



European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights hearing
“Sport and human rights on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Rio”
Wednesday, 13 July 2016, 11.00 - 12.30
[DROI](#) [Agenda](#)

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Moving the Ball on Mega-sporting events and human rights

I. Starting line for rights reforms

In a matter of days, the world’s top athletes go for gold at the Olympic Summer Games in Brazil.

I want to thank the European Parliament for taking the lead in recognizing the serious impact Mega-sporting events (MSEs) can have on human rights. With this hearing and [previous ones](#), you have spotlighted this moment of crisis for world sport.

The Olympic motto is "Faster, Higher, Stronger." But for too long there has been a chasm between these aspirational words and the ugly reality on the ground.

Human Rights Watch has documented serious abuses tied to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the 2015 Baku Games, the 2022 Qatar World Cup. And most recently police killings in Brazil ahead of the Rio Games.

Our research has shown that awarding Mega-sporting events to abusers will worsen conditions for local populations. Instead of sport being a “force for good,” as the federations have long claimed, Mega-sporting events can reward rights abusers, cost lives, and create misery for local rights activists and journalists.

What abuses are we are talking about?

- **property rights**, when people are bulldozed from their homes to make way for infrastructure and stadiums without fair compensation;
- **migrant workers’ rights**, when workers have passports withheld; are cheated of wages, and must work in dangerous—or even deadly—conditions;
- **repression of civil society**, including environment and other rights monitors;
- **harassment of journalists** and denial of media freedom; and

- **blatant discrimination** against women and LGBT people.

II. Volleyball's net loss for women

Let me give you an example from just this month of how sports federations can betray the principles they claim to uphold.

Since 2012, women in Iran have been banned from attending -- as part of the audience-- volleyball tournaments hosted by the International Volleyball Federation, known as the FIVB.

Iranian women have been denied the right to buy tickets, threatened, detained and arrested for trying to go to stadiums. All of this is in stark violation of the FIVB's own constitution, which promises gender equality.

Instead of insisting Iran play by the rules, the FIVB keeps awarding Iran tournaments—including the first beach volleyball tournament last February on Kish Island. In the months before the competition, the FIVB announced it had assurances the event would “be open to women.” Instead, many women were excluded and turned away at the gates.

In the run-up to this month's FIVB World League tournament in Tehran, women were again promised they could attend—but got the message, “Women quota are finished” when they tried to buy tickets online. Iranian women posted their disappointment on Twitter and Persian Facebook pages with screenshots of how they were blocked. One woman from @OpenStadiums, a group in Iran, told AP that the FIVB failed to uphold women's rights. She said, "Honestly... if the FIVB were Pinocchio, their nose was from Lausanne to Tehran.”

The FIVB wants to sell tickets and build volleyball in Iran. But they should not do that by condoning the exclusion of half the population.

Iran's ban is just one example of gender discrimination in sport.

III. Saudi women and sport

In London in 2012, two Saudi women took part in the Olympic Games for the first time ever. This hopeful moment led many to believe Saudi Arabia would soon drop barriers for women to play sports in the Kingdom. But 4 years later, Saudi Arabia still puts athletics beyond the reach of almost all women. There is no government sports infrastructure for women, and most buildings, sport clubs, courses, expert trainers, and referees are off limits.

With a female population of 13 million—4 million of them girls—this lack of exercise has devastating effects on health, education and professional opportunities.

As the Rio Olympics approach, Saudi women and girls should also be able to dream of winning gold.

IV. Moment for reforms

Despite the track record of abuse over the last decade, this is a moment with great potential for human rights reforms around sport—but only if all key players are prepared to insist on change.

Increasingly, corporate sponsors understand that their reputation is stained by abuses and discrimination. Increasingly, fans don't want to sit in stadiums workers died to build. And obviously, it is hard for women banned from a stadium or citizens who have been bulldozed from their homes to cheer their national team.

The good news is that there is an emerging consensus that could spur durable reform:

Last year, FIFA contracted with Harvard Professor John Ruggie to report on human rights across its operations. That report was published in April, and if implemented, would force an overhaul of FIFA's previous 'head in sand' approach to labor and other human rights abuses in host countries like Russia and Qatar.

There are steps FIFA can take now to show that Ruggie's report is not mere window-dressing, and they start with firmer action in Qatar. FIFA should publicly demand that Qatar act to end migrant worker deaths, and abolish its abusive exit visa system. FIFA should also closely monitor and remedy abuses in preparations for the next World Cup in Russia.

In June, a new Mega-sporting events Center was set up, with former Irish President and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson at the helm. It is made up of stakeholders from corporate sponsors like Coke and Adidas, broadcasters, athletes, trade unions, NGOs, governments, and some sports federations.

The reforms on the table are based on the UN Guiding Principles on Human Rights. They require sports federations like FIFA and the IOC—but also organizations like Formula One and the FIVB—to “respect, protect, and remedy” abuses.

The bottom line is that sports should not undermine human rights.

V. Key Human Rights Watch recommendations include:

- **All sports bodies need to make an explicit commitment** to respect human rights from the top down, and integrate polices and monitoring into procedures.
- **This means establishing a strategy** for protecting human rights end-to-end, for the entire lifecycle of an event, including in the selection of host countries;
- **The rights approach should include** feedback and monitoring from stakeholders, local activists, and international rights groups;
- **Sponsors and media partners** need to step up to insist on human rights due diligence and be prepared to remediate abuses;
- **Human rights needs to be written into the Host City Contracts** in clear and enforceable language.

Candidates need to meet basic rights benchmarks. And if they do not reform as promised? They lose the right to host.

Above all, what is needed is political leadership and firm resolve to address abuses in sport—no matter who is committing them.

Thank you, members of the European Parliament, for providing that leadership, and this important forum.
