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Jordan's Female Taxi Drivers Crash Through Stereotypes

A group of women in Jordan are defying gender roles for a career on the road. While it's not easy working in a male-dominated sector, the country's female taxi drivers are willing to challenge the naysayers in order to do the job they love.

WRITTEN BY
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Hiba al-Sharu has defied Jordan's patriarchal society to become one of the country's first female taxi drivers. [Elspeth Dehnert](#)

AMMAN, JORDAN – The only difference between Hiba al-Sharu and her male counterparts is the color of the sign that sits atop her taxi – hers is pink, a symbol for a woman-friendly service in a country dominated by men. She is one of 10 women who earlier this year became some of the first female taxi drivers in Jordan. They are being hailed as pioneers in a conservative society where jobs are dictated by gender and women often feel uneasy taking taxis driven by men.

“It’s a beautiful job because of the relationships you form and the freedom that comes with it,” says al-Sharu as she swiftly changes lanes in the traffic. Also, she adds, “I have a passion for driving cars.”

Al-Sharu became a taxi driver in March after her friend told her about a new female-driven service being offered by Taxi al-Moumayaz, one of the leading companies of its kind in Jordan. CEO Eid Abu al-Haj says the reason for creating the initiative was twofold: to give women the chance to work in the male-centric transportation sector and to provide female riders with a more comfortable option.

“People think it’s odd,” says al-Haj. “But I try to prove that there’s nothing wrong with it. There’s no difference between a woman driving a normal car or a taxi.”

The opportunity came at the perfect time for al-Sharu. Despite holding a bachelor’s degree in business administration, the divorced mother of one had been struggling to find a decent job with a stable salary, health insurance and social security benefits. Driving for Taxi al-Moumayaz gives her all of that plus the ability to design her own schedule and to earn an additional income in the form of tips. More than six months have passed, and she’s happier than ever about her decision to work on the road.

But not everyone is supportive of al-Sharu’s new career path. “The Middle Eastern mentality doesn’t accept that I’m a taxi driver,” she says while fixing her hair in the rearview mirror.

In addition to working odd hours, taxi drivers must be alone in their cars with strangers – including men – for long periods of time. It’s an uncomfortable combination in a society where, traditionally, women are thought to bring shame to their family and culture if they do something that could be perceived as promiscuous. While Jordan is among the more progressive of the Arab nations – so-called honor killings are rare – harassment of women is commonplace, especially of those who are considered to be engaging in indecent or abnormal behavior.



Jordan’s women taxi drivers are being hailed as pioneers in a country where working odd hours and being in cars alone with strangers – including men – is traditionally seen as promiscuous behavior. (Elsbeth Dehnert)

Al-Sharu recounts one disturbing incident in particular: A couple of months ago, two male passengers refused to pay after instructing her to drive aimlessly around the city. After she realized they were mocking her, a verbal argument ensued. Then the fight turned physical. “The window was open and one of them grabbed a long stick from outside the car, and then he began hitting the meter with it,” she recalls. “It’s because I’m a woman.”

“My father is still not happy. He is ashamed. But I don’t care. This is my life, not his life.”

But it’s not only strangers who take issue with her line of work. “My father is still not happy. He is ashamed,” she says. “But I don’t care. This is my life, not his life.”

While al-Sharu is able to defy the men in her family, not all women in Jordan have that option. The country’s patriarchal

laws and cultural traditions deny women full equality. Women cannot pass citizenship on to their children, for example, or legally marry without permission from either a male blood relative or the court. The male guardianship system still dictates many aspects of everyday life.

Without full control over their own lives, women in Jordan have a difficult time breaking out of the traditional female role. Salma Nims, secretary general of the [Jordanian National Commission for Women](#), says women in her country are first and foremost mothers, wives and guardians of the domestic sphere. Working outside the home is discouraged in some families, unless it's a monetary necessity. And for women who do work, being a fully functioning member of the labor force is not easy since they are expected to also continue taking sole responsibility for the household.

Nims believes that one of the best ways to improve the work situation for women in Jordan is to stop the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in the media and school curriculum. "We are raising a generation that sees women with very limited options in terms of jobs," she says. "These stereotypes and judgments affect how young men and women see themselves and how they perceive the other and the role they play in society."

But al-Sharu favors a more direct approach: "My advice to women is to break the stereotype." Her becoming a taxi driver may not seem like much of a revolution, but she thinks it could help inspire a new reality for women in Jordan who want to free themselves from the confines of their gender roles.

"We're not stealing; we're not doing anything bad. We're helping people and providing a service," she says of herself and her fellow female taxi drivers.

"Try us," she adds with a smirk, "and then say what you want."

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About the Author

Elsbeth Dalmage is an American journalist based in Amman, Jordan. She has a passion for telling stories about women, society and international development. Her collaborations have included Marie Claire. Scientific American. Brownbook. ClimateWire. Channel

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