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New York, May 22, 2013

H.E. Nora al-Fayez
Deputy Minister of Education for Girls' Education
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Subject: **Advancing the rights of all girls to practice sports in Saudi Arabia**

Your Excellency,

We are writing to ask for a clarification of the Ministry of Education's position on sports for girls in government-funded schools as well as the concrete steps the ministry has taken toward adopting the proposed national strategy to promote sports for girls at all levels of education as indicated in the ministry's December 19, 2011 letter to Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch welcomed the Saudi Press Agency's recent report that students enrolled in private girls' schools will henceforth be allowed to take part in sports in accordance with Ministry of Education regulations. We enclose with this letter our press statement on the topic.

However, Human Rights Watch believes that the ministry should permit all Saudi girls, including public school students, to participate in sports in school, consistent with Saudi Arabia's human rights obligations to remove all forms of gender-based discrimination and provide equal access to physical education for all students irrespective of sex.

A comprehensive strategy to promoting sports for girls would be in line with the ministry's stated goal of promoting physical education in schools as a key factor in helping both male and female students stay healthy.

We are preparing a report on these issues and therefore would appreciate responses from your ministry to the following questions:

1. What steps has the ministry taken to develop a comprehensive educational curriculum that includes physical education for girls?
2. What is the timetable for introducing physical education for girls in government 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).
3. Is it currently possible for government schools to offer voluntary physical education classes to girls? What are the requirements for doing so, if any?
4. Can Saudis training to become a teacher specialize in physical education for girls? Can foreign physical education teachers receive accreditation in government or private schools?
5. In the view of the ministry, what obstacles, bureaucratic, logistical, political, or social, remain to implementing physical education in schools for girls?

More broadly, we have strongly urged other government bodies to take steps to end other forms of discrimination against girls and women in sport, as described in our February 2012 report “‘Steps of the Devil’: Denial of Women’s and Girls’ Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia” (available at www.hrw.org/news/2012/02/15/iocsaudi-arabia-end-ban-women-sport).

Despite the inclusion of two Saudi women to the 2012 Olympic team in London, sportswomen in Saudi Arabia continue to face barriers to participating in sports on an equal basis with men, including:

- The lack of a state sports infrastructure for women, with all designated buildings, sport clubs, courses, expert trainers, and referees limited to men;
- The refusal to license women’s gyms and sports clubs;
- Discriminatory practices by the General Presidency for Youth Welfare, the youth and sports ministry responsible for promoting sport among Saudi youth and overseeing youth sports leagues, such as denying women’s participation in official sports clubs;
- The denial of women’s representation on national sports bodies, resulting in the absence of competitive sports events for Saudi women athletes in the kingdom; and

- The absence of government financial support for Saudi sportswomen in national, regional, or international competitions.

Human Rights Watch has also highlighted the fact that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains in violation of the Olympic Charter's ban on gender discrimination, in particular its failure to establish a women's section within the Saudi Olympic Committee.

We believe that a comprehensive strategy to promote physical education for girls in both public and private schools represents an important first step in ending gender discrimination and allowing Saudi sportswomen to overcome the barriers to pursuing their interests.

We request that the ministry reply to these inquiries on or before June 30, 2013 so that we may reflect your response in a report we are preparing on this issue.

Sincerely,



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