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Saudi Women Find an Unlikely Role Model: Oprah

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

DAMMAM, [Saudi Arabia](#)—Once a month, Nayla says, she writes a letter to [Oprah Winfrey](#).

A young Saudi homemaker who covers her face in public might not seem to have much in common with an American talk show host whose image is known to millions. Like many women in this conservative desert kingdom, Nayla does not usually socialize with people outside her extended family, and she never leaves her house unless chaperoned by her husband.

Ms. Winfrey has not answered the letters. But Nayla says she is still hoping.

“I feel that Oprah truly understands me,” said Nayla, who, like many of the women interviewed, would not let her full name be used. “She gives me energy and hope for my life. Sometimes I think that she is the only person in the world who knows how I feel.”

Nayla is not the only Saudi woman to feel a special connection to the American media mogul. When “The Oprah Winfrey Show” was first broadcast in Saudi Arabia in November 2004 on a Dubai-based satellite channel, it became an immediate sensation among young Saudi women. Within months, it had become the highest-rated English-language program among women 25 and younger, an age group that makes up about a third of Saudi Arabia’s population.

In a country where the sexes are rigorously separated, where topics like sex and race are rarely discussed openly and where a strict code of public morality is enforced by religious police called *hai’a*, Ms. Winfrey provides many young Saudi women with new ways of thinking about the way local taboos affect their lives — as well as about a variety of issues including childhood sexual abuse and coping with marital strife — without striking them, or Saudi Arabia’s ruling authorities, as subversive.

Some women here say Ms. Winfrey’s assurances to her viewers — that no matter how restricted or even abusive their circumstances may be, they can take control in small ways and create lives of value — help them find meaning in their cramped, veiled existence.

“Oprah dresses conservatively,” explained Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud, a co-owner of a women’s spa in Riyadh called Yibreen and a daughter of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States. “She struggles with her weight. She overcame depression. She rose from poverty and from abuse. On all these levels she appeals to a Saudi woman. People really idolize her here.”

Today, “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” with Arabic subtitles, is broadcast twice each weekday on

MBC4, a three-year-old channel developed by the MBC Group with the Arab woman in mind. The show's guests, self-improvement tips, and advice on family relationships — as well as Ms. Winfrey's clothes and changing hairstyles — are eagerly analyzed by Saudi women from a wide range of social backgrounds and income levels.

The largest-circulation Saudi women's magazine, *Sayidaty*, devotes a regular page to Ms. Winfrey, and dog-eared copies of her official magazine, *O*, which is not sold in the kingdom, are passed around by women who collect them during trips abroad.

The particulars of Ms. Winfrey's personal story have resonated with a broad audience of Saudi women in a way that few other Western imports have, explained Mazen Hayek, a spokesman for the MBC Group.

Saudi Arabia was an impoverished desert country before it was transformed by oil money and, in just a couple of generations, into a wealthy consumer society. Saudi women readily identify with "this glamorous woman from very modest beginnings," Mr. Hayek said, in a phone interview from Dubai.

Maha al-Faleh, 23, of Riyadh, said, "Oprah talks about issues that haven't really been spoken about here openly before.

"She talks about racism, for example," she said. "This is something that Saudis are very concerned about, because many of us feel that we're judged for the way we veil or for our skin color. I have a friend whose driver touched her in an inappropriate way. She was very young at the time, but she felt very guilty about it — and Oprah helped her to speak about this abuse with her mother."

MBC edits some "Oprah" episodes to remove content banned by censors in the region, officials at the channel say. It does not broadcast segments on homosexuality, for example. But the officials say they make most episodes available to their regional viewers uncensored, including some about relations between Arabs and Westerners and about living with the threat of Islamic terrorism.

Saudi women say they are drawn to Ms. Winfrey not only because she openly addresses subjects considered taboo locally, but also because she speaks of self-empowerment and change.

Wafa Muhammad, 38, a mother of five from Riyadh, said she believed that, in their adoration of Ms. Winfrey, Saudi women are expressing a hesitant sense of longing for real change in their country.

"Many of us feel that the solutions for our problems have to come from outside," Ms. Muhammad said. When President Bush visited Saudi Arabia in January, she continued, as an example, his presence briefly became a locus of hope for Saudi women. "A lot of women were saying that they wished they could talk to Bush about problems like forced marriage, about how our children are taken away if our husbands divorce us."

In a country where women are forbidden to vote, or to travel without the permission of a male guardian, a sense of powerlessness can lead women to look for unlikely sources of rescue, Ms. Muhammad explained. "If women here have problems with their fathers or their brothers, what

can they do but look to Oprah?” she asked. “The idea that she will come and help them is a dream for them.”

Nayla, the homemaker in Dammam, a Persian Gulf port city, says Ms. Winfrey helps her cope with a society that does not encourage her to have interests. “The life of a woman here in Saudi — it makes you tired and it makes you boring,” she said, sighing.

Like many Saudi women, Nayla struggles with obesity, a major issue in the kingdom because many women are largely confined to their homes and local custom often prevents them from participating in sports or even walking around their neighborhoods.

She says that Ms. Winfrey has inspired her to lose weight and to pursue her education through an online degree course, a method acceptable to her husband since she will not have to leave home.

As she spoke, Nayla sat on the floor of the women’s sitting room of her mother-in-law’s house. A battered wooden bureau, its top littered with hairbrushes, plastic figurines, and perfume bottles, was the only piece of furniture.

Several female relatives sat with Nayla, and the door was kept slightly ajar so that their small children, chasing one another in the hall outside, could enter. But at the sound of heavier, male footfalls approaching, the women all jumped to their feet and scurried to hide their faces behind the bureau. It would be shameful if a brother-in-law accidentally caught a glimpse of their uncovered faces, Nayla explained.

“Oprah is the magic word for women here who want to scream out loud, who want to be heard,” Ms. Muhammad said. “Look at what happened to the girl from Qatif,” she said, referring to the infamous case of a young woman who was gang-raped, then sentenced to flogging because she had been in a car with an unrelated man.

The young woman from Qatif received a royal pardon last year after her case became an international media cause célèbre.

“The Qatif girl was heard outside the country, and she was helped,” Ms. Muhammad said. “But we need to have Saudi women who help women here. We need to have women social workers, women judges.”

“We have a very male-dominated society, and it’s very hard sometimes,” Ms. Muhammad said. “But for now I have my coffee, and sit, and I watch Oprah.

It’s my favorite time of day.”

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