which there could be no open discussion, a woman's right to drive is developing into a topic of growing and lively debate in Saudi Arabia.

Coming on top of other recent changes — women may now travel abroad without male accompaniment (though they still require male permission), earn graduate degrees in law and engineering, seek divorce and own their own companies — the driving discussion is noteworthy. Whether it signals that women will actually be driving soon or merely talking about it openly remains to be seen.

"We are telling everyone this is coming, whether today or tomorrow," said Abdallah Samhan, the producer, writer and host of "Tash Ma Tash," a variety comedy show that airs during the month of Ramadan and tackles controversial social issues in Saudi Arabia. Women have been seen driving in other episodes of the show as well, sending what Mr. Samhan says is a deliberate message.

"A woman cannot be separated from the society and women will be driving, whether it's now or 50 years from now," he said. "And there will be a time we will accept it, so now is the time to get prepared for that."

In another popular Saudi show, "Amsha Bint Amash," a woman who loses her father and is forced to move to the city masquerades as a man to get work as a taxi driver.

There is more. Saudi newspapers have begun writing about the implications and acceptability of women driving. The Saudi Human Rights Council, a government-backed advocacy organization, has begun researching the potential effects of women driving on families and Saudi society.

And most recently, a group of Saudi women have led an ambitious petition drive asking the king to repeal the ban, placing the issue at the heart of a discussion about modernity and Saudi Arabia's place in the world. And unlike the last such petition in 1990, the government seems mildly receptive rather than hostile.

"You get the feeling that they are preparing the population for this issue," said Wajeha al-Huweidar, 45, one of the organizers. "It is just like the decision to allow women education. They resisted it, but now it's a reality."

On Sunday, Ms. Huweidar and some 1,100 other women sent the petition to King Abdullah, demanding that women be given the right to drive, citing the lack of any religious reasoning against it.

Some Saudi officials and clerics agree with the women that Islam does not forbid women from driving. In the past, Saudi women were able to move freely on camel and horseback, and Bedouin women in the desert openly drive pickup trucks far from the public eye. Two years ago, Ahmed al Zulfa, a member of the shura consultative council, suggested that the council consider allowing women to drive, causing an uproar.

Clerics and religious conservatives maintain that allowing women to drive would open Saudi society to untold corruption. Women alone in cars, they say, would be more open to abuse, would become wayward, and would get into big trouble if stopped by police or involved in an accident. The net result would be an erosion of social mores.

“Our parents had the right of movement; our grandparents had it too,” Ms. Huweidar said, speaking by telephone from Dammam. “But we ladies of the cities lost the old ways and got nothing in their place.”

In 1990, a group of prominent Saudi women, taking advantage of the presence of Western reporters and camera crews in the country to cover the buildup to the first Gulf War, defied the ban by driving cars down a boulevard in Riyadh. Several of the women were jailed briefly; many lost high positions in schools and universities, and some left the country for a while afterward.

This time, however, the women are being given wide latitude to make their case, Mrs. Huweidar said. She said she thought the different reaction stemmed from the fact that the women are arguing against the ban now on pragmatic social and economic grounds, not purely as a matter of women's rights.

Saudi women have been entering the workforce in droves in recent years because of the rising cost of living in the country. That, in turn has given them newfound economic clout in the family, and provided them with greater leverage.

“I really believe most people support women driving, because they now realize that it affects the economy,” said Ebtihal Mubarak, another organizer of the petition drive. Ms. Mubarak, an editor at the English-language daily Arab News, says the cost of employing a driver has begun to impinge on Saudi families.

“Most middle class people can't afford drivers anymore,” she said. “A woman who gets a salary of 2,000 riyals (about \$550) now finds herself having to give 1000 to the driver to get her back and forth.”

Some Saudis hope that the driving debate will also open the door a small crack to discussion of other restrictive practices, including requiring women to dine in

segregated women-only sections of restaurants and work in segregated areas of offices. Women are also paid less than men for similar work.

Saudi women say that the impetus for change comes partly from seeing and reading about the freedom of women abroad on satellite TV and the Internet. They also feel they have become more sophisticated in dealing with the Saudi system.

“Those women in 1990 were taking advantage of the politics at the time, but this is more organized, and is a real campaign,” said Khaled Dakhil, professor of political sociology at King Saud University in Riyadh. “They have been on the net, sending out e-mails — those who are running the show are the women themselves.”

“As long as this issue is opened, big things will follow,” Ms. Huweidar said. “It means you have allowed half the population of the country to move around as they please. And the conservatives know that will change society dramatically, which is why they are so opposed to it.”

Still, few Saudis seem to expect change to come soon. Ms. Huweidar said her group had not yet received any reply from the palace to the petition.

Women's advocates like Ms. Sharif say that in any case, there will need to be lots of preparation and public education, both for women and for men, before the ban can be lifted.

“Fifty years ago, we rejected the mail, and then we advanced,” said Mr. Samhan, the TV presenter. “We refused radio, only to accept it, and then rejected TV, only to accept that, too. We will accept women driving someday all the same, and the environment has to be prepared for it.”

Rasheed Abou Elsamh contributed reporting from Jidda, Saudi Arabia.

