

COMMENTARY

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Women's Sporting Rights Put Saudi Arabia and Iran on the Defensive

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The struggle for women's rights to engage in sports and attend sporting events has commanded increased attention with the hunger strike of a British-Iranian national incarcerated in Tehran's notorious Evin prison, the expected arrival in Saudi Arabia of Australian women fans for the Asian Champions League final, and the rare appearance of Saudi women in an all-male stadium in Abu Dhabi.

The issue of women's rights also rose on the international sporting agenda with the withdrawal of the Qatari women's basketball team from the recent Asian Games after they were banned from wearing a headdress. The incident underlined the fact that women's rights also includes the right to compete with headwear that meets safety and security standards and is culturally acceptable.

In response to the withdrawal, the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) said it would next year ease the ban. Soccer paved the way for accommodating religiously observant women athletes with FIFA's acceptance two years ago of the principle that women were allowed to wear approved headgear.

The increased attention on women's sporting rights has put Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two Middle Eastern nations that ban women from entry into stadia during competitions, on the defensive and raises questions about the international sporting community's forcefulness in opposing restrictions that violate fundamental rights. International Olympics Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach said after last month meeting Saudi Arabia's newly appointed Olympic chief Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad bin Abdulaziz that women's rights was being discussed.

Human Rights Watch called on the kingdom to make clear what steps it was taking to ensure that women are included in international competitions and able to participate in sports generally. Saudi Arabia failed to field women athletes at the recent Asian Games after it was forced by the IOC to allow all of two expatriate women to compete in the 2012 London Olympics.

The degree to which Saudi Arabia feels pressured by increasingly unsustainable restrictions on women's sports was evident in Saudi responses to criticism. Rather than point to the kingdom's long-standing denial of women's rights rooted in culture and justified by a puritan interpretation of Islam, Mohammed al-Mishal, the secretary-general of Saudi Arabia's Olympic Committee, said that Saudi Arabia did not have women athletes who would have qualified for the 2014 Asian Games.

Al-Mishal however indicated that despite Saudi Arabia's promise to field women athletes at the 2016 Olympics in Rio Janeiro they would be limited to sports endorsed by a literal interpretation of the Qur'an. The Saudi official said the kingdom was training women to compete in equestrian, fencing, shooting, and archery Olympic contest which are "accepted culturally and religiously in Saudi Arabia".

Human Rights Watch Middle East and North Africa director Sarah Leah Whitson dismissed Al-Mishal's defence as excuses. "Two years after the London Olympics, the time for excuses is over – Saudi Arabia needs to end its discrimination against women and ensure women's right to participate in sport on an equal basis with men... Limiting women's participation to specific sports is yet another example of Saudi Arabia's refusal to allow women to compete on an equal basis with men," Whitson said.

Despite the restrictions, Saudi Arabia has taken small steps towards expanding women's ability to engage in sports. The country's Shura Council, a consultative assembly, has urged the education ministry to study the possibility of introducing physical education for girls in public schools. The move could lead to a lifting of the ban on female sports in public schools.

Moreover, authorities last year began licensing private sports clubs for women. Saudi Arabia has further struggled for years with proposals to build separate women's sections in stadia – a move that has been staunchly resisted by the country's conservatives. Manal Al-Dabbagh nevertheless became in August the first Saudi woman photographer to be allowed to photograph a soccer match in a stadium.

Writing on CNN's website, Lina K. Almaeena, a prominent Saudi promoter of women's sports, noted that Saudi officials have promised enhanced opportunities for women for years. Almaeena said those promises remained unfulfilled because of "logistical challenges" such as a lack of profession female professionals and adequate space that would ensure that women are shielded from the view of men. As a result, the government has yet to include physical education in the

curricula of girls' schools and enable women to use neighbourhood facilities and train for international competitions.

With the exception of the Equestrian Federation, women are not members of the boards of Saudi sporting associations. The absence of women board members in the case of the Saudi soccer association violates a decision of the West Asian Football Federation that obliges its members to put women's soccer rights on par with those of men and include women on their boards.

The controversy and domestic battles that women's sports evoke was recently evident on social media in response to a YouTube video viewed by nearly half a million people. The video showed a rare female Saudi soccer fan clad in traditional all enveloping dress cheering her club, Al Hilal, against the United Arab Emirates' Al Ain in an Asian Champions League match. The UAE contrary to the kingdom does not bar women from stadia. The woman is seen shouting in frustration at a bad tackle on the pitch. As she shakes her fist in anger, her sleeve rolls up and exposes her lower arm.

Commenters on the video lined up on both sides of the argument with 1,826 dislikes and 969 likes. In support of the woman, one commenter denounced segregation rooted in the kingdom's adherence to Salafism, a diverse Islamic trend that seeks to emulate life at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors, as the product of "a sick and obsessed mind." An opponent reiterated that "we do not allow women to have 100% freedom... Most Muslim women agree with this...so I don't understand how most of the world's women wear tight clothes and walk half naked on the streets and beaches as if it were normal ..! Don't these women have brothers or fathers???"

A Saudi psychiatrist warned in July that women's passion for soccer constituted a need to release pent-up energy and imitate others that endangered a woman's role in a conservative Muslim society.

The issue of women's stadium attendance will present itself again when Australia's Western Sydney Wanderers meet Al Hilal in the Asian Champions League finals in Riyadh on 1 November. Australian media have expressed concern whether female and Jewish supporters would be granted visas for the match. Saudi Arabia has long lifted its restrictions on allowing Jews into the kingdom and has in the recent past facilitated attendance of sporting events by Brazilian and New Zealand women fans when their teams were visiting the country.

The granting of entry to stadia to foreign women supporting a visiting team has sparked heated debate in Saudi Arabia. Controversy erupted in February when a group of female American Congressional staffers were allowed to attend a match in a Riyadh stadium from which Saudi women were barred.

Saudi Arabia's failure to forcefully act on repeated promises and follow-up on its concession to pressure to field women athletes at the London Olympics like the imprisonment of 25-year old British-Iranian dual national Ghoncheh Ghavami suggests that achieving women's sporting rights is a lengthy battle. International pressure will likely have to involve more than efforts at quiet behind-the-scenes persuasion.

Ghavami was charged with spreading propaganda against the Iranian government after she attempted in June with more than a dozen other women to enter a stadium where the Iranian national men's volleyball team was playing Italy. To be fair, Iran in contrast to Saudi Arabia encourages women's sports even if it bars women from stadia.

Writing in The Guardian, journalist and author Azadeh Moaveni argued in the case of Ghavami that international pressure on Iran to adhere to human rights standards would be more effective and "seem less a political tool to batter Iran when it is expedient than a permanent concern" if the Islamic republic's critics "strive for consistency, including human rights concerns as part of the ongoing political approach to Iran so that it becomes a fixed expectation in Tehran as well." That is true not only for Iran but also the struggle for women's sporting and human rights in Saudi Arabia as well as elsewhere in the world.

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/2014/10/womens-sporting-rights-put-saudi-arabia.html>

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