

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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October 27, 2015

H.R.H. Prince Abdullah Bin Musa'ed Bin Abdulaziz
General President of Youth Welfare/
President of the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee
General Presidency for Youth Welfare/
Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee
Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**Subject: Advancing the rights of all women and girls to
practice sports in Saudi Arabia**

Your Excellency,

We are writing to request a meeting to discuss the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee's and the General Presidency for Youth Welfare's efforts to increase the participation of women and girls in sports in Saudi Arabia, as well as to seek clarification on some of the efforts already undertaken or currently planned to better foster gender equality in sports.

Human Rights Watch welcomed the participation of Saudi athletes Wujdan Shahrkani and Sarah Attar in the London 2012 Games, and statements made by Mohammed al-Mishal, secretary-general of the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee, in September 2014, that women would participate in the Rio de Janeiro 2016 games "on a good scale." Human Rights Watch also welcomed the March 2013 announcement that the General Presidency for Youth Welfare would license private sports clubs for women, and welcomed news reports that the first such club opened in al-Khobar in June 2013. We enclose with this letter our press statements on these topics.

Despite this progress, we remain concerned that women in Saudi Arabia continue to face barriers to participating in sports on an equal basis with men. For example, Human Rights Watch was concerned with Saudi Arabia's failure to send women to participate in the 2014 Asian Games or the 2015 Special Olympics.

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Human Rights Watch believes that the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee and General Presidency for Youth Welfare should take concrete steps to promote the participation of women in sports in Saudi Arabia, consistent with Saudi Arabia's human rights obligations to remove all forms of gender-based discrimination.

Discrimination undermines fair play and the rules of sport—and human rights. The Olympic Charter says, “Sport is a human right.” Unfortunately, women and girls in state schools continue to be denied the right to play sports and to physical education as a matter of government policy. This, along with the lack of sports federations for women imperils millions of women and girls’ health and other basic rights.

As you will know, the International Olympic Committee unanimously adopted reforms called “[Olympic Agenda 2020](#)” in December 2014. This “strategic reform agenda” under the leadership of new IOC president Thomas Bach made gender equality a central plank of the Olympic movement. Many countries are taking steps to meet these new benchmarks. The IOC’s own agenda now precludes the selection of a host country that is openly discriminatory towards women and girls. Recommendation 11 of Olympic Agenda 2020 asks:

1. The IOC to work with the International Federations to achieve 50 percent female participation in the Olympic Games and to stimulate women’s participation and involvement in sport by creating more participation opportunities at the Olympic Games.
2. The IOC to encourage the inclusion of mixed-gender team events.

President Bach has insisted that Host City contracts and the Olympic Charter itself include protections against discrimination before and during global sporting events. We are calling on Saudi Arabia to embrace Agenda 2020—ahead of the Rio Olympics—and to make deeper reforms to allow girls and women to play sports, in state schools and outside of them.

A comprehensive strategy promoting sports for women would also be in line with the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee’s stated mission to “spread the Olympic Movement and its ideals in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” As described in the Olympic Charter and in Olympic Agenda 2020, these ideals include non-discrimination and fostering gender equality.

We are preparing a report to follow up on our 2012 report, “‘Steps of the Devil’: Denial of Women’s and Girls’ Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia”, and our 2008 report, “Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming from Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia,” which examine restrictions on women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, including the right to sport, and would appreciate responses from the General Presidency for Youth Welfare to the following questions:

1. What steps has Saudi Arabia taken to comply with the new IOC “Agenda 2020” reforms, including allowing sports federations for women?
2. How many licenses has the General Presidency for Youth Welfare issued for women’s sports clubs? Are the requirements for licensing women’s sports clubs the same as those for licensing men’s sports clubs? Please include any different requirements.
3. What steps has the General Presidency for Youth Welfare taken to ensure that women have equal access to sports infrastructure, including designated buildings, sport clubs, courses, expert trainers, and referees? Please include details on any steps taken to establish a dedicated section within the General Presidency focused on promoting women in sport, and any regulations requiring male sports facilities to allow women equal access to their facilities.
4. What steps has the General Presidency for Youth Welfare taken to demand admission of women members in all sports clubs it oversees?

In addition, we would appreciate responses from the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee to the following questions:

1. What steps has the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee taken to ensure Saudi women can compete in international competitions? Please include details on how many women will compete in the Rio de Janeiro 2016 games, the number of events in which women will compete, any other regional or international competitions in which Saudi women will compete, and specific types of support given to female athletes (e.g., financial support, access to training facilities, access to coaches, etc.).

2. What steps has Saudi Arabia taken to comply with the new IOC “Agenda 2020” reforms, including to establish a dedicated section within the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee focused on promoting women in sport?
3. What steps have been taken to increase women’s representation on national sporting bodies, including the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee and recognized sporting federations? Please include information on expected timeframes for increasing women’s representation and specific targets for women’s representation.
3. What funds have been set aside for women’s sports? Please include information on how this financial support compares to that currently allocated for men’s sports, and disaggregate the funding data by sporting body, and by national, regional and international sporting event.
4. What steps have been taken to increase women’s participation in sports more generally? Please include information on any efforts made to develop national competitions for women in a variety of sports and disciplines, to form national women’s teams to participate in international and regional sporting events, or to conduct public outreach campaigns about the right to, and the benefits of, women participating in sports.

Finally, we’d appreciate a response to the following question:

1. In the view of the General Presidency for Youth Welfare and the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee, what obstacles—bureaucratic, logistical, political, or social—remain to implementing physical education in schools for girls?

Human Rights Watch has strongly urged other government bodies to take steps to end discrimination against girls and women, as described in our April 2008 report “Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming from Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia” (available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/04/19/perpetual-minors/human-rights-abuses-stemming-male-guardianship-and-sex>). We specifically called on other government bodies to take steps to end discrimination against girls and women in sport 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).

We have also sent a letter to the Minister of Education, urging the introduction of physical education in girls’ public schools.

The General Presidency for Youth Welfare and the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee both have crucial roles to play in promoting gender equality in the Kingdom. We believe establishing dedicated sections within each of these government bodies that focus on promoting women in sport would be an important first step in ending gender discrimination and allowing sportswomen in Saudi to better pursue their interests.

We request a response to these inquiries on or before November 30, 2015 so that, as with our last report, we may reflect your response in the report we are preparing on this issue. We are also happy to schedule a meeting to discuss these issues directly. If you have any queries regarding this matter or to submit your response to the questions, please do not hesitate to contact my colleague Sarkis Balkhian at balkhis@hrw.org or +1-202-492-6749 or mail your response to:

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Sincerely,



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cc: Mr. Thomas Bach
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