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“STEPS OF THE DEVIL”

Denial of Women’s and Girls’ Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia



“Steps of the Devil”

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Summary

When Saudi men and women sit down to watch the London Olympic Games later this year they will likely only get to see male athletes representing their country. This is because of an effective ban on women's participation in national competitive sports.

The ban is part of a Saudi government policy that severely limits the ability of women to practice sport, to the point of prohibiting it in many contexts. The policy reflects the predominant conservative view that opening sports to women and girls will lead to immorality: "steps of the devil," as one prominent religious scholar put it. In 2009 and 2010 the government went as far as closing private gyms for women, prompting a campaign against the ban by a group of women under the slogan "Let her get fat."

The topic of sports for women and girls has become hotly debated in Saudi Arabia in recent years. Saudi government statements have veered between vague promises of liberalization and outright rejection of expanding the limited existing opportunities for women and girls to engage in physical exercise and sports. But in terms of policies and practice, the Saudi government continues to flagrantly deny women and girls their right to practice physical education in schools and to practice recreational and competitive sports more generally.

Discrimination against women and girls in sport is only one part of the broader pattern of systematic violations of women's and girls' rights in Saudi Arabia. Under the system of male guardianship, Saudi women of all ages need their male guardian's often written consent to receive certain health care; to work, to study, to marry, and to travel. Male guardians can be fathers, husbands, brothers, or even minor sons. In 2009 the Saudi government accepted a recommendation by the United Nations Human Rights Council to abolish the system but has so far failed to do so. Saudi Arabia is also the only country in the world which bans women from driving, a ban which a small number of women in Saudi Arabia have recently started to defy.

Discrimination in sport against women and girls is most apparent in the absence of physical education classes for girls in state schools. Saudi Arabia introduced state schooling for girls in the early 1960s, but never added physical education classes to the

girls' curriculum. The government does tolerate physical education for girls in private schools, but even in those private schools which offer it the quality of coaching and facilities is uneven, and there appears to be no set curriculum.

In 2011 the Saudi government announced plans to introduce physical education for girls in state schools. However, the details of the plan, including the timing of its implementation and whether girls will be able to access the same level of physical education as boys, remain unclear.

Prior to the closure of women's gyms in 2009 and 2010 on the grounds that they were unlicensed, Saudi women had made limited progress in recent years in establishing and frequenting gyms and fitness centers, sometimes set up in private homes. Since the closure of the gyms, the government has failed to issue commercial licenses that would allow them to reopen.

The government does now allow "health clubs" for women. But these do not offer the variety of different sporting activities that is widely available for men, including team sports and athletics. Furthermore, these health clubs, which are often attached to hospitals, are few in number and inaccessible to many women because of the high cost of membership fees.

Although Saudi Arabia boasts 153 official sports clubs regulated and supported by the General Presidency for Youth Welfare (GPYW), a government agency, offering individual and team sports, in practice these clubs remain closed to women. The female basketball team section of Jeddah United appears to be the only exception. Jeddah United is a private sports company not among the 153 sports clubs.

Small private initiatives to hold sporting tournaments for women and girls continue away from the public eye, but these are tolerated rather than supported by the government. A leading Saudi businessman, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, sponsored Saudi Arabia's first women's soccer team, the Jeddah Kings, in 2009. But he abandoned the effort when media coverage of a women's soccer tournament that year involving the Jeddah Kings and five other private teams caused a public backlash, with a hostile reaction to the players by some conservative Saudis.

Within Saudi Arabia, the debate about sports for women and girls does not focus on rights or discrimination but rather on the health benefits derived from an active lifestyle. In recent years rates of obesity and diabetes have risen significantly in Saudi Arabia, especially among women and girls. Between two-thirds to three-quarters of adults and 25 to 40 percent of children and adolescents are estimated to be overweight or obese. Being overweight is a significant factor in the increased prevalence of diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and certain types of cancer. These diseases, which can develop at a young age and in some cases disproportionately affect girls and women, also represent a significant proportion of mortality in Saudi Arabia, and form the majority of non-communicable diseases.

Opponents of sports for women and girls put forward the “slippery slope” argument that once women start to exercise, they will shed modest clothing, spend “unnecessary” time out of the house, and have increase possibilities for mingling with men. Others propose endless conditions for women and girls practicing sport (for example, that they must wear modest clothing and engage in sports away from the prying eyes of men) that perpetuate the unequal and discriminatory conditions that limit the ability of women and girls to practice sports.

The Saudi National Olympic Committee (NOC) is responsible, together with the 29 recognized Saudi sporting federations, for organizing competitive tournaments and selecting athletes and teams from the GPYW-regulated clubs and elsewhere to represent the kingdom internationally. The Saudi NOC does not have a women’s section, and neither do any of the 29 sporting federations. Saudi Arabia has never sponsored a woman athlete in an international competition. One Saudi woman, the equestrian athlete Dalma Muhsin, participated in the 2010 Singapore Youth Olympic Games, where she won a bronze medal. However, Muhsin did not benefit from official sponsorship, nor was she nominated through a process of national competitive trials.

In order to allow all countries to send male and female competitors to the Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) reserves limited places for male and female athletes who are not required to meet the qualifying standards in the swimming and track and field (athletics) categories. But Saudi Arabia has never taken advantage of this system to nominate female athletes for the Olympic Games, and it has given no indication that it will send any female athletes to the 2012 London Olympic Games.

Saudi Arabia is one of only three countries worldwide that have never nominated a female athlete to the Olympic Games—Brunei and Qatar being the other two. Qatar, the host of the 2006 Asian Games, has begun to develop a program for women in sport, and both Qatar and Brunei have sent female athletes to regional and international competitions such as the Islamic Women’s Games. Saudi Arabia has never done so.

The rights of women and girls to physical education and to participate in sport is internationally recognized in treaties Saudi Arabia has signed, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. These treaties prohibit discrimination against women and girls.

The charter of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) prohibits discrimination against women in sport, yet the IOC has not demanded that Saudi Arabia allow women to practice sports as a condition for the kingdom’s participation in the Olympic Games.

As a condition for allowing Saudi Arabia to participate in the games the International Olympic Committee should make it clear to the Saudi National Olympic Committee (NOC) that it should, before the start of the London Olympic Games, set out a timeline for: forming a women’s section within the NOC; providing funds for women’s sport; and starting an outreach campaign to attract Saudi women to competitive sports. The IOC should also make it clear to the NOC that the nomination of a woman in the track and field (athletics) universality slot is a condition for Saudi Arabia’s participation.

More generally, in order to address the systematic discrimination against women in sport, Saudi Arabia should, within one year, set out a clear strategy and timeline for rolling out physical education for girls in government and private schools and launch a public outreach campaign to emphasize the right of girls to physical education. The strategy should contain measureable benchmarks, including: the building of facilities; types of physical education offered at each level of education; weekly class hours spent on physical education; and training teachers of physical education for girls.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia should lift its ban on licensing gyms for women, and instruct the General Presidency for Sport and Youth Welfare (GPSYW) to open a women’s section and to demand the admission of women members in all sports clubs it oversees in the kingdom.

Together with the country's 29 sporting federations, the NOC should develop national competitions for women and begin to form national women's teams to participate in regional and international sporting events.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch conducted research for this report in 2011 through telephone interviews with eleven Saudi women, based on referrals from activists, whose full names we have withheld in order to protect them from unwanted attention by members of their family and community and possible government retaliation for speaking with a foreign human rights organization, which Saudi prosecutors consider a criminal act. The women came from Qatif, Dammam, and Khobar in the Eastern Province, Riyadh, and Jeddah, the kingdom's three largest urban areas. We were unable to gather views of women living in more remote areas. Another eight women declined to be interviewed for this report out of fear of retaliation for speaking to an international human rights organization.

The Saudi government has not granted Human Rights Watch visas to carry out research inside the kingdom since 2006. To assess government policy, Human Rights Watch wrote two letters to Saudi officials, one to the Saudi National Olympic Committee in July 2011, and one to the Saudi Ministry of Education in August 2011, presenting detailed questions on the ability of women and girls to participate in sports in the kingdom. We received a reply on January 9, 2012.

In the absence of access to or communication from government officials, this report relies on statements attributed to Saudi officials in local and international media. While details we requested in our letters to officials are often lacking in such media articles, the large number of articles on women and sports over recent years allows for a reasonable assessment of the reality of women's ability to participate in sports, and trends in government policy.

The Gulf Institute, a civil society organization in Washington D.C., led by Ali Al Ahmed, a Saudi dissident, in 2010 started a campaign entitled "No Women, No Play," highlighting the absence of Saudi women athletes from international competitions. We are grateful to the Gulf Institute for its cooperation on this report.

I. Physical Education in Schools

When Saudi Arabia introduced schooling for girls in the 1960s, physical education was not part of their curriculum in government schools. This situation continues today.¹ Girls in state schools receive no physical education, either at the elementary or secondary levels.

Samar B., a 30-year-old Saudi woman from Jeddah, told Human Rights Watch that she “attended public school at all levels of her education” but never had physical education classes.²

Dima H., 36, told Human Rights Watch that at her state school in Khobar, in the Eastern Province, she was made to feel that she was worth less than a boy. She said she never understood “the reason behind such discrimination in schools where there are only female students.” Because her school did not offer physical education classes for girls, she used to go to the ARAMCO oil company compound to practice sports, such as walking and swimming.³ The compound was her only opportunity for sports.

Dima H. recalled that, while state schools did not provide sports for girls, company schools in the area for the children of ARAMCO employees did offer physical education classes for girls. However, she said, the government forced the schools to stop offering such classes decades ago and the ban is still in effect today.⁴ “Why can’t [girls] play sport?” she asked.⁵

Some private schools do offer physical education classes to girls. Dar al-Hanan, the kingdom’s first private school for girls, opened in 1956 and included physical education for girls from the beginning. In those private schools that do offer physical education for girls, some make those classes compulsory, while others offer the classes on a voluntary basis. The Ministry of Education on December 4, 2011 responded to Human Rights Watch’s

¹ Amani Hamdan, “Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Achievement,” *International Education Journal*, vol. 6(1) (2005), pp. 47-53, <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/v6n1/hamdan/paper.pdf> (accessed September 15, 2011).

² Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., Jeddah, May 16, 2011.

³ Saudi ARAMCO is the Saudi national oil company, in which many foreigners work and whose housing and company sites are not open to the public. Men and women mingle freely there; women can drive and play sports.

⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., Toronto, May 23, 2011.

⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

inquiry about government policy on physical education for girls. Deputy Minister of Girls' Education, Norah al-Fayez, wrote in response to a question by Human Rights Watch regarding requirements for offering physical education in private schools that "in fact there are sports activities in some private girls' schools as part of their school curriculum and as extra-curricular activities."⁶ Samar B. said that some private schools offered physical education to girls without reporting this to the government.⁷

Hadeer R., 17, said physical education was compulsory for girls at her private primary school in Jeddah from grades 1 through 8, but only for two years in grades 9 through 12. The reason for the compulsory physical education classes, she said, was that graduates from her private school received both US and Saudi high school diplomas, and the US diploma required physical education classes.⁸

Hadeer R. said she greatly enjoyed playing basketball in particular, in daily 40-minute classes, and that the teacher also offered aerobics, badminton, and other sports. Students took these classes seriously and were required to wear sporting outfits. Her school even organized an annual sports day competition in soccer, table tennis, and other sports in which girls could participate.⁹

Sadeem B., in her early twenties, said she was able to play basketball only at the private elementary school she attended, but that the school did not emphasize the importance of physical education for girls. "The sports class was always the class that got canceled in exchange for other classes," she said.¹⁰

Norah A.'s private school in Riyadh did not make physical education compulsory for girls at the secondary level, but offered it on a voluntary basis. At the elementary level at the same institution girls' physical education was compulsory. Norah A. said she took physical education classes twice a week in secondary school, mainly playing soccer and volleyball. "Many girls were not interested in sports," she said. Only seven other girls participated.¹¹

⁶ Letter from Norah al-Fayez, deputy minister of education for girls, Ministry of Education, to Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2011, received on January 9, 2012.

⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., Jeddah, May 18, 2011.

⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Sadeem B., May 26, 2011.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., Paris, May 26, 2011.

The women interviewed by Human Rights Watch underlined the marked difference, even in private schools, between the low importance given to girls' physical education and the high importance accorded to boys' physical education. Norah A. said that from family conversations she knew that schools for boys had much bigger sporting facilities, offering a wider range of activities. The schools encouraged boys to practice sports and organized regular sporting competitions for them, she said. By contrast, Norah's school did not take seriously the physical education classes for girls. Her school only had two sports professors for several hundred girls. Girls were not required to dress in sportswear and had to exercise in impractical school uniforms.¹²

Saudi Arabia is planning to extend physical education for girls as part of a larger plan to expand facilities for physical education in all state schools across the kingdom. In August 2011 the minister of education, Faisal bin Abdullah, was quoted in the media as saying that a Spanish company, Itik Consulting Sports and Leisure, was developing the overall plan, and an Australian company, Rise Global, lists "girls and women" and "sport instructors" among the key stakeholders of its contract with the Saudi Ministry of Education to work on a national school sports strategy.¹³

In August 2011 another media outlet quoted the minister as saying that the government was studying a plan to offer physical education to girls according to the "strictures of the [Islamic] Sharia and so that customs and norms won't be harmed."¹⁴ The minister explained that the government was "working on establishing departments for physical education in the universities and colleges so that female physical education teachers graduate to prepare our female students socially, healthwise, and in sport in a way that does not contradict the special characteristics of our society and the sensitivity of this aspect."¹⁵ In January 2011, *Alarabiya.net*, a news website, reported "confidential

¹² Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

¹³ *National School Sports Strategy - Saudi Arabia*, <http://www.sportanddev.org/en/connect/project.cfm?proj=189> (accessed September 5, 2011).

¹⁴ Dr. Abd al-'Aziz Jar Allah, "In Education ... Development Without Change (في التعليم.. التطوير لا التغيير)," *Al-Jazira* Newspaper, August 20, 2011, http://www.moe.gov.sa/news/daily/20_9_1432.htm (accessed September 7, 2011).

¹⁵ Mut'ib al-'Awwad, "On the Ground: The Minister's Idea of Sport (في الميدان : الرياضة بفكر الوزير)," *Okaz*, August 20, 2011, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20110820/Con20110820440620.htm> (accessed September 7, 2011).

information” from the Ministry of Education to the effect that the ministry was planning to introduce physical education for girls in middle school in 2013.¹⁶

It remains to be seen when and if these reported plans will be implemented and whether they will end discrimination against girls and women in their access to physical education and sports. As recently as May 2011, the education minister considered that it was still “too early” to talk about introducing physical education for girls in schools.¹⁷

Samar B. said that there was an attempt some years ago by a minister to introduce physical education for girls in schools. However, she said, the government rejected this proposal.¹⁸ Muhammad al-Rashid, who was education minister for a decade until 2004, appeared to corroborate this when he told *Al-Riyadh* newspaper in February 2011 that a storm of protest erupted when he tried to open up discussion about introducing physical education for girls in schools twenty years ago.¹⁹ As late as December 2010 the spokesperson for the Ministry of Education said that the ministry would impose penalties on any state school found to be conducting sport activities for girls, as this was against prevailing law.²⁰ The ministry’s statement came in response to reports of sports activities in six schools for girls in Jeddah. The ministry said it had opened an investigation into the alleged provision of physical education classes in those schools.²¹

Deputy Minister of Girls’ Education, Norah al-Fayez, wrote to Human Rights Watch that

¹⁶ Khalid al-Shayr, “Women’s Sport in Saudi [Arabia] ... Between Necessity and Great Act of Corruption (الرياضة النسائية في (السعودية..بين الضرورة والمفسدة العظيمة)”, *Alarabiya.net*, January 13, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/01/13/133336.html> (accessed February 14, 2011).

¹⁷ Muhammad Mani’ and Mas’ud Al Mu’idh, “Prince Faisal bin Abdullah Hopes for Pens and Colors for All Three During Meeting with ‘Al-Watan’ Delegates (الأمير فيصل بن عبدالله يتأمل أقلام الألوان الثلاثة في لقائه مع منسوبي “الوطن)”, *Al-Watan*, May 7, 2011, http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Local/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=52866&CategoryID=5 (accessed May 7, 2011).

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

¹⁹ Fayidh al-Shamari, “Al-Rashid: Because of Sports for Girls I Was Subject to a Horrible Attack .. and All My Objectives Are Just (الرشيد: بسبب رياضة البنات تعرضت إلى هجوم شنيع .. وجميع أهدافي صحيحة)”, *Al-Riyadh*, February 11, 2011, <http://www.alriyadh.com/2011/02/11/article603546.html> (accessed August 5, 2011).

²⁰ “Practicing Sport is Forbidden in Schools for Girls in Saudi [Arabia] (ممنوع ممارسة الرياضة بمدارس البنات بالسعودية)”, *Alarabiya.net*, December 25, 2010, <http://www.elbashayer.com/news-123662.html> (accessed January 13, 2011).

²¹ Muhammad Shamma, Saudi [Arabia] Prohibits Practicing Sport in Girls’ Schools (السعودية تمنع ممارسة الرياضة في مدارس (البنات)”, *Horytna.net*, December 22, 2010, <http://www.horytna.net/Articles/Details.aspx?AID=28155> (accessed January 13, 2011), and Tareq A. Al Maena, “Women’s Rights is not a Toy for Men: Saudi Ministry of Education’s Crackdown on Some Schools Organising Sports for Girls Shows Old Habits Die Hard,” *Gulf News*, January 2, 2011, <http://gulfnnews.com/opinions/columnists/women-s-rights-is-not-a-toy-for-men-1.739317> (accessed January 2, 2011).

the issue of girls' physical education is under serious consideration as one of the priorities of the ministry's leadership that regards physical education in schools as one of the necessities helping male and female students to stay healthy. The ministry is currently working on a comprehensive educational curriculum, starting with laying the infrastructure for the project and finishing with health and nutritional education, all within the national strategy for girls' and boys' physical education.²²

Even at state universities there are few possibilities for women to practice sports, according to the women who spoke with Human Rights Watch. One female professor said her dean introduced a sporting facility for female students, including basketball and table tennis, some four years ago, but the dean had since been edged out for being "too progressive," though the women's sports hall remained. A former student said her university offered no facilities for women. A female lecturer at a state university said private universities have sports facilities for women, but are instructing students not to draw attention to this fact lest they face verbal attacks by religious conservatives.²³

²² Letter from Norah al-Fayez, deputy minister of education for girls, Ministry of Education, to Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2011, received January 9, 2012.

²³ Human Rights Watch interview with Iman F., lecturer at a Riyadh university, Riyadh, November 18, 2011.

II. Recreational Sport

Social norms in Saudi Arabia generally dictate that women should not appear in public “unnecessarily”—this is understood to include engaging in exercise—and that a woman should not come into contact with an unrelated man. A separate police force, the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, or religious police, enforces these norms, although enforcement is inconsistent and is not clearly spelled out in law. These norms discourage women from exercising in public. At the same time private female sporting facilities are simply not available or accessible for many women because of their cost and scarcity, and in any case are of a much lower standard than the many facilities available to men.

The Saudi women interviewed by Human Rights Watch for this report spoke of the pleasure they derived from exercising when abroad or in certain enclaves within the kingdom, and they lamented the lack of facilities for women in the kingdom. Dima H. said her happiest moments were when she played soccer with her brothers.²⁴

The government contributes to the discrimination against women in the provision of sports facilities by denying business licenses to gyms for women unless they declare them as health clubs—essentially fitness centers with fitness machines and aerobics classes, but not gyms or sports clubs offering the variety of different sporting activities that is widely available for men, including team sports and athletics.

Sporting Activities

The home is where Saudi women can freely exercise, provided they have the necessary space, equipment, and time, as well as approval from family members. Najwa J., 43, from Qatif, told Human Rights Watch that she leads a busy life and only has time to exercise at home on a stationary bicycle twice a week.²⁵ She said that five years ago she started following the Tae Bo exercise routine at her home to maintain her fitness.²⁶ Samar B.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., al-Qatif, May 31, 2011.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

described how some of her family members would do some gymnastics exercises in the home before starting each day.²⁷

Others are luckier and have the money or the privilege to access more fully equipped gyms or sporting facilities. Enclaves where women can practice sports include ARAMCO, the Saudi state-owned oil company headquartered in Khobar in the Eastern Province, in whose compounds Saudi and non-Saudi employees, men and women, mingle and can play sports. In Riyadh, the Youth Sports' Association, part of the American School, offers sporting facilities to men and women. In Jeddah, a new gym for women claims to be the only fully-equipped facility for women in the kingdom.

Dima H. described the “fantastic moments” when she could swim with her brothers in the ARAMCO pool in Khobar.²⁸ The compound was “a state within another state” where rules of gender segregation, the ban on women driving, and prohibition of women practicing sports did not exist, perhaps a remnant from the time when ARAMCO was an American-run company.²⁹

Hadeer S. said she had been playing basketball since she was 12-years-old, and still played three times a week for two hours at a time. Her club, Jeddah United, is the only club in a city of several million people where girls can play basketball.³⁰ In Riyadh, the American School houses a sports complex at which girls can play team sports, such as soccer and volleyball. Norah A. said she goes there every weekend. She said that although only a few girls participated, their numbers had recently increased.³¹

Facilities for Women

The facilities at Jeddah United club and at the American School in Riyadh are exceptional in offering women and girls the opportunity to play team sports like soccer and basketball. Most gyms for women in Saudi Arabia are exercise and fitness centers, rather than sports clubs.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

³¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

Between 2009 and 2010 Saudi authorities clamped down on gyms for women, closing a number of “unlicensed” facilities, in particular in Jeddah.³² In mid-2009 the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs issued a decision closing all women’s gyms and allowing only those affiliated with a health center to operate.³³ The spokesperson of Jeddah’s municipality, Ahmed al-Ghamdi, explained that, at that time, the government was not issuing “permission for women-only sports club[s].”³⁴ Shabnam Naz, a manager of a beauty salon who had tried to obtain a license for a women’s fitness center, said that she had submitted all required documents, but that “the General Presidency of Sport and Youth Welfare provides licenses to men’s fitness clubs but not for women’s clubs.”³⁵ In October 2009, the GPYW issued the first license for a children’s club, Sports Kids Club in Jeddah, to allow girls under the age of 13 to practice sports.³⁶ In June 2010, however, the GPYW had not yet established the five sports clubs for women planned in 2007, and there were no plans in its budget to do so that year.³⁷ A different government entity, the Royal Commission for Jubail, an industrial and port city in the Eastern Province, began work in October 2010 on what it billed as the first sport and cultural club for women run by a government agency.³⁸

In response to the closures of women’s gyms, which continued until 2010, a group of women launched a campaign on the internet called “Let Her Get Fat.”³⁹ The campaign

³² Fatmah al-Amro, “First Women’s Sports and Entertainment Club Opens,” *Saudi Gazette*, May 26, 2010, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2010052673492> (accessed September 13, 2011).

³³ “Saudi Women Launch ‘Let Her Get Fat’ Campaign Against Closure of Clubs (سعوديات يطلقن حملة “خلوها تسمن” ضد إغلاق نوادي الرياضة النسائية),” *Arabianbusiness.com*, March 23, 2009, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/arabic/550398> (accessed September 13, 2011).

³⁴ Sameera Aziz, “Women Rally to Get Their Own, Licensed Gyms,” *Saudi Gazette*, June 16, 2009, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009061640977&archiveissuedate=16/06/2009> (accessed September 12, 2011).

³⁵ Sameera Aziz, “Women Rally to Get Their Own, Licensed Gyms,” *Saudi Gazette*, June 16, 2009, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009061640977&archiveissuedate=16/06/2009> (accessed September 12, 2011).

³⁶ Adnan al-Shabrawi, “Sports Authority Licenses Club for Girls under 13,” *Saudi Gazette*, October 12, 2009, October 12, 2009 <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009101251296&archiveissuedate=12/10/2009> (accessed September 17, 2011).

³⁷ Walaah Hawari, “Will the Kingdom Ever Have Sports Centers for Women?,” *Arab News*, June 11, 2010, <http://arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/article63941.ece> (accessed September 16, 2011).

³⁸ Sa’id al-Shahrani, “First Governmental Sport Club for Saudi Women in Jubail (أول نادٍ رياضي حكومي للمرأة السعودية في (الجبيل الصناعية),” *Al-Watan*, October 27, 2010, http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Sports/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=26754&CategoryID=6 (accessed February 14, 2011).

³⁹ “Health Authorities in Jeddah Have Shut Down an “Illegal” Women’s Fitness Centre,” *Sodahead website*, <http://www.sodahead.com/united-states/health-authorities-in-jeddah-have-shut-down-an-illegal-womens-fitness-centre/blog-241757/> (accessed September 12, 2011); and “Saudi Women Launch ‘Let Her Get Fat’ Campaign Against Closure

vowed to boycott health clubs for women attached to hospitals—the only ones that were allowed under the new regulations—because of steep fees amounting to at least 500 Saudi Riyals per month (US\$133), compared to the women’s gyms, where monthly fees could be as low as 100 Riyals (\$27) (Norah A.’s monthly fees in the Riyadh club were 200 riyals).⁴⁰

Najwa J., from Qatif, in the Eastern Province, said that three or four small women’s gyms continued to operate in her town, but that she never enrolled because they were “very small with little equipment.”⁴¹ After leaving the ARAMCO compound, Dima H. worked in a health insurance company in Dammam and Khobar. She stopped practicing sports or exercising, she said, because “there are no private sports clubs for women and girls ... because there is no authorization for women to open and run such clubs as long as the religious authority prohibits women from doing so.”⁴² Reem Q. told Human Rights Watch that the only way she could practice sport was in a health club in Jeddah.⁴³

Since 2010 new women’s gyms have opened, but most charge hefty fees. Annual fees in three gyms ranged from SAR 4,800 to SAR 6,800 (\$1,778 to \$2,519).⁴⁴ In Jeddah, Samar B. told Human Rights Watch, she opened a women’s gym in mid-2010, but she had to label it a health club, with the sign outside describing it as a “center for natural remedy, [because] so far, there is no measure that authorizes gyms for females. Legally, a sports facility dedicated to women should aim at therapy only with specific and limited sports equipment.”⁴⁵

Samar B. also had to get a man to agree to be the owner of the club “in order to ease the procedures of obtaining the license from the Ministry of Trade.”⁴⁶ Although the club is billed as a health center, it offers lessons in swimming, squash, tennis, volleyball, and aerobics, and has a walking area. It also provides its clients with fat-free food and a

of Clubs (سعوديات يطلقن حملة "خلوها تسمن" ضد إغلاق نوادي الرياضة النسائية), *Arabianbusiness.com*, March 23, 2009, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/arabic/550398> (accessed September 13, 2011).

⁴⁰ See for an example of a website carrying the demands of the campaign: *Forum for the School* (منتدى مدرسة المشاعبيين), <http://www.bdr130.net/vb/t481669.html> (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

⁴² Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interview with Reem Q., Jeddah, May 27, 2011.

⁴⁴ Amal al-Sibai, “Fitness Centers for Women in Jeddah,” *Saudi Gazette*, September 5, 2011,

<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2011090510829> (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

medical service to deal with injuries.⁴⁷ The club has become a success, with more than 2,000 members joining in the first eight months. Some doctors now refer patients to exercise at her club, Samar B. said.⁴⁸

Team Sports

While a limited number of often expensive health clubs offering exercise and fitness equipment for women exist in Saudi Arabia, women and girls have few if any opportunities to play competitive or team sports.

Aliyah Qureishi, a young woman from Jeddah, told *Arab News* that she “finds her passion for playing football is wasted.”⁴⁹ There were no facilities in which she could play and society frowned upon women playing sports considered to be in the domain of men. “But I love football and there should be a place for women to pursue our love for sports. Eventually, I make an excuse to go play football with my friends outside. [I]f my parents knew the truth they would start hyperventilating,” she told the *Arab News*.⁵⁰

Hadeer S. said there were not enough courts for women to play basketball, compared to the large number available to men. “Gyms are available in general for women,” she said. “What is lacking are courts to play sports like basketball, etc. [Furthermore,] women need to play sports in an indoor court or gym in order to not be bothered by the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice [the kingdom’s official morality police]”.⁵¹

Norah A. said that the Youth Association, the only place she could play volleyball, was far away on the outskirts of Riyadh. “In Riyadh, there are many gyms for women, but women can only swim or practice aerobics, limiting their range of sports. It’s harder for women to find a sports’ facility where they are able to play the sport they want,” Norah A. said.⁵²

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁴⁹ Mariam Nihal, “Saudi Women Fighting the Odds,” *Arab News*, February 22, 2011, <http://arabnews.com/saudi Arabia/article279671.ece> (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁵⁰ Mariam Nihal, “Saudi Women Fighting the Odds,” *Arab News*, February 22, 2011, <http://arabnews.com/saudi Arabia/article279671.ece> (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

⁵² Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

Another problem is finding qualified sports and exercise instructors. In Samar B.'s club, all the trainers are foreigners.⁵³ At Jeddah United, Hadeer S. said that all her basketball coaches had been foreigners—Syrian, French, and American. There were not enough coaches to train women and the advanced team was currently training by itself, she said.⁵⁴ Reem Q. said that to promote sports in the kingdom it was necessary to prepare sports facilities and “qualified female instructors.”⁵⁵

Unequal Treatment

The availability, accessibility, and quality of sports services available to women and girls are far inferior to those available to men and boys. As Najwa J. puts it: “It’s so closed to us, too open for them ... There are clubs dedicated to men everywhere.”⁵⁶

After she could no longer use the ARAMCO facilities, Dima H. said that seeing her brothers continue their sporting activities in clubs and gyms made her feel the disadvantage of being a woman acutely, since no such facilities for women exist in Dammam or Khobar.⁵⁷ Norah A. concurred, saying that “men and boys do have a wide range of choice” in their sporting activities whereas girls are restricted to private schools and the occasional youth sports association.⁵⁸

Men have access to sporting facilities at state universities, but women rarely do. “In college [at Dammam’s King Faisal University], I did not play sports at all, as no classes were scheduled for female students,” she said. Norah A. confirmed that female students do not practice sport at university because there are no classes for them.⁵⁹

The new all-women’s Nora bint Abdulrahman University for 40,000 students that opened in 2011 in Riyadh does have sports facilities, though they have not been put to use yet.⁶⁰

⁵³ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Reem Q., May 27, 2011.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Iman F., November 18, 2011.

Sports facilities that are open to women, such as the sport association on the outskirts of Riyadh frequented by Norah A., are often not easily accessible because of limits on women's freedom of movement. Saudi Arabia maintains a ban on women driving, and generally imposes the system of male guardianship whereby most actions by a woman, including the ability to go out wherever and whenever she wishes, requires the approval, sometimes in writing, of her male guardian—a father, husband, brother, or other close male relative. The male guardian can be a child, but the system applies to women of all ages.

Saudi Arabia's strict clothing requirements for women are a further impediment. Outdoors, a woman must wear a black cloak, called an *'abaya*, covering her from head to toe. Najwa J. told Human Rights Watch that a few years ago Qatif residents held a "marathon" in which women could participate, but only wearing the *'abaya*.

Furthermore, opening hours for sporting facilities for women are shorter than those for men who can "practice sports whenever they want, since some [men's] clubs are open early in the morning until late at night, which is not the case at clubs for women," Najwa J. said.⁶¹

Saudi women who spoke with Human Rights Watch also noted a difference in the quality of services provided. Najwa J. said while clubs for men "offered a wide range of activities," those for women were more restricted.⁶² Norah A. told Human Rights Watch that gyms for women "only offer swimming and/or aerobics." Fitness centers for men were very well equipped offering more opportunities for men to exercise than those for women, she said.⁶³

The biggest difference between facilities for men and women, some of the women said, is not in the exercise equipment, but in the opportunities to play competitive sports, and team sports such as soccer, volleyball, or basketball in particular.

Women and girls in Saudi Arabia are also banned from attending public sporting events as spectators, in particular in soccer stadiums. In May 2011 Saudi journalists expressed outrage at the fact that a number of women had entered the Muhammad bin Fahd stadium

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

⁶² Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

in Dammam together with men to watch a training session of the Egyptian soccer club, *al-Zamalek*, in a “clear violation of the laws of the General Presidency for Youth Welfare.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ “Female Zamalek Supporters Cause Indignation of Saudi Street! (إمشجعات الزمالك يثرن استياء الشارع السعودي),” Special for *Alkooora.com*, May 5, 2011, <http://www.kooora.com/default.aspx?n=106937> (accessed May 6, 2011). Human Rights Watch has been unable to verify any such laws.

III. Competitive Sport

Saudi Arabia is perhaps the only country in the world that does not have competitive sportswomen. This is hardly surprising, given the disadvantages and discrimination women and girls suffer in the provision of sport facilities.

“So far, there is no possibility to have professional female teams because women first have to get recognition of their right to practice sports,” Samar B., the manager of the women’s gym in Jeddah, said.⁶⁵ Without support from government mechanisms, there were too few Saudi women who practiced any sport to imagine a professional team, she said.⁶⁶

Norah A. said she did not know of any Saudi professional sportswomen. The lack of facilities and support for women meant that “consequently, moving into professional practice becomes harder, if not impossible.”⁶⁷ Reem Q. said the Ministry of Education should “conduct competitions [for girls] at the national level.”⁶⁸

Samar B. said she knew four Saudi women athletes who had previously trained abroad and now trained every day in her club and who “meet the standards and requirements of international competitions,” especially in swimming. However, she said, the government did not allow them to become part of the Saudi national sporting team, since there was no women’s section.⁶⁹

One young Saudi woman, Dalma Muhsin, who was 18-years-old at the time, did win a bronze medal at the 2010 Singapore Youth Olympic Games. Muhsin was the first Saudi woman ever to participate in any Olympic Games, or any other international sporting event. She also became the first Saudi woman, and indeed the first woman from the Gulf region, to win an Olympic medal.⁷⁰ According to media reports, King Abdullah personally intervened to ensure Muhsin could participate in the Singapore Games. But she did not

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Reem Q., May 27, 2011.

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

⁷⁰ “Equestrian Muhsin First Saudi and Gulf to Win Olympic Medal (الفارسة محسن أول سعودية وخليجية تحرز ميدالية اولمبية),” *Dar al-Hayat*, August 23, 2010, <http://ksa.daralhayat.com/portalarticlendam/175290> (accessed August 5, 2011).

benefit from either Saudi or Olympic sponsorship and her participation did not fully comply with normal procedures of admission for the games, international sporting officials told Human Rights Watch, without providing details and on condition of anonymity.⁷¹

Muhsin is the daughter of Arwa Mutabagani, a dedicated equestrian who lived mostly in Italy. In 2008 Mutabagani became a member of the Saudi Equestrian Federation. She is the first and only woman to hold a position in one of the 29 recognized Saudi sporting federations.⁷² These federations nominate athletes for participation in international competitions, in tandem with the Saudi National Olympic Committee. The International Olympic Committee has to recognize the competitions as meeting IOC standards.⁷³

So far, however, there has been no official support for women's competitive sport in the kingdom, and Muhsin remains the singular exception of a Saudi female competitor in an international sporting event. Reem said that the prevailing attitude from both Saudi society and the government was that "women continue to be debased in our country," and this prevented their participation in sporting competitions.⁷⁴ The General Presidency of Youth Welfare (GPYW) has no women's or girls' section, and neither does the Saudi National Olympic Committee or any of the 29 sporting federations.⁷⁵

Prince Nawwaf bin Faisal is, at the same time, the head of the GPYW, a government agency, and the Saudi National Olympic Committee. On September 14, 2011, Prince Nawwaf announced that the GPYW had spent 17.3 million Saudi Riyals (\$4.6 million) on the 153

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interview with senior international sporting officials, early 2011.

⁷² Faiza Saleh Ambah, "An Olympic Door Opens for Women," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2008, <http://abdullahalami.blogspot.com/2008/08/olympic-door-opens-for-saudi-woman.html> (accessed April 28, 2011), and Sa'd al-Subai'i, "Arwa Mutabagani First Woman Joining Membership of a Sporting Federation in the Kingdom (أروى مطبقاني أول سيدة تنضم لعضوية اتحاد رياضي بالملكة)," *Al-Watan*, April 6, 2008, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=2746&id=48930> (accessed July 21, 2011). Mutabagani does not appear among the board members of the Saudi Olympic Committee, however. See: "Olympic Committee Board Members," *Saudi National Olympic Committee*, <http://www.saudiolympic.org.sa/modules/administration/item.php?itemid=33> (accessed September 23, 2011).

⁷³ For each sporting discipline sets competitive qualifying standards, scores, times, distances, weights, and so forth, in order to compete at the Olympic Games. For example, see the "Entry Standards" set for the London 2012 Olympic Games by the International Association of Athletics Federations, http://www.iaaf.org/mm/document/statistics/standards/05/97/61/20110415082248_httppostedfile_entrystandards_london2012_24135.pdf (accessed November 24, 2011).

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Reem Q., May 27, 2011.

⁷⁵ For the federations, see: <http://www.saudiolympic.org.sa/modules/administration/item.php?itemid=15> (accessed November 17, 2011).

existing sports clubs in the kingdom to expand their activities in 2011.⁷⁶ The GPYW oversees sports clubs in the kingdom and is in the process of revising the unified bylaws for clubs, which are government-issued regulations. A review of the existing and proposed bylaws yielded no overt ban on clubs forming women's sections. However, there is no mention of sport for women, either.⁷⁷

Jeddah United, which fields basketball teams for women and girls at three age levels, may be the only club in the kingdom to have a women's section.⁷⁸ A team member told Human Rights Watch that the women's basketball teams do not have any other clubs against which they can compete, and can only play competitive matches against informal local private women and girls' basketball teams or those from private schools or universities. Their games and tournaments receive no official sponsorship or support, and they have not represented Saudi Arabia in regional or international competitions.⁷⁹

In May 2011, Yusif Khamis, the director of the GPYW for al-Ahsa district in the Eastern Province, told *Al-Yaum* daily newspaper that the GPYW was planning to open sports clubs for women, but he rejected an alternative proposal to reserve certain days every week for women to practice sports in existing male-only clubs. Khamis said this was unworkable because of the full schedule of existing clubs.⁸⁰ A proposal by the Shura Council in 2007 to create five women's sports clubs by the beginning of 2011 remains unfulfilled.⁸¹

Competitive sport for women in Saudi Arabia therefore remains small-scale and consists of privately organized matches between private teams operating outside official sporting structures, such as clubs or state school or university teams. In 2007 the Saudi religious police reportedly prevented a private soccer tournament for women organized by a private

⁷⁶ The figure is for the *hijri* year 1432 to 1433, which roughly corresponds to the year 2011 of the Common Era.

⁷⁷ See the published existing and proposed changes in the bylaws of the General Presidency for Youth Welfare, Sport Affairs Agency and General Administration for Sport Clubs and Federations (وكالة الشؤون الرياضية، والرئاسة العامة لرعاية الشباب، والإدارة العامة للأندية والاتحادات الرياضية) and Project to Revise the Basic Unified Regulation for Clubs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (المملكة العربية السعودية في المملعة الأساسية الموحدة للأندية في) (مشروع لإعداد اللائحة الأساسية الموحدة للأندية في المملكة العربية السعودية), <http://www.gpyw.gov.sa/sports/> (accessed September 14, 2011).

⁷⁸ See "JU Divisions; Basketball," at jeddah-united.com (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Lina M., Jeddah, September 17, 2011.

⁸⁰ Ghada al-Bish, "Invitation for Women to Participate in Sport Clubs (دعوة لمشاركة النساء في الأندية الرياضية)," *Al-Yaum*, May 10, 2011, <http://www.alyaum.com/News/art/11334.html?print> (accessed September 13, 2011).

⁸¹ Sa'd al-Subai'i, "Women Sports Overcomes Negligence and Attains Participatory Level and Honorable Accomplishments (الرياضة النسائية تتخطى مرحلة التغيب وتبلغ مستوى المشاركة والإنجاز المشرف)," *Al-Watan* (Saudi Arabia), March 8, 2010, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3447&id=139318> (accessed August 5, 2011).

university in Damman, in the Eastern Province.⁸² In July 2009 the first women's soccer tournament took place in Jeddah, with six participating teams.⁸³ Earlier that year in March, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a businessman known for his support for women's rights in the kingdom, sponsored Kings' Federation (*Ittihad al-Muluk*), a Saudi women's soccer team, with 155,000 Saudi Riyals (\$30,600) for one year.⁸⁴ These auspicious beginnings came to an end, however, when the government pressured the team sponsored by Prince Alwaleed to disband in late 2010, Samar B. said.⁸⁵

⁸² Razan Baker, "Make Way for Saudi Women in Sports," *Arab News*, June 1, 2007,

<http://archive.arabnews.com/?page=8§ion=0&article=96909&d=1&m=6&y=2007> (accessed November 18, 2011).

⁸³ Hamad al-'Ushaiyan, "They Held the Cup: 'Kings United' Realizes first Saudi Women's Soccer Championship (خطفن الكأس)", *Al-Watan*, July 8, 2009,

<http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3204&id=109262> (accessed April 5, 2011).

⁸⁴ "Alwaleed bin Talal Sponsors First Women's Soccer Team with 115 Thousand Riyal (الوليد بن طلال يدعم أول فريق كرة قدم)", *Al-Riyadh*, March 22, 2009, <http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/03/22/article417511.html> (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

IV. Olympic Movement and Values

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been engaging Saudi Arabia and the Saudi National Olympic Committee in particular on the need to provide sports facilities for women.⁸⁶ The IOC indicated that it was pleased that Muhsin participated in the Singapore Games, and that it hoped for further Saudi female participation in the Olympic Games.

But unlike its neighbors Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Emirates, Oman, and Yemen, Saudi Arabia has not even begun to lay the bases for promoting women's sport through physical education in school and sporting federations. In March 2011 Gulf Games for Women were held in seven disciplines in Abu Dhabi, but Saudi Arabia did not send any women athletes.⁸⁷ This was despite a Saudi promise to participate by sending women's sports teams for the first time to an international competition.⁸⁸

The Saudi National Olympic Committee (NOC) is responsible, together with the 29 recognized Saudi sporting federations, for organizing competitive tournaments and selecting athletes and teams to represent the kingdom internationally. The Saudi NOC does not have a women's section, and neither do any of the 29 sporting federations. Saudi Arabia has never fielded a woman athlete in an international competition with the exception of Dalma Muhsin, whose participation at the 2010 Singapore Youth Olympic Games, described above, was not sponsored by the Saudi Arabian government.

For the sake of universality, the International Olympic Committee reserves special slots for male and female competitors in swimming and track and field (athletics) who are not required to meet the qualifying standards. These slots are designed to allow nations who would not otherwise qualify nonetheless to be represented in the games by both male and female athletes. Saudi Arabia has shown no sign that it intends to take advantage of this system to field women in its universality slots.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Tommy Sithole, director of international relations, International Olympic Committee, Lausanne, March 24, 2011.

⁸⁷ "Gulf Women Compete in 7 Sports (رياضات 7 يتنافسن في الخليج)," *Dar al-Hayat*, March 8, 2011, <http://www.daralhayat.com/portalarticlendam/241856> (accessed March 8, 2011).

⁸⁸ Muhammad al-Jabali, "Women's Sport Committee in Cooperation Council Studies Establishing Television Station (لجنة لرياضة المرأة في مجلس التعاون تدرس إنشاء قناة تلفزيونية)," *Al-Arab* (Qatar), June 5, 2009, <http://alarab.com.qa/details.php?docId=84813&issueNo=529&secId=20> (September 21, 2011).

⁸⁹ See: *Federation Internationale de Natation*, "Memorandum to All FINA Member Federations Concerning London 2012 Olympic Games Universality Places," March 16, 2011 (on file with Human Rights Watch).

In November 2011, Prince Nawwaf bin Faisal, the president of the Saudi NOC, announced that the Saudi NOC would send only a men's team to the London 2012 Olympic Games.⁹⁰ However, Prince Nawwaf did not rule out the possibility of a Saudi woman participating.

If there is to be women's participation, then ... it would be by invitation [from outside bodies], and we would be keen to have women's participation in the appropriate form and dress and according to Islamic precepts and in the presence of her male guardian and provided that while she performs the sport no part of her is visible contrary to the Sharia.⁹¹

Saudi Arabia is only one of three countries never to have nominated a female athlete to the Olympic Games—Brunei and Qatar being the other two. Qatar, host to the 2006 Asian Games, has begun to develop a program for women in sport and has fielded national women's teams in regional competitions.⁹² Both Qatar and Brunei also sent girls to participate in the 2010 Singapore Youth Olympics. Unlike Saudi Arabia, both countries also sent female athletes to the Women's Islamic Games held in Iran, where some won medals.⁹³ In November 2010 the National Olympic Committees of the Gulf Cooperation Council member states decided to add volleyball for women as a category and said they would hold competitions soon for all national teams "with the exception of Saudi Arabia," which does not have such a team.⁹⁴ In July 2010 Qatar announced it was planning to send women athletes to the London 2012 Olympic Games.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ "Nawwaf bin Faisal: No Saudi Female Members in London Olympics («أولمبياد في» نواف بن فيصل: لا عناصر نسائية سعودية في «أولمبياد في» نواف بن فيصل)», *Al Hayat*, November 23, 2011, <http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/331885> (accessed November 24, 2011).

⁹¹ "Nawwaf bin Faisal Announces It: Saudi Female Participation in Olympics According to Islamic Precepts (نواف بن فيصل (يعلنها. مشاركة سعودية نسائية في الأولمبياد وفق الضوابط الإسلامية)», *Alarabiya.net*, November 23, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/22/178629.html> (accessed November 24, 2011).

⁹² "Qatar Women Hope To Make History, Athletes Eye 2012 Olympics," *Arab Times Online*, December 23, 2011, <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smId/414/ArticleID/177615/refTab/36/t/Qatar-women-hope-to-make-history/Default.aspx> (accessed December 27, 2011).

⁹³ See All-Time Women's Islamic Games Medal Table, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overall_Women%27s_Islamic_Games_Medal_Count (accessed July 22, 2011).

⁹⁴ "Gulf Olympic Committees Suggest Inclusion of Women's and Disabled Sport in Gulf Competitions (اللجان الاولمبية الخليجية) (تقترح مشاركة رياضة المرأة والمعاقين بالدورة الخليجية)», *Kuwaiti News Agency*, November 1, 2010, <http://www.kuna.net.kw/NewsAgenciesPublicsite/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2122045&Language=ar> (accessed March 15, 2011).

⁹⁵ Duncan Mackay, "Qatar decision to send female athletes to London 2012 increases pressure on Saudi Arabia," *Inside the Games*, July 1, 2010, <http://www.insidethegames.biz/olympics/summer-olympics/2012/9939-qatar-set-to-bow-to-ioc-pressure-and-send-women-to-london-2012> (accessed November 24, 2011).

The Saudi NOC does not support women athletes, yet it enjoys IOC technical and financial cooperation and support. For example, the IOC, as part of the Olympic Solidarity Program, supported the Saudi NOC in 2010 with a total of \$168,000. Some of this money was spent on “strengthening Olympic values,” but apparently not on ending discrimination against women in sports, a key Olympic value.⁹⁶

In October 2009 the IOC gained UN observer status in recognition of its contribution through sport to the UN Millennium Development Goals, which include gender equality. At a meeting to discuss gender equality and sport in June 2010, Anita De Frantz, IOC member and Chair of the IOC Women and Sport Commission, said:

Sport helps empower girls and women because it changes attitudes. It helps women competitors realise their own potential and it helps others see them in a new light. When a woman athlete triumphs, she often becomes a role model for her family, her community or even her country ... Change in this area does not come easy. We need strong partnerships to ensure that more women and girls have access to physical activity worldwide. To make real progress, we need the cooperation of governments, educational institutions and the private sector.⁹⁷

Currently, Saudi Arabia’s discriminatory policies against women and girls in sport are in clear violation of the Olympic Charter, which states:

The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind [and any] form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of

⁹⁶ “Olympic Solidarity Program,” *Saudi National Olympic Committee*, <http://www.saudiolympic.org.sa/modules/administration/item.php?itemid=46> (accessed July 10, 2011). The website gives the following breakdown of expenditures: US\$30,000 for developing NOC administration, \$15,000 for sporting methods advisor, \$2,000 for introducing the solidarity program, \$2,500 for a “strengthening Olympic values” meeting in May 2010, \$34,000 for preparing athletes for regional games for Shooting Federation, \$45,000 for preparing athletes for Cycling Federation, \$8,000 for leadership training each for soccer and tennis, and \$20,000 for public awareness via an NOC stand at the Janadiriyya cultural festival in Riyadh.

⁹⁷ “Gender Equality in and through Sport Discussed at UN Meetings,” *International Olympic Committee*, June 29, 2010, <http://www.olympic.org/women-sport-commission?articlenewsgroup=-1&articleid=93070> (accessed July 18, 2011).

race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement.⁹⁸

Given the glacial pace to date of advancing the ability of women and girls to participate in sport in Saudi Arabia, and the setbacks experienced, a “strong partnership” with the Saudi NOC should involve the IOC setting clear benchmarks and timelines for women’s ability to participate in sports as conditions for further cooperation, including Saudi Arabia’s participation in the London Olympic Games.

Senior IOC officials explained to Human Rights Watch that they were not considering reviewing Saudi Arabia’s membership in the IOC or its participation in this year’s Olympic Games, because “the selection of the [Olympic] team is the right of the NOC. The IOC will not ask Saudi Arabia to send a woman—we will not make Saudi Arabia’s participation conditional on that.”⁹⁹ In July 2011, an IOC spokeswoman, Sandrine Tonge, reiterated that position, saying the IOC governing body “does not give ultimatums nor deadlines but rather believes that a lot can be achieved through dialogue.”¹⁰⁰

This position is inconsistent both with past IOC practice and with the lack of progress to date through dialogue with Saudi Arabia. The International Olympic Committee banned Afghanistan in 1999 from participating in the 2000 Sydney Olympics based on the Taliban’s replacement of Afghan National Olympic Committee administrators with its own political appointees who greatly reduced sports practiced and discriminated against women. Then-director-general of the IOC, Francois Carrard, explained that “the Taliban run NOC, which among other things, prohibited women to compete in sports, [is in] violation of the Olympic Charter for discrimination in sport.”¹⁰¹ South Africa under apartheid long faced a ban on participation in the Olympic Games, from 1964 until 1992, even though the country had offered to field black athletes and thus had not “technically” violated the IOC

⁹⁸ *International Olympic Committee*, “Olympic Charter,” February 11, 2010, Fundamental Principles, principles 4 and 5.

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Tommy Sithole, March 24, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Patrick Goodenough, “Int’l Olympic Committee Talking to Saudis About Ban on Female Athletes, But No Ultimatum,” *CNS news*, July 12, 2011, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/int-l-olympic-committee-talking-saudis-a> (accessed July 21, 2011).

¹⁰¹ Scott Rosner and Deborah Low, “The Efficacy of Olympic Bans and Boycotts on Effectuating International Political and Economic Change,” *Texas Review of Entertainment and Sports Law*, vol. 11 no. 1 (2009), p.65.

mandate, a senior IOC official said.¹⁰² The decision to ban South Africa was made “because of the systemic nature of the problem” of racial discrimination, he explained.¹⁰³

The IOC’s acquiescence in Saudi Arabia’s systematic discrimination against women in sports frustrates the aspirations of Saudi women hoping one day to participate in the Olympic Games. A member of what is probably the most professional women’s sporting team in the kingdom, Jeddah United’s basketball team, said she did not believe Saudi women were ready to compete at the Olympic level, but criticized the lack of government support for women’s sport to lay the foundations for future participation.¹⁰⁴ Samar B. criticized the lack of “a clear vision to implement training of Saudi coaches [and] competitions between female teams in Saudi Arabia.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch interview with Tommy Sithole, March 24, 2011.

¹⁰³ Human Rights Watch interview with Tommy Sithole, March 24, 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Lina M., September 17, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

V. Saudi Views on Women and Sport

The Saudi debate about women and sport pitches advocates of women's participation against conservative religious clerics who fear that allowing women to practice sport will set them on a path of immorality. Advocates mainly stress the health benefits of exercise, and individual Saudis also point to the improved self-esteem women gain from practicing sport. Some government officials publicly support these views, but government policy has not significantly changed what is in effect a ban on women practicing sport on terms equal to those of men.

Official Views

In June 2009 Nura al-Fayiz, Deputy Minister of Education in charge of girls' education, told *Al-Watan* that "the time was still too soon for [the] topic" of sports for girls.¹⁰⁶ Since then several Saudi officials have endorsed the idea of introducing physical education for girls in schools and allowing women to practice sports in clubs. The most recent announcement came from Minister of Education Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, who in August 2011 said he was studying the introduction of physical education for girls in schools and ways of establishing departments for women's sports at colleges and universities.¹⁰⁷ In May 2011 the director of girls' education in the Eastern Province, Dr. Samir 'Umran, told *Al-Yaum* newspaper that girls in government schools in the Eastern Province would be able to practice sports "soon" in four new sports and cultural buildings to be built.¹⁰⁸ An article on June 20, 2011 in the same newspaper stated that a "national strategy for sports in schools in all stages of education for boys in the kingdom" was currently being prepared. The article went on to indicate that the new strategy would include sports for girls. It described female educators welcoming the new strategy as "empower[ing] Saudi women to exercise their right to sports."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Amal al-Turaiki and Nura al-Hajiri, "Nura al-Fayiz: Too Soon For Women's Sport (نورة الفايز: الوقت مبكر على الرياضة (النسائية)," *Al-Watan*, June 8, 2009, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3174&id=105372> (accessed August 1, 2011).

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch Interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Saif al-Harithi, "Four Sport Buildings for Girls in the Eastern [Province] and Cameras to Monitor the Schools (مبان رياضية 4 للبنات بالشرقية وكاميرات لمراقبة المدارس)," *Al-Yaum*, March 5, 2011, <http://www.alyaum.com/News/art/6024.html> (accessed August 1, 2011).

¹⁰⁹ "Launch of National Strategy for School Sport (إطلاق استراتيجية وطنية للرياضة المدرسية)," *Al-Yaum*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.alyaum.com/News/art/16059.html> (accessed August 1, 2011).

Whether these endorsements remain individual sentiments or reflect evolving government policy remains unclear, in particular in light of missed deadlines and the setback of the government's closing of women's gyms in 2009 and 2010.

Although the government has not actively supported women's ability to practice sport on a level equal to men, there appears to be no written law that prohibits sport for women. Dima H. recalled that a few years ago in Dammam, a local mosque introduced men's and women's days for exercising by walking around the mosque, although women complained that they could then not take their husbands with them.¹¹⁰

Dima H. said that in her private school, teachers following the national curriculum taught her the slogan, "A sane mind in a healthy body," but also that the role of women was to do housework.¹¹¹ Norah A. said that in her private school, sports and biology professors taught students that sport is healthy, although a religion teacher said that sport was only for boys, because women's bodies were fragile.¹¹²

The issues of physical education for girls at school and the ability of women to practice sport have come up at the United Nations, where specialized committees discussed Saudi Arabia's implementation of the human rights obligations it has undertaken.

In 2007 the Saudi delegation promised the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee), the committee tasked with monitoring the implementation of the CEDAW Convention, that curricula for boys and girls at all levels of education were being "standardized between the sexes" and stated, incorrectly, that no discrimination exists in respect of the facilities and equipment provided to both sexes."¹¹³

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee), overseeing the implementation of children's rights, did not raise the exclusion of girls from physical education during a review of Saudi Arabia's compliance with the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 2006.¹¹⁴ Without questioning a gender bias, the UN Committee accepted the

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

¹¹² Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

¹¹³ Government of Saudi Arabia, Combined Initial and Second Periodic Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW/C/SAU/2, March 29, 2007, pp.31-32.

¹¹⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties under Article 44 of the Convention, Concluding Observations, Saudi Arabia," CRC/C/SAU/CO/2, March 17, 2006,

Saudi delegation’s statements regarding its support for sport for children, including “physical education curricula [that support] the acquisition of sporting skills,” as well as numerous activities under the General Presidency for Youth Welfare.¹¹⁵

The Saudi delegation outlined sport activities for children while failing to mention that they applied only to boys:

Within sporting activities, children are allowed to participate in all national and international individual and team sporting competitions with a view to developing their team spirit and sense of sportsmanship. School sports are organized through a variety of programmes, including weekly or bi-weekly classes, morning exercise sessions, the Children’s Fair, sports days, school sports championships, sporting finals and the activities which the General Presidency for Youth Welfare runs through sports clubs countrywide.¹¹⁶

At the CEDAW Committee in 2007 the Saudi delegation stressed that the kingdom had in September 2003 begun to adopt measures to implement “equal opportunities for both sexes to participate actively in sports and physical education.”¹¹⁷ As evidence it noted that government clubs attached to the Ministry of Defense and the National Guard were open to women and girls, and that 17,000 women and girls were members of private clubs where they practiced a variety of sports.¹¹⁸

Religious Views

The view that sports should be restricted to men and boys appears to be based not on religious law, but on on cultural norms that view a woman’s role solely in housekeeping and the raising of children, and on underlying assumption of religious teachings.

[http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/898586b1dc7b4043c1256a450044f331/6145aocf3438dc54c1257168004c5998/\\$FILE/G0641006.pdf](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/898586b1dc7b4043c1256a450044f331/6145aocf3438dc54c1257168004c5998/$FILE/G0641006.pdf) (accessed September 6, 2011), para. 66.

¹¹⁵ Government of Saudi Arabia, Second Periodic Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, CRC/C/136/Add.1, April 21, 2005, paras 243 and 262.

¹¹⁶ Government of Saudi Arabia, Second Periodic Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, CRC/C/136/Add.1, April 21, 2005, para. 258.

¹¹⁷ Government of Saudi Arabia, Combined Initial and Second Periodic Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW/C/SAU/2, March 29, 2007, p.33.

¹¹⁸ Government of Saudi Arabia, Combined Initial and Second Periodic Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW/C/SAU/2, March 29, 2007, p.33 and pp. 43-44.

Sheikh Dr. Abd al-Karim al-Khudair, a prominent opponent of allowing women and girls to practice sport, wrote that calls to open women’s sport clubs to improve their health are “steps of the devil.” The sheikh was appointed by the king in February 2009 as a member of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, and since March 2010 has sat on its subsidiary Permanent Commission for Research and Religious Rulings, the only body allowed to pronounce on the correct interpretation of Islamic law in the kingdom.¹¹⁹ He made his remark in an undated book chapter entitled “Explanation-Editor: Book of Prayer.” Sheikh al-Khudair saw any measures to allow women to practice sport as a slippery slope towards immoral behavior. If women were allowed to play soccer, for example, under Islamic strictures, they would wear ‘*abayas*. But then those would get in the way, and they would take them off; then the women would find playing soccer in ordinary clothes unsuitable, and take those off, too, until there would be “no more difference between us and others, until we gradually get rid of all distinguishing differences” between men and women.¹²⁰

Sheikh Abdullah al-Mani’, another member of the senior scholars’ council who also serves as an advisor at the Royal Court, said in May 2010 that the health of a “virgin girl” will be affected by too much movement and jumping in sports such as soccer and basketball.¹²¹ For other sports, women would have to practice in closed locations, in the absence of men, and wear “loose clothing,” even when only the company of other women. In April 2009, Sheikh Salih al-Luhaidan, also a member of the senior scholars’ council and until February of that year also the kingdom’s chief justice, told *Al-Majd* television channel that “there is no prohibition” against women practicing sports, under certain conditions.¹²² However, Sports clubs for women are a “façade,” and not the “Islamically correct way,” al-Luhaidan said. “It is best for the Muslim woman to remain at home,” he stated, adding that “my

¹¹⁹ See: “The Shaikh’s Curriculum Vitae (سيرة الشيخ), The Official Site of Respected Sheikh Abd al-Karim bin Abdullah al-Khudair (الموقع الرسمي لفضيلة الشيخ عبدالكريم بن عبدالله الخضير),” <http://www.khudheir.com/pages/115> (accessed February 11, 2011). On the role of the committee, see: Christoph Boucek, “Saudi Fatwa Restrictions and the State-Clerical Relationship,” *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 27, 2010, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2010/10/27/saudi-fatwa-restrictions-and-state-clerical-relationship/1bv> (accessed October 27, 2010).

¹²⁰ Sheikh Dr. Abd al-Karim al-Khudair, *Explanation-Editor: Book of Prayer ((كتاب الصلاة (46) شرح: المحرر – كتاب الصلاة (46))*, <http://www.khudheir.com/audio/5547> (accessed February 11, 2011).

¹²¹ Yasir Ba-‘Amir, “Saudi Dispute About the Issue of Women Sport (جدل سعودي بشأن الرياضة النسائية),” *Aljazeera.net*, May 29, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/E87FE9B0-9540-4F63-8425-94741F2AEA76.htm> (accessed February 14, 2011).

¹²² Bashir al-Qudaimi, “Women’s Sports Clubs Have Other Goals and Participation in Them is not Allowed (الأندية النسائية (الرياضية لها أهداف أخرى ولا تجوز المشاركة فيها),” *Sisters’s Islamic Way Webforum*, May 21, 2009, <http://akhawat.islamway.com/forum/lofiversion/index.php?t213334.html> (accessed November 18, 2011).

advice to a man is not to allow his daughter, and a husband not to allow his wife, or to allow his sister to enter such a club.”

An anonymous group of self-described “elite religious scholars and seekers of knowledge,” writing on the internet in March 2010, made a more nuanced and detailed case in response to the announcement of the government’s plan to establish five women’s sport clubs by early 2011. The arguments of this group reflect opinions conservative Saudis have voiced in regard to women’s rights, including questions of mingling with men, modesty in dress, and appropriate gender roles. Their religious argumentation presents a good summary of such conservative views on women and sports.

The group affirmed the principal equality between men and women in practicing sport, quoting ‘Aisha, wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who ran a race against the Prophet. However, a woman must only exercise in harmony with her “human condition,” which precludes women from wrestling, for example, lest she become “masculinized resembling men.” She may also not practice dangerous or harmful sports that could cause immediate harm or harm in the future. Furthermore, she must not reveal her private parts, understood by this group to mean large parts of a woman’s body, not only the genitals. This condition would rule out swimming, soccer, or basketball, the group determined. Furthermore, unlawful mixing with unrelated men, as spectators or participants, was also forbidden. Women’s sport must not lead to her neglecting her religious duties, such as prayer or duties in the house and toward her family, or to traveling without a male guardian. The group concluded discussion of the first two points by permitting appropriate sport for women inside the home.

The group then dismissed the idea of physical education for girls for health reasons. Obesity has only become a problem in recent years, they argued, while it was not a problem decades ago when there was also no physical education in schools for girls. They continued by stating that introducing physical education for girls would also impose financial burdens on parents, as girls take particular care about their appearance, as well as on the state, without a significant return. Furthermore, physical education may actually cause health problems, such as an irregular period and infertility, they claimed. Moral quandaries may ensue if girls change clothes in front of one another in the absence of changing rooms, leading them to illicit sexual behavior. In the absence of qualified Saudi teachers, foreign teachers would have to be employed who may not abide by Islamic

morals. In short, the group said, the negative and corrupting influences outweigh any positive aspects.

The anonymous group of authors also stressed that practicing sport outside the home puts a woman in conflict with her natural tasks, such as studying, working, or looking after her house and family, which are enough to occupy her. The woman is to stay at home first and foremost, the group wrote. Women's participation in sporting competitions, even Olympic Games is "among the greatest tools of the project to corrupt women."¹²³

In response to Prince Nawwaf bin Faisal's November 2011 announcement that although the Saudi National Olympic Committee would not select a woman athlete, Saudi women could participate if they received an invitation, a number of prominent Saudi clerics spoke out against Saudi women participating.

Sheikh Dr. Muhammad al-Nujaimi, a professor at the Supreme Institute of the Judiciary, which provides mandatory training courses for aspiring judges and court clerks, said that "it is not allowed for a Muslim woman" to participate in the Olympics.¹²⁴ Dr. Muhammad al-'Arifi, a well-known preacher and professor at King Sa'ud University in Riyadh, wrote a public letter one day after Prince Nawwaf's announcement, urging him "not to be the door through which the corruptors enter" the kingdom, since "no one of sound mind doubts that it is prohibited ... for a woman to practice sport ... if that leads to her mingling with men ... as cameras roll and [television] stations send" these images.¹²⁵

Conservative opposition to women's participation in sports can have a chilling impact. Hadeer S. recalled that after taking a trip to Jordan in 2009 with her basketball team, an

¹²³ Contribution by user One-Moment-Please (لحظة من فضلك), entitled "Four Points Related to the News of Establishing Saudi Women's Sports Clubs (أربع وقفات مع أخبار انشاء أندية نسائية سعودية)" to online discussion forum *Islam Portal* (بوابة الإسلام), whose slogan is "return and call to the book [the Qur'an] and the tradition [of the Prophet Muhammad] (العودة و الدعوة الى الكتاب والسنة)", undated, around February or March 2010, <http://www.islamdor.com/vb/showthread.php?t=20633> (accessed February 12, 2011).

¹²⁴ "Saudi Man of Religion Affirms that Saudi Arabia Must Not Participate with a Women's Equestrian Selection in London Olympiad (عالم دين سعودي يؤكد أنه لا يجوز مشاركة السعودية بمنتخب نسائي للفروسية في أولمبياد لندن)", *Al.Quds al-Arabi*, November 20, 2011, <http://alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=data\2011\11\11-20\202497.htm> (accessed November 23, 2011).

¹²⁵ Dr. Muhammad al-'Arifi, "Participation of Women in the Olympic Games (مشاركة المرأة في الألعاب الأولمبية)", *Official Forums of Sheikh Muhammad al-'Arifi*, November 24, 2011, <http://www.3refe.com/vb/showthread.php?t=162936> (accessed November 25, 2011).

extremist Saudi religious group decried them for lacking in good morals. *Al-Shams* newspaper printed the story together with a picture of her team, with faces blurred.¹²⁶

Some prominent religious scholars argue in favor of introducing physical education for girls in schools and encouraging women to exercise. Sheikh Ali ‘Abbas al-Hikmi, also a member of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, said in May 2009 that women practicing sport was an “Islamic necessity” for preserving the mind and body and supported the opening of women’s sport clubs as long as these do not lead to unlawful gender mixing, revealing of private parts, or other Islamic prohibitions.¹²⁷ In February 2011, Sheikh ‘Adil al-Kalabani, the former chief cleric of the Holy Mosque in Mecca, a government-appointed position, also publicly supported sport clubs for women.¹²⁸ In December 2012 *Al-Medina* newspaper printed a long editorial article questioning why introducing physical education for girls in schools was a “great act of corruption,” or how “young girls practicing sport in their schools far away from [prying] eyes wrecks their morals.”¹²⁹

Promoters of women’s right to exercise quote the caliph, Omar bin al-Khattab, as having said: “Teach your children swimming, archery, and horse-riding.” Several Saudi women recited this saying by the Prophet in support of their sporting activities.¹³⁰ Princess Basma bint Sa’ud bin Abd al-‘Aziz, a granddaughter of the kingdom’s founder and daughter of King Sa’ud, told the German news agency Deutsche Presse Agentur in May 2010 of the “importance of allowing the practice of sports in girls’ schools,” and considered any prohibitions on sport for women “contrary to the [normative] life of the Prophet [Muhammad].”¹³¹

Although religious views opposing prohibition on women’s participation in sport are less frequently pronounced than those in favor, government policy is only inching toward

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

¹²⁷ “Saudi Religious Scholar Underlines that Women’s Sport is an Islamic Necessity to Preserve the Body (عالم دين سعودي) (يؤكد أن رياضة المرأة ضرورة شرعية لحفظ الجسد),” *Alarabiya.net*, May 21, 2009, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/05/21/73456.html> (accessed March 15, 2011).

¹²⁸ Abdullah al-Dani, “I hope for Designated Sport Clubs for and Religious Volunteers and Women (أتمنى تخصيص أندية) (رياضية للمطوعة والنساء),” *Okaz*, February 3, 2011, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20110203/Con20110203398548.htm> (accessed February 14, 2011).

¹²⁹ “Women Practicing Sport is Forbidden ... (.. ممارسة النساء للرياضة حرام),” *Al-Madina*, December 12, 2010, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/279122> (accessed August 6, 2011).

¹³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011., Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

¹³¹ Muhammad ‘Atyaf, “Saudi Princess: Preventing Girls’ Sports in Schools Violates the Prophet’s Sunna (أميرة سعودية: منع) (رياضة البنات في المدارس يخالف السنة النبوية),” *Alarabiya.net*, May 30, 2010, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/05/30/110026.html> (accessed August 3, 2011).

realizing women’s right to sport rather than taking bold steps to realize it. Indeed often it appears that government policy vindicates conservative religious views opposing women and girls practicing sport.

Societal Attitudes

The Saudi women interviewed by Human Rights Watch said their families and friends encouraged them to practice sport and did not object on social or religious grounds. Najwa J. said she never had negative feedback and that her husband and children are “proud of her” for practicing sport.¹³² Hadeer S., the basketball player, said sport was “an integral part of my time management and social life,” and that her father always supported her.¹³³ Norah A. equally said her mother was proud of her for practicing sport.¹³⁴

Some women said they had experienced criticism from other Saudis. Some years ago, Dima H. said, a passersby intervened to prevent her from exercising together with her brothers at an entertainment center, saying men and women should never be together in the same place (although that restriction applies only to unrelated men and women).¹³⁵ Najwa J. thought that Qatif residents were tolerant toward women exercising, but that the situation may be different in other nearby cities, such as Khobar, where people were more conservative.¹³⁶

Dima H. said that she also received criticism from her female peers when she told them she was learning to box. “They laughed and described this sport as being for men,” she said. And they ridiculed her when she said it helped her concentrate and be prepared to defend herself.¹³⁷ Norah A. remembered some teachers frowning about her practicing sport in a mixed club.¹³⁸ Sadeem B. said that her girlfriends in Riyadh, considered a more conservative city, faced ridicule from boys and harassment from the religious police when they tried to exercise.¹³⁹

¹³² Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

¹³³ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

¹³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

¹³⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

¹³⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

¹³⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011.

¹³⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Sadeem B., May 26, 2011.

What these women want to change is the government's lack of support for women practicing sport, because government support would allow them to practice sport in spite of conservative opposition. They want public support as well as concrete measures such as better and cheaper facilities, including municipal clubs, and the opportunity to create a sporting culture for women and girls where they can enjoy sport and compete with other women.¹⁴⁰ Norah A. thought that Saudi Arabian society was ahead of the government in supporting women in sports, but "the government does want to keep sticking to the image it conveys that Saudi society is conservative."¹⁴¹

Najwa J. underlined the importance of introducing physical education for girls so that they can learn sports from an early age. More important, however, was allowing women to drive, she said, as otherwise they had few means of getting to sport facilities.¹⁴² Hadeer S. stressed that without courts for team sports, women mostly could only exercise for fitness.¹⁴³

Dima H. hopes that Saudi women can one day take part in the Olympic Games and thus become an inspiration for other Saudi women. Najwa J. said that the absence of professional competitive female athletes relegated sports for women to a lower rung.¹⁴⁴ Norah A. thought that opening up the space for women to exercise and to practice recreational sports was a necessary first step to bring forth competitive female athletes.¹⁴⁵

Health

A key concern for those promoting the right of women and girls to sport is the benefit to health. In recent years rates of obesity and diabetes have risen significantly, both globally and in Saudi Arabia, among women and girls, according to several studies.¹⁴⁶ In Saudi Arabia, between two-thirds to three-quarters of adults and 25 to 40 percent of children and adolescents are estimated to be overweight or obese.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with several of the women cited in this report and with Lina M., Jeddah, March 15, 2011.

¹⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

¹⁴² Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

¹⁴³ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadeer S., May 18, 2011.

¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Dima H., May 23, 2011., Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Norah A., May 26, 2011.

¹⁴⁶ A presentation on the Saudi national school sports strategy by the Spanish consulting company Itik, hired to help develop that strategy, states that male obesity rates in Saudi Arabia were the fourth-highest worldwide. See: "National School Sports Strategy," a presentation by Itik Consulting Sports and Leisure, August 23, 2011, <http://www.slideshare.net/joaquinix/national-school-sports-strategy-itik> (accessed September 17, 2011).

¹⁴⁷ S. W. Ng, S. Zaghoul, H. I. Ali, et al., "The Prevalence and Trends of Overweight, Obesity and

One study published in 2007 examining socioeconomic factors associated with weight gain found that “[t]he prevalence of [being] overweight and obesity among female school-aged children and adolescents in the Al-Khobar city was very high.”¹⁴⁸ In the capital, Riyadh, a study from 2001 examined the factors associated with being overweight or obese among adults. It found that urban residence, female sex, and marriage “were associated with obesity in adults,” and concluded that “[o]besity is an important public health problem in Riyadh.”¹⁴⁹ A third study, published in 2005, found the overall obesity rate at over 35 percent of the population, and found that “[f]emales are significantly more obese [than men] with a prevalence of 44%.”¹⁵⁰ A 2007 study looking at the entire kingdom concluded that “lifestyle changes where high calorie diet and diminished physical activity are the fundamental components of lifestyle contribute [sic] to an increased prevalence of obesity and associated diseases.”¹⁵¹

According to the 2002 World Health Report, approximately 58 percent of diabetes and 21 percent of ischaemic heart disease and between 8 and 42 percent of certain cancers globally were attributable to weight (for a body mass index of over 21).¹⁵² These diseases also represent a significant proportion of mortality in Saudi Arabia. In the World Health Organization’s Eastern Mediterranean Region as a whole (which includes the Gulf States), non-communicable diseases account for 67 percent of all deaths, with most deaths (62 percent) being attributed to cardiovascular disease.¹⁵³ These diseases can develop even at young ages because childhood and adolescent obesity elevate cardiovascular disease

Nutrition-related Non-communicable Diseases in the Arabian Gulf States,” *Obesity Reviews* (2011) 12, 1–13 doi: 10.1111/j.1467-789X.2010.00750.x

¹⁴⁸ W. Y. Al-Saeed, K. M. Al-Dawood, I. A. Bukhari, A. Bahnassy, “Prevalence and socioeconomic risk factors of obesity among urban female students in Al-Khobar city, Eastern Saudi Arabia, 2003,” *Obesity Reviews*, vol. 8, issue 2 (March 2007), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-789X.2006.00287.x/full> (accessed September 20), pp 93–99, Summary.

¹⁴⁹ S. A. Al-Shammari, T. Khoja, and A. Gad, “Community-based Study of Obesity among Children and Adults in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,” *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, vol.22, no.2 (2001), <http://www.idpas.org/fortificationguidelines/Zinc%20phosphate%20ratio%20ref35.pdf#page=68> (accessed September 20, 2011), pp.178-183, p. 178.

¹⁵⁰ Mansour M. Al-Nozha et al., “Obesity in Saudi Arabia,” *Saudi Medical Journal*, vol. 26, no. 5 (2005), pp. 824-829, <http://repository.ksu.edu.sa/jspui/bitstream/123456789/2927/1/Obesity%20in%20SA.pdf> (accessed September 23, 2011), p. 824.

¹⁵¹ Yousef Abdullah Al Turki, “Overweight and Obesity Among Attendees of Primary Care Clinics in a University Hospital,” *Annals of Saudi Medicine*, vol. 27, issue 6 (2007), <http://www.saudiannals.net/article.asp?issn=0256-4947;year=2007;volume=27;issue=6;spage=459;epage=460;aulast=Al;ip=66.249.71.176> (accessed September 20, 2011), p.459-460.

¹⁵² World Health Organization, “The World Health Report 2002: Reducing Risks, Promoting Healthy Life,” *World Health Organization*, 39, 57–61, 162 (ed.).

¹⁵³ S. W. Ng, S. Zaghoul, H. I. Ali, et al., “The Prevalence and Trends of Overweight, Obesity, 2011 12, 1–13 doi: 10.1111/j.1467-789X.2010.00750.x

risks and all-cause mortality.¹⁵⁴ Even in childhood, gender differences are seen. For example, Al-Shehri and colleagues found for 9 and 12-year-old children that lipid levels (precursors for high cholesterol, and a risk factor for cardiovascular disease) were statistically worse among girls than boys at both ages.¹⁵⁵ Among pregnant women, gestational diabetes is increasing rapidly, resulting in higher infant morbidity and perinatal mortality.¹⁵⁶

Samar B., the gym manager, said many women come for the health benefits, and most were in their thirties or forties.¹⁵⁷ She said that the gym also offered information about healthy nutrition and that “many of the women were able to lower their blood pressure and feel that they can enjoy a normal life. There is a huge interest of women in losing weight.”¹⁵⁸ Najwa J. said exercising helped her re-attain her ideal weight after she had a baby.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Must A, Strauss RS, “Risks and Consequences of Childhood and Adolescent Obesity,” *International Journal of Obesity Related Metabolism Disorders*, 1999; 23(Suppl. 2): S2–S11.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Shehri SN, Saleh ZA, Salama MM, Hassan YM, “Prevalence of Hyperlipidemia among Saudi School Children in Riyadh,” *Annals of Saudi Medicine*, 2004; 24: 6–8.

¹⁵⁶ Elhadd Tarik A, Al-Amoudi Abdallah A, Alzahrani Ali S., “Epidemiology, Clinical, and Complications Profile of Diabetes in Saudi Arabia : A review,” *Annals of Saudi Medicine*. 2007, Volume: 27, Issue Number: 4, Page: 241-250

¹⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Samar B., May 16, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Najwa J., May 31, 2011.

VI. Legal Standards

The right of Saudi women and girls to sport and physical education is rooted in international human rights law. Four main tenets underpin this particular right. First, the right to participate in cultural life (which includes the right to participate in sport); second, the right to an education aimed at the fullest development of a child’s personality and his or her physical and mental abilities (physical education is integral to this); third, the right to the highest attainable standard of health; and fourth, the right to be free from discrimination (which demands that women and men, girls and boys, enjoy equal rights to physical education and sports).

Relevant provisions of treaties Saudi Arabia has signed and ratified—the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the Arab Charter on Human Rights (Arab Charter)—are legally binding obligations that Saudi courts should enforce.

Right to Sport

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognizes the right of everyone to “leisure” (art. 24), and to participation in the “cultural life of the community” (article 27).¹⁶⁰ The International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (ICESR) recognizes the right to take part in “cultural life” (article 15).¹⁶¹ Saudi Arabia is one of only the approximately thirty member states of the United Nations that have not yet acceded to the ICESCR. In 2009, however, Saudi Arabia ratified the Arab Charter, which reiterates the right to participate in “cultural life” (article 42). The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which provides authoritative interpretation of the ICESCR, in its 2009 General Comment No. 21 on the right to participate in cultural life explicitly included “sport and games” among its understanding of culture.¹⁶² The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which Saudi Arabia acceded in 2000,

¹⁶⁰ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted December 10, 1948, G.A. Res. 217A(III), U.N. Doc. A/810 at 71 (1948).

¹⁶¹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976.

¹⁶² UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21, The Right to Take Part in Cultural Life, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/21 (2009), para. 13.

recognizes the right of women and girls to participate without discrimination “in recreational activities, sports and all aspects of cultural life” (article 13.c).¹⁶³ The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), to which Saudi Arabia acceded in 2008, specifically recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to “participation in ... sport.”¹⁶⁴

In 1978 the member states of United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the International Charter of Physical Education and Sport (UNESCO Sport Charter), recognizing sport “as an essential dimension of education and culture” (article 2.1). The charter considered a person’s freedom “to develop and preserve his or her physical, intellectual and moral powers ... one of the essential conditions for the effective exercise of human rights” (preamble) and proclaimed “[t]he practice of physical education and sport ... a fundamental right for all” (article 1).

Right to Physical Education

In addition to their right to sport, children enjoy the right to physical education as part of their right to an education for the “development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.”¹⁶⁵ CEDAW obliges states to provide education to women and girls with “[t]he same opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education.”¹⁶⁶ In education, states must provide girls and women with “access to the same curricula [as boys and men,] teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality” as that of boys and men.¹⁶⁷ The Arab Charter obliges states to “take all the necessary measures to guarantee, particularly to young persons, the right to pursue a sporting activity.”¹⁶⁸ The UNESCO Sport Charter provides that “[e]very overall education system must assign the requisite place and importance to physical education” (article 2.3).

¹⁶³ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted December 18, 1979, G.A. res. 34/180, 34 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 46) at 193, U.N. Doc. A/34/46, entered into force September 3, 1981.

¹⁶⁴ CRPD, art. 30.

¹⁶⁵ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force September 2, 1990, art.29, CRC.

¹⁶⁶ CEDAW, art. 10.g.

¹⁶⁷ CEDAW, art. 10.b.

¹⁶⁸ Arab Charter, art. 33.4.

The Right to Health

The right to sport also forms part of the right to the highest attainable standard of health (ICESCR, art. 12, Arab Charter, article 39). The UNESCO Sport Charter states that “physical education and sport contribute to the maintenance and improvement of health” (article 2.2). The CESCR in its 2000 General Comment No. 14 on the right to health stated that “the right to health must be understood as a right to the enjoyment of a variety of facilities, goods, services and conditions necessary for the realization of the highest attainable standard of health” (p. 3). The CESCR General Comment No. 14 considered it part of states’ duties to fulfill the right to health such that they “adopt measures ... against any other threat as demonstrated by epidemiological data” and that they “disseminat[e] appropriate information relating to healthy lifestyles.”¹⁶⁹ In that same General Comment No. 14, the CESCR highlighted that the state’s obligation to prevent, treat, and control epidemics requires “the promotion of social determinants of good health, such as environmental safety, education, economic development, and gender equity.”¹⁷⁰

Prohibition on Discrimination

The right to be free from discrimination is fundamental to the enjoyment of all human rights. The equality of all human beings, and the equal rights of men and women in particular, undergirds the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. States are prohibited from discriminating against a person in the exercise of his or her rights on the basis of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.¹⁷¹ CEDAW defines discrimination against women as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex” that impacts the exercise of a human right.¹⁷²

States are obliged to eliminate and prevent discrimination against women by “public authorities and institutions [or] any person, organization or enterprise,” that is, by private actors as well as by state practice.¹⁷³ The Arab Charter puts positive obligations on states

¹⁶⁹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21, The Right to Health, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/2000/4 (2000), paras. 36 and 37.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, para 16.

¹⁷¹ UDHR, art. 1, ICESCR, art. 2.2, Arab Charter, art.3.1.

¹⁷² CEDAW, art. 1.

¹⁷³ CEDAW, arts. 2.e and 2.f.

to “take the requisite measures” to achieve “effective equality in the enjoyment of all rights” without discrimination based on sex.¹⁷⁴

Because women often do not enjoy the ability to exercise their rights on the same level as men, CEDAW recognizes that states would need to take “special measures” favoring women in order for them to more rapidly progress toward equality with men in the exercise of their rights. Such favorable treatment of women is permissible and encouraged.¹⁷⁵ In its General Recommendation No. 25 on Special Measures, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which oversees the implementation of CEDAW, specifically urged the adoption of special measures in the area of sport.¹⁷⁶ The Arab Charter similarly allows for “positive discrimination established in favour of women by the Islamic Shariah, other divine laws and by applicable laws and legal instruments.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Arab Charter, art.3.2.

¹⁷⁵ CEDAW, art. 4.1.

¹⁷⁶ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation 25, Temporary Special Measures (Thirteenth session, 2004), Compilation of General Comments and General Recommendations Adopted by Human Rights Treaty Bodies, UN Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.9 (Vol.II) (2008), para. 38, p.112.

¹⁷⁷ Arab Charter, art.3.3.

VII. Recommendations

To the Saudi Ministry of Education

- Announce that physical education will be a mandatory subject for girls in state schools throughout the years of compulsory education, and in private schools in a similar way to other mandatory subjects.
- Set out a clear timeline for introducing physical education for girls in state schools within one year, and in private schools in a similar way to other mandatory subjects.
- Include in the implementation strategy measurable benchmarks, such as what percentage rate of government schools will have fully integrated girls' physical education by a certain date; the rate of building facilities; the types of physical education offered at each level of education; the number of weekly class hours spent on physical education.
- Establish a program to train teachers of physical education for girls.
- Launch a public outreach campaign targeting parents and educators to emphasize the right of girls to physical education.

To the Saudi General Presidency for Youth Welfare

- Lift the ban on licensing gyms for women.
- Open a women's section in the General Presidency for Youth and Welfare.
- Mandate that to obtain a license, sports clubs must be open to women.
- Actively encourage sports clubs to establish women's sections offering quality sporting facilities equal to those enjoyed by men.

To the Saudi National Olympic Committee and Saudi Sporting Federations

- Open a women's section, staffed preferably by women in the NOC and in each of the Saudi sporting federations.
- Develop national competitions for women in a variety of sports and disciplines.
- Begin selecting top ranking women's athletes in a variety of sports and disciplines to form national women's teams and support them in participating in regional and international sporting events.
- Nominate a woman for the universality slot in track and field for the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

To the International Olympic Committee and International Sporting Federations

- In consultation with the Saudi NOC, set a timeline for forming women's sections in the NOC and national sporting federations, to have commenced before the London 2012 Olympic Games and to be completed no later than one year hence in early 2013.
- Make clear to the Saudi NOC and sporting federations that ending the effective ban on women's sport is a prerequisite for continued Saudi participation in international sporting events, including the London 2012 Olympic Games. NOC and federation support for women's sports in Saudi Arabia must include establishing appropriate organizational structures, providing funds, and reaching out to women to encourage them to participate in sport.
- Make clear to the Saudi Ministry of Education that publicly announcing and taking effective steps toward ending discrimination against girls in the enjoyment of the right to physical education is a condition for Saudi participation in the London 2012 Olympic Games.
- Make Saudi nomination of a woman in the track and field universality slot a condition for Saudi participation in the London 2012 Olympics.

To National Olympic Committees

- Share experiences, best practices, and lessons learned about women's sport with the Saudi NOC, including establishing appropriate organizational structures, and reaching out to women to practice sport, and to society in overcoming negative stereotypes about women in sports.
- Emphasize to Saudi functionaries and sportsmen that disallowing and failing to ensure the possibility of women to practice sports is a violation of human rights and goes against the Olympic spirit and charter.

To Major Sponsors and Broadcasters of the Olympic Games

- Press the International Olympic Committee and the Saudi National Olympic Committee to address discrimination against women in sports.

To the United Nations Human Rights Bodies

- The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should address discrimination against women and girls in sports and hold Saudi Arabia to its treaty obligations.
- The member states of the Human Rights Council should assess in the next Universal Periodic Review of Saudi Arabia's human rights record in 2013 the kingdom's progress in ending discrimination in sports against women and girls.

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Human Rights Watch wishes to thank those Saudi women who facilitated research and agreed to be interviewed for this report.

Appendix: Human Rights Watch Letters to Saudi Officials

Letter to the Ministry of Education

New York, August 12, 2011

H.E. Nora al-Fayez
Deputy Minister of Education for Girls' Education
Ministry of Education
Riyadh – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Your Excellency,

Human Rights Watch writes to seek information regarding physical education for girls in schools in Saudi Arabia. There has been some discussion about the issue recently, including about the possibility of introducing physical education for girls into the curriculum in government schools.

We refer in particular to an article in *Al-Yawm* newspaper of May 3, 2011 that quoted the director of girls' education in the Eastern Province, Dr. Samir 'Umran, as saying that girls in government schools in the Eastern Province would be able to practice sports "soon" in four new sports and cultural buildings. An article on June 20, 2011 in the same newspaper stated that a "national strategy for sports in schools in all stages of education for boys in the kingdom" was currently being prepared. The article went on, however, to indicate that the new strategy would include sports for girls. It described female educators welcoming the new strategy as a "empower[ing] Saudi women to exercise their right to sports." These developments, if correct, would reflect a change from your statements in June 2009 to *Al-Watan* newspaper that quoted you in an article saying that "the time was still too soon for this topic" of sports for girls.

Human Rights Watch is currently researching the situation of women and girls' ability to practice sports in Saudi Arabia and what obstacles remain to achieving equality with men and boys in this regard.

We therefore seek information from your ministry about the following matters:

1. Is physical education for girls a mandatory part of the curriculum in any or all government schools for girls at present? If so, please provide details about weekly hours, types of sports or exercise practiced, and facilities used.
2. Is it possible for government schools to offer voluntary physical education classes to girls? What are the requirements for doing so, if any?
3. Is it possible for private schools to make physical education mandatory for girls? Is it possible for private schools to offer voluntary physical education classes for girls? If so, please provide details on whether this applies to all or only some grades, and what the requirements for doing so are.
4. Can Saudis training to become a teacher specialize in physical education for girls? If so, what are the differences to teacher training in physical education for boys, if any? Can foreign physical education teachers receive accreditation in government or private schools?
5. What plans does the ministry have to introduce physical education for girls in schools? Please give an expected start date, including details of weekly hours spent on physical education, types of sports or exercise practiced, and facilities used for each grade or type of school (elementary, middle, and secondary).
6. In the view of the ministry, what obstacles, bureaucratic, logistical, political, or social, remain to implementing physical education in schools for girls?

We look forward to receiving a response to our inquiry by September 15, 2011, and would be glad to discuss the matter of physical education for girls with you in person via telephone if you prefer.

Please contact Christoph Wilcke, senior researcher, Middle East and North Africa Division, at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Sarah Leah Whitson
Executive Director
Middle East and North Africa Division

Letter from the Ministry of Education

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Ministry of Education

Girls Education

Office of the deputy

Number: 33170963

Date: December 19, 2011 (24/1/1433 *hijri*)

Ms. Sarah Leah Whitson

Executive Director

Middle East and North Africa Division

Human Rights Watch organization

Dear Ms. Whitson,

In reference to your letter of August 24, 2011 regarding physical education for girls in Saudi schools, we inform you that the ministry has issued no regulatory bylaws or rules that punish schools for female students practicing physical education; in fact there are sports activities in some private girls' schools as part of their school curriculum and as extra-curricular activities.

The issue of girls' physical education is under serious consideration as one of the priorities of the ministry's leadership that regards physical education in schools as one of the necessities helping male and female students to stay healthy. The ministry is currently working on a comprehensive educational curriculum, starting with laying the infrastructure for the project and finishing with health and nutritional education, all within the national strategy for girls' and boys' physical education.

This approach stems from the ministry's comprehensive vision striving to safeguard sufficient opportunities for male and female students in all stages of public education.

With my best wishes and regards,

Deputy minister for girls' affairs

/sig/

Nura bint Abdullah al-Fayiz

Letter to the National Olympic Committee

New York, July 25, 2011

His Royal Highness Prince Nawwaf bin Faisal bin Fahd
President
National Olympic Committee
P.O. Box 6040
Prince Faisal Fahd Olympic Complex
Riyadh 11442
Saudi Arabia

Your Royal Highness,

Human Rights Watch writes to enquire about the efforts of Saudi Arabia's National Olympic Committee to promote women in sports.

As one of three constituent members of the Olympic Movement, National Olympic Committees are bound to promote the fundamental values of Olympism, which state, among others, that “[t]he practice of sport is a human right ... without discrimination of any kind,” and that “any form of discrimination with regard to ... a person on grounds of ... gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement” (Principles 4 and 5 of the Olympic Charter).

Over the past months, Human Rights Watch has been conducting research on women's ability to practice sports in Saudi Arabia and we are encouraged by such small steps as the appointment of Ms. Arwa al-Mutabaqani to the board of the Saudi Equestrian Federation, and the participation of her daughter, Dalma Malhas, in the 2010 first Singapore Youth Olympics, the first Saudi woman to participate in an Olympic competition.

We have also been in touch with senior officials at the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne regarding the IOC's dialogue with the Saudi Arabian National Olympic Committee on the issue of women and sports.

We seek further information about the efforts of the Saudi National Olympic Committee in this regard and ask you to respond to the following questions:

- What sports competitions for girls or women that are approved by one of the six Saudi sports federations have taken place since 2008 within the kingdom? In addition to the date and place of the competition, please provide the sport, discipline, names of participants and times / results.
- Has any of the six federations approved and supported national or club-level women athletes to participate in an international sporting competition, for example the Islamic Solidarity Games, the Islamic Women’s Games, the Gulf Cooperation Council Games, the Arab Games, the Asian Games, international competitions of individual disciplines, or the Olympiad?
- Has the Saudi Arabian Swimming Federation nominated a female athlete to participate in the 14th FINA World Championships in Shanghai in July 2011? Such a nomination is a prerequisite for entering a female athlete who did not meet time qualification requirements for the London 2012 Olympiad in a swimming discipline.
- Does the Saudi Arabian Athletics Federation plan to nominate a female athlete who does not meet the qualification requirements for an athletic event at the 2012 London Olympiad as it is allowed to do (in swimming and athletics under rules for universal participation)?
- Does the Saudi National Olympic Committee have a section for women’s sports? Please provide details of the sections activities.
- How many women does the Saudi National Olympic Committee employ? What are their titles and roles?
- Besides competitive sports, what efforts is the Saudi national Olympic Committee making to promote recreational sports for women at all ages, for example through support for accessible facilities and programs?

We ask that you send your response by August 15, 2011. Please feel free to contact our senior researcher for Saudi Arabia, Christoph Wilcke, at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] (telephone), or [REDACTED] (fax).

Sincerely,

Sarah Leah Whitson
 Executive Director
 Middle East and North Africa Division

“STEPS OF THE DEVIL”

Denial of Women’s and Girls’ Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia

Saudi government policy effectively bans women and girls from playing sports. In schools, the Saudi government offers boys, but not girls, physical education classes. Only men’s gyms receive licenses, confining women’s facilities to “health clubs,” usually attached to hospitals. Of the 153 government-regulated sports clubs, none has a women’s team.

The Saudi National Olympic Committee and the country’s 29 national sports federations have no women’s sections or competitions for aspiring women athletes. Some government clerics oppose sport as “steps of the devil” that would lead women to un-Islamic behavior, while other Saudi clerics describe sports as a religious necessity, in particular in light of growing obesity rates.

The government also subjects women to the authority of a male guardian in all important life decisions and prohibits adult women from driving.

Saudi Arabia, along with Qatar and Brunei, has never nominated a woman to participate in the Olympic Games, but, unlike Saudi women, Qatari and Brunei female athletes have participated in other international sports competitions.

“*Steps of the Devil*” exposes empty government promises to expand sports opportunities for women and girls, and calls on Saudi Arabia to protect women’s equal right to sports. The report also urges the International Olympic Committee to live up to its charter, which prohibits discrimination against women in sport, and to condition Saudi Arabia’s participation in the 2012 Olympic Games on ending this discrimination, or face a ban similar to that it imposed on Afghanistan in 1999 partly for its exclusion of women athletes.



The female basketball team of Jeddah United warm up in Jordan on April 21, 2009. Jeddah United is the only private sports company with women’s teams.

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