Even a year ago, it would have been hard to imagine — Saudi women clad in skinny jeans and Harley-Davidson T-shirts, revving motorbikes at a Riyadh sports circuit.

But ahead of the historic lifting of a decades-long ban on female drivers on June 24, women gather weekly at the privately owned Bikers Skills Institute, to learn how to ride bikes.

“Biking has been a passion ever since I was a kid,” said 31-year-old Noura, who declined to give her real name as she weighs public reactions in the ultra-conservative Islamic kingdom.

Overturning the world’s only ban on female drivers, long a symbol of repression against women, is the most striking reform yet launched by powerful Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

None of the women at the floodlit motoring circuit wanted to talk about the crackdown, a deeply sensitive issue, focusing instead on securing a basic freedom long denied to them. “I grew up watching my family riding bikes,” Ms. Noura said as she mounted a Yamaha Virago. “Now I hope... to have enough skills to ride on the street.”

Next to her, revving a Suzuki, sat Leen Tinawi, a 19-year-old Saudi-born Jordanian. For both women, biking is not just an adrenalin-fuelled passion, but also a form of empowerment. “I can summarise the whole experience of riding a bike in one word — freedom,” Ms. Tinawi said.

‘It’s your turn to ride’ Both bikers follow their Ukrainian instructor, 39-year-old Elena Bukaryeva, who rides a Harley-Davidson.

Most days the circuit is the domain of drag racers and bike enthusiasts — all men. But since offering courses to women in February on the basics of bike riding, four female enthusiasts have enrolled, most of them Saudis, Ms. Bukaryeva said.

“They always wanted to learn how to ride a motorcycle. And now they are saying ‘it’s my time’,” Ms. Bukaryeva said.

She echoed a catch-phrase printed on the institute’s promotional material: “It’s your turn to ride.”

Many women fear they are still easy prey for conservatives in a nation where male “guardians” — their fathers, husbands or other relatives — can exercise arbitrary authority to make decisions on their behalf.

“Expect more accidents” because of women is a common refrain in an avalanche of sexist comments on Twitter.