



## WOMEN AND SPORT: THE RELATION BETWEEN SAUDI WOMEN'S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SPORT FIELD AND THE SAUDI VISION 2030, AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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المرأة والرياضة: العلاقة بين حق المرأة السعودية في المشاركة في المجال الرياضي ورؤية السعودية ٢٠٣٠، دراسة تحليلية

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### Abstract:

*Sports are often seen as a reflection of a society's reputation and standing in the modern world and can serve to highlight their civilisation's progress and values. One question that modern Islamic countries has had to address is the role of women in sports, in fact, women have participated in sports since the early seventh century and the beginning of Islam. In this article we focus on Saudi women specifically and will see how they have played a progressively greater role in different sports and that they have made substantial progress in this area, which is a testament to their ability to change and develop. Firstly, this paper will demonstrate a holistic overview of women right to sport as a basic human right from an Islamic and International human rights perspective. The paper is going to address some of the international agreements regulating the right to sport and will discuss the application of such international agreements regulating this right domestically. A description of the development of women right to sport in the context of Saudi Arabia, focusing on the role played by the Saudi government in empowering Saudi women in this area both at national and international levels will be provided. In addition, this paper will show how these efforts are linked to the wider Vision 2030 plan being developed in Saudi Arabia as part of efforts to diversify the Saudi economy and reduce its reliance on oil and petroleum products.*

**Keywords:** Women, Human rights, Saudi Vision 2030, Sport, International Law

**المستخلص:** تُعد الرياضة في كثير من الأحيان انعكاسًا لسمعة المجتمع ومكانته في العالم المعاصر، ويمكن أن تبرز مدى تطور حضارته وقيمه. ومن القضايا التي كان على الدول الإسلامية الحديثة التعامل معها هي دور المرأة في المجال الرياضي.

في الواقع، شاركت النساء في الرياضة منذ بداية ظهور الإسلام في القرن السابع. يركز هذا المقال تحديدًا على النساء السعوديات، ويستعرض كيف أن مشاركتهن في مختلف الأنشطة الرياضية شهدت تطورًا ملحوظًا، الأمر الذي يعكس قدرتهن على التغيير والتطور.

يقدم هذا البحث في البداية نظرة شاملة لحق المرأة في ممارسة الرياضة باعتباره من الحقوق الأساسية للإنسان، وذلك من منظور إسلامي ومن منظور حقوق الإنسان الدولية. كما تتناول الورقة عددًا من الاتفاقيات الدولية التي تنظم هذا الحق، وتناقش تطبيق هذه الاتفاقيات داخل المملكة. وتستعرض تطور حق المرأة في الرياضة في السياق السعودي، مع التركيز على الدور الذي لعبته الحكومة السعودية في تمكين المرأة في هذا المجال على المستويين المحلي والدولي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يوضح هذا البحث كيف ترتبط هذه الجهود بخطة رؤية السعودية ٢٠٣٠، التي تهدف إلى تنويع الاقتصاد السعودي وتقليل اعتماده على النفط ومشتقاته.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المرأة، حقوق الإنسان، رؤية السعودية ٢٠٣٠، الرياضة، القانون الدولي

## INTRODUCTION

Sport is a human activity which aims to improve an individual's physical fitness as well as their mental well-being. Sports also have a large element of social participation and are activities which are governed by rules and regulations at both a national and international level. Sports are also closely linked to the issue of basic human rights with governments playing a key role in forming and developing an individual's health and well-being through the promotion of sports in society as a whole and their integration into the educational system to encourage healthy habits and social behaviours. Sports have also been pivotal in developing not only cohesion within a society but also in promoting international relations between rival and friendly countries and to express national attitudes and views to the world as a whole and gain status and recognition for their achievements or trophies and medals won.

If we turn to the role of sports in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is clear that the Saudi government is dedicated to using sports as a way of raising the quality of life of its citizens and this is most evident in the Saudi Vision 2030 plan where sports are a crucial part of Saudi national strategy. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is party to some of the main United Nations human rights treaties, assuming an obligation to curb all forms of discrimination against women, including the sport field. Therefore, it is obvious that economic development has led the Saudi government to encourage and support women to participate in sports. As part of this plan Saudi Arabia is carrying out huge investments in sports which also serves to help diversify the economy away from a reliance on oil and petroleum products. When it comes to the role Muslim women play in sports in Saudi Arabia, the evidence shows that they have achieved great success in this area. This follows the tradition of women participating in sports, which has been present since the beginning of Islam and Saudi women's sport has flourished during the reign of King *Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud*, with according to the Family

Affairs Council,<sup>1</sup> their participation in sports activities showing an increase of 150% and with figures showing that ‘in 2024, about 79% of Saudi women practice sports as a basis of healthy life and comprehensive balance.’<sup>2</sup> In fact, women in Saudi Arabia play a major role on the sports field. Their significant achievements inspire others, and they are considered a role model for future generations, as their participation in sports did not break stereotypes, but rather challenge societal perceptions regarding women’s capabilities and positions.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ANALYSIS**

Overall, this study has a great value, as it provides an overview of sports as a basic human right. The paper contributes to the individual's understanding of how international human rights treaties regulating sports could be applied domestically. Furthermore, this paper sheds the light on how Islam supports women’s right to participate in sports and provides a description to the development of that right in the context of Saudi Arabia, focusing on the role played by the Saudi government in empowering Saudi women in this area both at national and international levels. In addition, this paper will show how these efforts are linked to the wider Vision 2030 plan being developed in Saudi Arabia as part of efforts to diversify the Saudi economy and reduce its reliance on oil and petroleum products.

Thus, conducting systematic analysis into women right to sport would result in the formation of more effective management techniques, greater protection and ultimately result in greater existence and participation of women in the sport field.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a deductive approach, including induction and analysis, and deducing the relation between Saudi women’s right to participate in the sport field and the Saudi Vision 2030, through national laws and international agreements related to human rights.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- How do rights included in international treaties become part of domestic laws?
- What is the relationship between human rights and women’s right to sport?
- What is the Islamic perspective of women’s right to sport? And to what extent does women’s right to sport interferes with the Saudi Vision 2030?

### **RESEARCH STRUCTURE**

This study consists of two main sections, as following:

#### **1. WOMEN’S RIGHT TO SPORT**

##### **1.1 SPORT AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A HOLISTIC OVERVIEW**

##### **1.2 WOMEN RIGHT TO SPORT AND THE APPLICATION OF INTERNATIONAL LEGAL INSTRUMENTS: OBLIGATIONS AND EFFORTS**

<sup>1</sup> This is a national institution that represents family, women, children and elderly people in international bodies and organisations. It was established pursuant to the Resolution “Regulating the Family Affairs Council” issued by the Council of Ministers No. (443) dated 10/20/1437 AH.

<sup>2</sup> Saudi Women Practice Sports, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, Riyadh, 2024.

## 2. SAUDI ARABIA AND WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SPORT

### 2.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN RIGHT TO SPORT IN SAUDI ARABIA

### 2.2 EMPOWERING WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SPORT IN SAUDI ARABIA: SAUDI VISION 2030

#### **SECTION ONE: WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SPORT**

This section discusses women's right to sport as a basic human right and highlights the Islamic law perspective of women's participating in sports. Furthermore, the section views the right to sports from a human rights perspective addressing some of the international legal instrument ratified by the Saudi government and demonstrating how to apply such international obligations domestically.

#### **1.1 SPORT AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A HOLISTIC OVERVIEW**

The egalitarian nature of human rights means that all rights must apply to all individuals equally.<sup>1</sup> This core norm has been the basis of international declarations universally since 1945, and it has led to significant enhancement to the human rights, that are entitled to all individuals over the world. In this regard, the United Nations Human Rights Treaty System acts as an international institution to obtain public policy toward the application and the preservation of human rights.<sup>2</sup>

Many international declarations and documents of both European Union and the United Nations have clearly declared that sport is a basic human right which is closely linked to the level of a country's prosperity and development. Indeed, every individual has the right to health, leisure and social inclusion, which has led to international organisations considering sports, along with the associated health and social benefits, as a keyway to support and develop these rights as part of the overall goal of promoting individual freedom and well-being.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw clear signs that the importance of sport was being recognised internationally. The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace<sup>3</sup> as well as the Magglingen Declaration<sup>4</sup> have confirmed that sport is a basic human right. In addition, the International Olympic Committee<sup>5</sup> and different documents and declarations of the United Nations, such as the Universal

<sup>1</sup> Michael Goodhart, *Human Rights: Politics and Practice*, (Oxford University Press 2013) 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Connors, "An Analysis and Evaluation of the System of State Reporting", in A. Bayefsky (ed.), *The UN Human Rights Treaty System in the 21st Century* (Kluwer Law International 2000) 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, please visit: <  
[https://www.sportanddev.org/sites/default/files/downloads/16\\_sport\\_for\\_dev\\_towards\\_millennium\\_goals.pdf](https://www.sportanddev.org/sites/default/files/downloads/16_sport_for_dev_towards_millennium_goals.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> This was adopted in 2003 by 29 countries. It emphasises the importance of sports and its connection to development.

<sup>5</sup> This is an international non-governmental committee established in 1894 and based in Switzerland. It is responsible of enhancing Olympism throughout the world.

Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup> affirm that sport is a human practice and a basic human right that is recognised worldwide.

Sports can meet basic human needs and contribute to an individual's well-being and fulfilment. From the perspective of human rights, it has been classified as belonging to the fourth generation of human rights. First generation rights are focused on the right to freedom and consist primarily of political and civil rights. As a basic human right, sport contributes to human fulfilments and meets needs of the human beings. From a human right perspective, sport as a human right could be classified into the fourth generation of human rights. The second generation of rights is constructed around equality (social, cultural and economic rights). Collective rights, which reflect the concept of solidarity, alongside with sustainable development and environmental rights belongs to the third generation of human rights.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the fourth generation of human rights aims to place the three previous generations of rights into practice. In fact, although the fourth generation has not been defined from a philosophical point of view, these rights are fundamental when it comes to satisfying the needs and requirements dictated by contemporary social changes. For instance, the right to leisure, tourism and pleasure.<sup>3</sup> This means that the human activity of sport needs to be encouraged, developed and supported in order to satisfy the psycho-social, biological and bodily needs of people and that this endeavour is intrinsically linked to the development of this fourth generation of human rights. Focusing on the relation between women and the right to sport, it is clearly that women have been forbidden entry into the sport field since the days of the first Olympics in Ancient Greece. Sometimes, women are not allowed into the stadium as spectators, facing punishment of being ejected from society for daring to watch the sporting contests.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, since such early barriers, women fought back for their right to sport. This is reflected by the struggle for equal opportunities women seek in everyday community far of the sports field, voting rights, equal pay or property rights. In other words, women have had to struggle against various systemic, structural, political and social restrictions built to prevent them from attaining equality.

Turning into the case of women's rights in Islam, human rights have been a subject of controversy in both the Muslim world and in the West. Yet, in Islam, women are considered as having a complete independent personality in the same way men are, and the Islamic religion acknowledges various rights women possess, including their right to sport. Indeed, Islam has respected women's right to sport provided their chastity and dignity are preserved. Women are seen as having the clear right and the need to practice sports due to its positive impact on their health, while also bearing in mind the obligation

<sup>1</sup> This is an international declaration that was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948 and considers a milestone document in the history of human rights.

<sup>2</sup> Emanuele Isidori and Mirca Benetton, "Sport as Education: between Dignity and Human Rights" (2015) 197(1) *Social and Behavioural Sciences* 686, 689-690.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* 690.

<sup>4</sup> Marlaina Lemmon, "Evening the Playing Field: Women's Sport as a Vehicle for Human Rights" (2019) 19(1) *The International Sports Law Journal* 238, 238.



to adhere to the Islamic principles specified by *Sharia* law and which are appropriate to their feminine nature.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, sports for women fall into two main categories: firstly sports which are suitable for women and which can be sub-divided as in the case of competitive sports could be divided into team sports such as basketball and volleyball, and individual sports such as swimming and running. On the other hand, the second category is sports which are not suitable for women due to their feminine nature such as wrestling.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, it is clear that Islam does not forbid women participating in sports, but rather, Islam is a religion that aims to promote human activity and vitality. In fact, in the time of Prophet *Muhammed* - peace be upon him- women practiced sports. Thus, unless there is clear evidence in *Sharia* law that a certain practice should be banned, Muslim women have a basic right to take part in sports.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, Islam is the state's official religion. According to Art 1 of the Saudi Basic Law of Governance:

"The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic State. Its religion is Islam. Its constitution is Almighty God's Book, The Holy Qur'an, and the Sunna (Traditions) of the Prophet (PBUH). Arabic is the language of the Kingdom. The City of Riyadh is the capital".<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore understandable that in compliance with *Sharia* principles, the Saudi Kingdom emphasises that the idea that sport is, in all respects, a human right.

## 1.2 WOMEN RIGHT TO SPORT AND THE APPLICATION OF INTERNATIONAL LEGAL INSTRUMENTS: OBLIGATIONS AND EFFORTS

Throughout history, there is a significant correlation between women's right to sport and women's equality in human rights within the boarder society. The fight for equality is not easy, and women attempting to participate in the sport field have felt that struggle intensely. In this domain, female athletes receive less financial support compared to males, this includes salaries, equipment management or medical coverage.<sup>4</sup> However, with women success in the sport field, society has also reflected such accomplishment in increased equality and grater access to human rights. As an example, in the case of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Vision 2030 considers one of the biggest successes of the century and meets many of the standards for promoting women's right to sport and includes the progress that has been made in various other areas of human rights. In terms of international human rights law, Saudi Arabia has ratified various international legal instrument in the history of the UN, assuming an obligation to enhance women rights to sport and to curb all types of discrimination against women in this area. For instance, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2008, Saudi Arabia has signed and ratified the International Convention

<sup>1</sup> Yazid Qalati and others, "Muslim Women and their Right to Sports: A Religious Perspective" (2021) 4(1) *Journal of Sport and Society* 160, 163-164.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* 164-166.

<sup>3</sup> Royal decree No. A/90 of 1st March 1992.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* 238-239.

against Doping in Sport attempting to coordinate and advance anti-doping in sport on international level.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions which aims to curb, expose, and punish match fixing in sports was entered into force on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2020.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Saudi Arabia ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2000,<sup>3</sup> the significant international treaty that protects women rights precisely emphasises on women's right to participate actively in sports.<sup>4</sup> According to article 10(g):

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: The same Opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education”.

However, even though these multilateral treaties may seem symbolic at first glance, they pinpoint to the Saudi government's significant efforts to promote the right to sport, as such treaties constitute powerful diplomatic ties and strategic instruments. In this regard, it is essential to shed the light on the application of such human rights treaties domestically. Since human rights subject is heavily debatable, it was crucial to form neutral independent and treaty bodies to monitor states parties' compliance toward their commitments under the various human rights treaties.<sup>5</sup>

International human rights law places obligations on states, which they are bound to respect. When becoming parties to an international treaty, state parties assume to fulfil and respect duties and rights included in such treaties. In other words, state parties have an obligation to enhance and protect human rights from the one hand, and to conduct constructive steps to guarantee the full enjoyment of such rights.<sup>6</sup> Through the ratification of any treaty, governments are obliged to put all appropriate regulations and domestic measures that are compatible with the treaties' duties and obligations. Instances where domestic legal measures fail to address human rights abuses, complaints and procedures to assure the implementation of basic human rights norms are available for individuals at both national and international levels.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 UNESCO International Convention Against Doping in Sport, (Parliament of Australia 2025) < [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed\\_Inquiries/jsct/9november2005/chapter2#int](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed_Inquiries/jsct/9november2005/chapter2#int) >.

<sup>2</sup> The Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions, (Council of Europe 2025) < <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/macolin> > accessed 5 May 2025.

<sup>3</sup> This was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly.

<sup>4</sup> Ratification Status for Saudi Arabia, (OHCHR 2020) < [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=152&Lang=EN](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=152&Lang=EN) > accessed 4 May 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Wakefield, “The International Human Rights Treaty System: Impact at the Domestic and International Levels”, (2014) 21 (1) *Human Rights Brief* 32, 32.

<sup>6</sup> International Human Rights Law, (OHCHR 2025) < <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-and-mechanisms/international-human-rights-law> > accessed 5 May 2025.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

Therefore, it is noteworthy to tackle the following question: how do rights included in an international treaty become part of domestic laws? In other words, how such rights and obligations become enforceable domestically on state parties? In fact, 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties<sup>1</sup> has clarified the means where state parties may accept international duties emerging from a treaty. Meaning, Vienna Convention did not provide an answer of the application of obligations arising from human rights treaties domestically, rather, the Convention left this matter to the arbitration of each state to be settled as it considers; the (domestication) of international treaties, an issue if national law that is not governed by international human rights law.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as the application of international law domestically depends on a state's national laws and constitution, it could be said that legislative steps can be implemented by blending new national laws that aim to enforce international norms domestically.

Overall, women's right to sport considered an inherent human right. Promoting human rights within the context of sporting activities starts with preserving women's rights by combating all types of discrimination that could affect such activities. The Saudi government is keen to affirm the continuity and universality of women's right to sport. Indeed, such efforts have a great impact to construct a better sporting community by the practice of sports with no discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

## **SECTION TWO: SAUDI ARABIA AND WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SPORT**

This section focuses on the role played by the Saudi government in empowering Saudi women in the sport field. It demonstrates the development of women's right to sport in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and discusses the relationship between women's right to practice sports and the Saudi Vision 2030.

### **2.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN RIGHT TO SPORT IN SAUDI ARABIA**

Following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1932, the Arabian Peninsula witnessed radical transformations and notable changes in economic and social conditions. There was a significant general lack of awareness regarding the wider individual and societal benefits of sport with sport being regarded as a way of gaining physical strength particularly among young men with a focus on military preparation and training for future wars. Sport came to be a fundamental way of manifesting cultural and individual achievements via national and international competitions and contests and served as a tool for promoting political and societal stability. This led to the need for laws

<sup>1</sup> This is an international declaration that was adopted 1969 by the United Nations Conference on the Law of Treaties.

<sup>2</sup> A.O.Adede, Domestication Of International Obligations, (Constitution of Kenya Review Commission 2001). For more information, please visit: < <https://www.commonlii.org/ke/other/KECKRC/2001/14.html> >.

<sup>3</sup> Hawra Al-Moussawi, Sport and Human Rights, (University of Karbala 2015) < <https://phlsl.uokerbala.edu.iq/wp/blog/2014/12/08/sports-and-human-rights/> >.



and legislation to regulate these activities given the essential and prominent role sport has come to play.

In the case of Saudi Arabia the crucial role sports play in forming the psychological, social and physical perspectives of society was not fully recognized before the reign of King Abdulaziz the Hijaz in 1926.<sup>1</sup> It was King Abdulaziz started to promote the practice of sports in the Arabian Peninsula, for example by introducing sports as a subject in school curriculums in KSA and as the Kingdom developed and progressed so did sports.

This progress was not easy. For instance, by the beginning of the thirties and due to the economic crisis caused by the global depression in the world's economy crisis, in 1933 sports programmes started to decline in Saudi Arabia as this crisis began to hit the Saudi national economy. However, by the end of World War II, the Saudi oil market witnessed an unexpected upsurge which led to the ability to fund various development programmes within the society, among which, the establishment of sports clubs.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Saudi society at this time was particularly conservative in nature and thus the process of developing and encouraging sports encountered significant obstacles. Nevertheless, the Saudi Kingdom was able to construct the first building block of governmental sports institutions which was represented by the General Presidency of Youth Welfare (newly known as the Ministry of Sports),<sup>3</sup> the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee<sup>4</sup> and Sports Federations.

Indeed, the sports sector like any other sector, requires legislation to shape, formalise and clarify the legal framework within the sector. In 2022, the Saudi government issued a sports law which primarily aims to raise participation in sports, increase the international competitiveness of Saudi sports and create a favourable investment environment for sports firms.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the *Shoura* Council has recently approved a draft sports law which aims to curb abuse, discrimination and intolerance within the sport sector. It primarily aims to contain illegal practices in sports such as the use of drugs. In addition, this law encourages foreign investments in the sports field by promoting international cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it could be said that Saudi Arabia has witnessed significant transformations on institutional and administrative levels that ultimately led the Kingdom to participate more

<sup>1</sup> Laila Abdel Karim Abdullah, "The History of the Evolution of Sports Clubs in Saudi Arabia" (2022) 9(4) *King Khalid University Journal of Historical and Civilizational Studies* 1, 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Zain Al-Abidin Najm, *Economic Relations Between the United States and Saudi Arabia*, (Dar Al-Kitab Al-Jamie 1995) 12-15.

<sup>3</sup> This is a governmental organisation that was established in 1974. It is responsible for organising sports activities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>4</sup> This is an independent sport organisation that was established in 1964. It is responsible to represent the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in all Olympic competitions and activities.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, please visit: < <https://www.albrightstonebridge.com/files/ASG%20Analysis%20-%20New%20Draft%20Sports%20Law%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia%20.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> New Sports Law to Curb Intolerance and Discrimination; Promote Foreign Investments, *Okaz/Saudi Gazette*, (Jeddah, 2023).

successfully in sports competitions held not only in the Gulf and Arab regions but also in international competitions. King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud -may God protect him- has supported the sport sector significantly. In fact, sports in Saudi Arabia have achieved notable successes recorded during the era of King *Salman*, under the supervision of His Royal Highness Prince *Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud*, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. Most importantly, these achievements include the organisation of different international champions, the qualification of the Saudi national soccer team to the World Cup, along with the notable progressive steps taken to empower Saudi women in the sports sector.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 EMPOWERING WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SPORT IN SAUDI ARABIA: SAUDI VISION 2030

Saudi Vision 2030 focused on providing a significant boost to the sports sector; a field that serves to unite all segments of Saudi society as well as providing a way of connecting and interacting with different countries on the global stage. By hosting various important sports championships and events the plan aims not only to contribute significantly to the local economic production within Saudi Arabia but to also increase Saudi exports of non-oil materials and products with the goal of attaining 50% of the total domestic economy becoming free from dependence on oil.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, and thanks to the Saudi Vision plan, women in Saudi Arabia have been able to participate in local, regional and international sports competitions. The continuous and progressive steps taken to empower women in the sports field while challenges remain, demonstrate both the Saudi government and nations commitment to apply the goals of the Vision with the aim of increasing the presence of Saudi women in different sports events. It should be noted in this domain that women's sports in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia started and indeed first flourished during the reign of *King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud*, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and the founder of the current Saudi state. This impetus to women's sports can be distinguished, among other things, as consisting of providing support for future young potential sportspersons, encouraging competition and transparency, as well as re-forming the society with more capacities and capabilities within the framework of the Vision 2030 and it is essential to note the contributions made by the architect of the Vision, the visionary and young dynamic leader Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed Bin Salman.

In accordance with the remarkable decision made by King *Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud* in 2018,<sup>3</sup> the General Saudi Sports Authority officially announced that women are allowed to attend sports events, a decision that marked a significant change to the existing social restrictions and barriers that women faced, and therefore, had a notable positive impact on women rights to sports.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please visit: < <https://www.spa.gov.sa/24ad5bf4fd>>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please visit: < <https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/content/saudivision>>.

<sup>3</sup> Allowing Families to Enter Saudi Stadiums, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, Riyadh, 2017.

In fact, Saudi society has witnessed a remarkable shift in its approach to women's participation in sports. Indeed, in addition to the Saudi Vision, many factors are contributing to such a transformation of traditional paradigms, including the Saudi government commitments and initiatives to encourage women's participation in sports such as for instance, creating facilities for women's sports facilities and introducing physical education classes for girls in schools. The impact of these changes has been to contribute to the dismantling of social barriers faced by women in different areas of their life and it is undoubtedly true that sports represent a powerful tool for women to achieve more representation and access to opportunities in different areas of life. A key driver of these changes has been the creation of inspirational role models thanks to the achievements of many female Saudi athletes who have won various medals and achieved international recognition. Princess *Reema Bandar Al-Saud* is one clear example of a groundbreaking pioneer in women's sports. She was the first head of the women's department at the General Sports Authority. Then, she was chosen to be the president of the Saudi Sports for All Federation and then went on to be appointed ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United States of America.<sup>1</sup>

There have been many notable milestones marking the progress of women's sports in Saudi Arabia. One very significant one was the establishment of women's basketball, volleyball and football teams in 2003. Another took place in 2006 when a women's sports academy was established which led to women being able to participate in international Olympics and competitions. In addition, women's sports clubs were allowed to be established for the first time in 2017 thanks to the decision of *King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud* and then in 2019, Saudi Arabia initiated the first women's football league;<sup>2</sup> These measures, among others, line up with the objectives of the Saudi Vision 2030, which include expanding women opportunities in employment and other fields as well as raising sports participation in Saudi society. Moreover, on an international level, Saudi Arabian Football Federation has revealed plans to radically boost women's football in KSA as part of the Saudi government effort to host the 2027 AFC Women's Asian Cup,<sup>3</sup> an initiative that reflects the Saudi Arabian determination to empower women and promote their role within the field of sports.

Therefore, on the one hand, it is evident that Saudi Arabia has made significant steps towards empowering women's rights to sport and these efforts are bearing fruit. As mentioned previously, harnessing sports to transform Saudi Arabia culturally, socially and economically began with Vision 2030. In fact, through this Vision, and with the power of sports, Saudi Arabia has opened to the world, diversified its economy and created a healthier and vibrant society. In this regard, women's participation in sports

<sup>1</sup> Majed Garoub, Women's Empowerment in Sports Sector, (Saudi Gazette 2023) <<https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/635479/Opinion/Womens-empowerment-in-sports-sector>>.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammed Fakehy and others, "Saudi Women Empowerment Constraint for Participation in Sports and Physical Activities" (2023) 12(1) *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences* 164, 165-166.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

field has increased significantly by more than 150 percent, with registered female coaches, athletes and sports doctors.<sup>1</sup> However, and far beyond numbers, women's opportunities in the sports field are limitless. With the 2030 Vision, barriers have been broken, and the Saudi passion for sports has been remarkably boosted. In addition, Saudi women's sports have had clear successes and made a positive impression on the international community thanks to the efforts made by the Saudi government to support women's sports. For instance, Saudi women have achieved unprecedented accomplishments in the field of sports arbitration, *Al-Anoud Al-Asmari*, obtained the international badge, becoming the first Saudi woman to obtain such a position. She joined the international list of referees for the year 2023, which was announced by the International Federation of the game "FIFA" distinguished for women's football referees.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Saudi national women's football team entered the FIFA World Rankings for the first time.<sup>3</sup> All of these are indications that the Saudi government is firmly committed to the long-term of the 2030 Vision to make Saudi Arabia an international leader in the sports field.

## CONCLUSION

The practice of sport is a human right where individuals must have the opportunity to play and participate in accordance with her or his needs. In fact, sports should be conceived as a way to promote human rights, and one which cannot operate in isolation of other basic human rights.

It is undeniable that sports can have a remarkable power to connect people and to transform lives in a positive way. They can even serve to promote international friendship and understanding and have the power to overcome boundaries and unite people from all walks of life in a shared activity or event. For this, the implementation of obligations under the international treaties, and the protection of rights arising from such instruments require state parties to take steps to guarantee the recognition of these rights domestically. These values are essential to understand to role played by sports in the broader progress and transformation taking place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, women in Saudi Arabia play a major role in sports both at a national and international levels. Women's achievements in sports help counter stereotypes on the one hand and challenge societal perceptions of women's potentials and capabilities. Economic development has led the Saudi government to encourage and support women to participate in the sport field. Thus, women in Saudi Arabia today compete in and win competitions and medals at a local, regional, and international level.

With no doubt, since the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, sports in Saudi Arabia have played a crucial role in women's empowerment. Saudi Arabia has undertaken to build and encourage a robust ecosystem for women within the field of sports. The Saudi

<sup>1</sup> Garoub (n35).

<sup>2</sup> HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud, Harnessing the Power of Sports for Diversity and Inclusion, (Saudi vision 2030, 2024) < <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/media/articles/hrh-ambassador-reema-bandar-al-saud>>.

<sup>3</sup> Fakehy and others (n36) 166-168.

government has established women's national teams, introduced sports in the educational curriculums, reformed rules and regulations to create licenses for women to use, operate and own sports gyms and clubs, and in addition, the Saudi government has mandated all federations have female board members and representatives in international delegations. One of the most noteworthy achievements of Saudi Arabia in the field of sports is their successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. This clearly highlights their commitment to promoting sports on an international level.

To conclude in the present day, Saudi Arabia has shown its commitment to sports and to women's sports specifically with the aim of continuing to work to improve the public health and well-being of the kingdom along with fostering the successful achievement of the Saudi Vision 2030 goals.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SPORT**

- Urging states parties to comply toward their duties under the various international human rights treaties.
- How important it is to let other states know about Saudi government's initiatives supporting women's right to sport through the accomplishments of Saudi Vision 2030.
- The necessity of reforming legislations that guarantee and support women's right to participate in the sport field.
- The necessity of dealing with women's right to sport, as an essential requirement for mental well-being and physical fitness.
- The importance of governments embracing various policies and building programs that focus on promoting women's right to sport within society, by confronting the various challenges they face, raising people awareness and establishing mechanisms that facilitate women's right in this area.

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