

COMMENTARY

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Saudi Survey:

Majority of Saudis Favour Women's Right to Sports

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A vast majority of Saudis favour women having the right to fully engage in sports in a country that has no official facilities for female athletes or physical education programs for girls in schools, according to a Saudi sociology researcher, who has put forward a series of recommendations at a time that the government is developing its first ever national sports plan albeit for men only.

Mariam Dujain Al-Kaabi concluded on the basis of a survey as part of her master thesis of 312 Saudis active in education who were almost evenly split between men and women that 73.5 per cent unambiguously endorsed a woman's right to engage in sports while 21.6 percent felt that their right should be conditional. Published by Ash-Sharq newspaper, the study countered conservative opposition in the kingdom that asserts that allowing women to engage in sports would have negative social consequences.

Al Kaabi's study was published as the kingdom debates granting women the right to engage in sports, attend sporting events in stadia, enjoy physical education in state-run schools and on a non-sporting issue be allowed to drive. While many members of the ruling elite, including King Abdullah, are believed to favour granting women greater rights, the government has so far shied away from confronting conservative clerics who condemn women's sports as corrupting and satanic and charge that it would spread decadence. The clerics warn that running and jumping could damage a woman's hymen and ruin her chances of getting married.

Saudi Sheikh Saleh bin Saad al-Luhaydan cautioned in September as women launched an online campaign to demand their right to drive that driving could affect their ovaries and pelvises. Sheikh Al-Luhaydan, a legal and psychology consultant to the Gulf Psychological Association, quickly became the target of ridicule on social media with Saudis sarcastically congratulating

him for his scientific discovery. An Arabic Twitter hashtag “Women_driving_affects_ovaries_and_pelvises” went viral.

The government is hesitant to confront conservative elements of the clergy at a time that it is trying to ring fence the kingdom against the wave of discontent and protest that has been sweeping the Middle East and North Africa for almost three years. While Saudi Arabia, a country where demonstrations are constitutionally banned, has not witnessed mass protests, it has experienced multiple expressions of demands for change, including protests in the predominantly Shiite Eastern Province, home to its oil reserves; demonstrations in the arch conservative town of Buraidah, a bulwark of Saudis puritan Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, demanding the release of political prisoners; protests against princes who own soccer clubs in stadia and online; a women’s campaign for the right to drive; and an outpouring of criticism of the ruling family on social media.

Human Rights Watch last year accused Saudi Arabia of kowtowing to assertions by the country’s powerful conservative Muslim clerics that female sports constitute “steps of the devil”.

Saudi Football Federation (SFF) president Ahmed Eid Alharbi, a storied former goalkeeper who became the kingdom’s first elected sports official after his predecessor, a member of the ruling family, was forced under fan pressure to step-down, hinted in September at the positive economic impact of allowing women to attend soccer matches would have. He said that the creation of facilities for women would increase capacity at stadiums by 15 per cent.

Alharbi later qualified his remarks by saying that the decision to lift the ban on women was not his. “A decision like this is a sovereign decision. Neither I nor SAFF can make it. Only the political leadership in this country can make that decision,” he said. The government has been fretting over that decision for more than a year.

Saudi Arabia alongside Yemen was the only Muslim Middle Eastern nation that refused early this year to sign on to a campaign by Middle Eastern soccer associations to put women’s soccer on par with men’s football.

In a statement, the associations grouped in the West Asian Football Federation (WAFF), defined “an athletic woman” as “an empowered woman who further empowers her community.” In a rebuttal of opposition to women’s soccer among some Islamists across the region and more conservative segments of Middle Eastern society the seminar stressed that women’s soccer did not demean cultural and traditional values.

The statement called further for the appointment of women to the boards of WAFF member associations, establishment of a WAFF women’s committee, creation of Under-16 and Under-19 women competitions in the Middle East (West Asia) as well as the compulsory rotation of hosting of subsidized WAFF women competitions – demands Saudi Arabia has yet to comply with. WAFF nevertheless said that the kingdom would be included in women’s tournaments.

Al Kaabi’s study recommended that the government introduce sports as a compulsory part of the curriculum in all government girls’ schools, provide playgrounds, approve sporting activities

outside of school, establish women's sports clubs and public exercise and training facilities, raise awareness of the health benefits of sports, establish a women's section in Prince Nawaf's Presidency of Youth Welfare (the equivalent of a ministry of youth and sports), and enable women to compete in international sporting events.

Saudi Arabia bowed to pressure last year to field for the first time ever women athletes at an international tournament, the London Olympics. It did so by fielding two expatriate Saudi females.

Saudi press reporting on Al Kaabi's study illustrated the sensitivity of the issue. The Saudi Gazette introduced the study by referring to the fact that Widan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahrkhani, a judo player and one of the two Saudi women athletes in London, was more concerned about being covered when her hijab dropped during the tournament than competing to win.

"It was a dramatic scene for a sportswoman who was keen to achieve recognition for herself and her country. What made the scene more dramatic, however, was her insistence to preserve the true image of Saudi women when she focused only on protecting her hair from being seen by others," the Gazette said.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. **Web link:** <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2013/11/saudi-survey-majority-of-saudis-favor.html>

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