



Female supporters of Saudi's Al-Hilal attend their team's football match against Al-Ittihad in the Saudi Pro League at the King Fahd International Stadium in Riyadh on January 13, 2018. Saudi Arabia allowed women to enter a football stadium for the first time to watch a match that weekend, as the ultra-conservative kingdom eases strict decades-old rules separating the sexes.

Women's Sports Programs Are Challenging Saudi Arabia's Gender Divide

by Charlotte Lysa and Andrew Leber

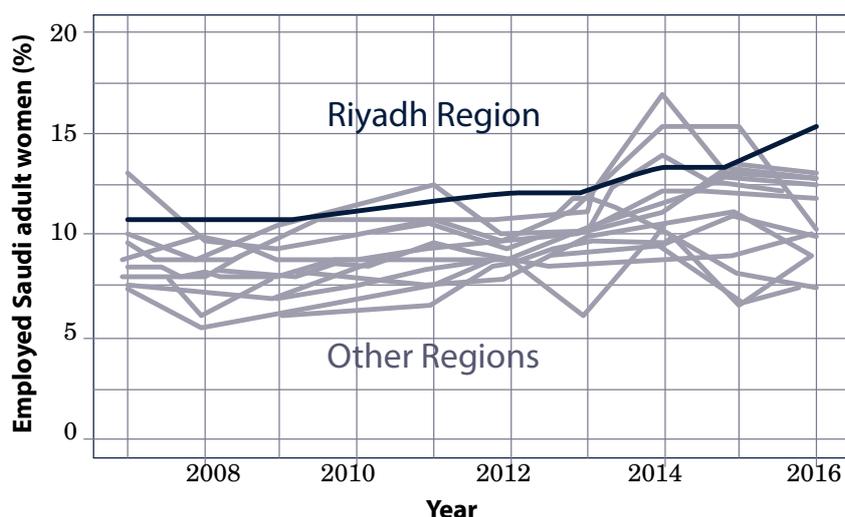
For decades, global perceptions of Saudi society have been dominated by the country's strict gender policies. Namely, separate restaurants and cafes for single men and for families, a "guardianship" system that surpasses its Gulf neighbors in subordinating female agency to male control, and—most infamously—a complete ban on women driving.

But now, according to statements by Saudi Arabia's leaders and boosters, Saudi women are living in an age of opportunity. Female citizens could vote and hold office as of 2015, they had made incremental but noticeable gains in the clerical workforce, and women have made up a slim majority of university students since 2016.¹ Since then, gender relations have been changing at "hyper-speed," to quote one Saudi man in his late 30s marveling at the number of women, hair uncovered, crowding into mixed-gender spaces at a Jeddah coffee shop. Women should also be able to drive by this summer, and dividers are now being bolted onto stadium bleachers to allow Saudi women to attend football matches for the first time ever.

II. Analysis

Although current reform efforts in Saudi Arabia suggest a genuine commitment to women's empowerment, Saudi policymakers are well-aware that news of greater women's rights helps drive positive international media coverage of the kingdom. Projecting an image of a more tolerant, inclusive country helps Saudi leaders attract greater foreign investment. The welcome news of granting women the right to drive starting in June 2018, for example, was tempered by revelations of the kingdom's clumsy efforts to keep female activists who had fought the driving ban out of the international press. While this was possibly aimed at heading off backlash from conservative Saudis, it was more likely an attempt to keep global media narratives focused on Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's top-down reform efforts. For this reason, understanding the complexity behind women's changing status in Saudi Arabia requires looking beyond the headlines to determine which "firsts" are largely symbolic and which portend systemic change for gendered policies in the kingdom.

Figure 1: Women's employment in Riyadh versus other regions in Saudi Arabia



Source: General Authority for Statistics, Saudi Arabia.

Periodic coverage of historic "firsts" for Saudi Arabia can also obscure the glacial process of extending policy change to the periphery and organizing movements that can slowly transform the country from below. At the same time, discussing Saudi Arabia strictly at the national level obscures divisions of class and geography that render women's advancement an uneven affair within the country. Women's employment has been consistently higher in the Riyadh region (see Figure 1), where major company headquarters and government offices can invest in the gendered architecture necessary to employ women. Likewise, the increasingly colorful and loosely worn abayas seen in trendy urban venues are all but absent in more conservative districts and rural areas outside Riyadh.

Healthy body, healthy citizen?

One area—physical activity—though rarely commented on in the English-speaking media is illustrative of Saudi Arabia's gender inequality given that female citizens' physical health notably lags behind men.² Until last year, there were no licensed female gyms and those that did exist typically charged fees that priced out middle- or lower-class Saudi women. With no physical education for girls in public schools, it is unsurprising that the main opportunity most women have for exercise outside the home is circulating mall floors in sneakers.

One area—physical activity—though rarely commented on in the English-speaking media is illustrative of Saudi Arabia's gender inequality.

However, in recent years new opportunities have opened up in the field of women's sports. In 2016, Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud, known as a vocal advocate for women's rights in Saudi Arabia, was appointed vice president of Women's Affairs at the General Sports Authority. Following her appointment, licensing for female-only gyms commenced and a physical education program for girls in public schools was announced, which has slowly gotten underway since the fall of 2017.

The development of women's sports and physical activity is aligned with aspects of Saudi Vision 2030, a reform program aimed at social and economic transformation in the kingdom. Vision 2030 is partly motivated by the need to improve the physical health of the population, as well as developing new domestic outlets for consumer spending. Much as these can be interpreted as symbolic moves, they are laying the groundwork for increased female sports participation—implicitly acknowledging that sports, and football in particular, are to be considered open to both genders.

Already, some gyms known to operate without proper licensing have begun to formally register with the government. New gyms or even entire chain organizations catering to women have begun to appear. As one gym manager observed, "opening up for the licenses has caused gyms to pop up right and left—it is *the* hot industry to go into. Because it's a virgin market, everyone wants a piece of the cake."³

But providing gym access to all will require more than market mechanisms—not everyone has spare money to buy a membership. One gym owner noted that the makeup of his clientele was "mostly income driven" rather than a reflection of "liberal" women being more interested in exercise.⁴ Physical education programs that plan to extend into conservative towns and villages may encounter extra resistance—then again, rural women have long been able to drive cars and trucks in Saudi Arabia, despite the strictly-enforced ban in urban areas.

In any event, expanding women's sports across Saudi Arabia will demand a great deal of investment in both facilities and human resources. To date, only one pilot project aimed at educating teachers for the public school program has been implemented—the number of new female teachers needed is massive, and male teachers are already hard to come by. The complete lack of any tradition of organized physical activity makes the project all the more challenging. "They [teachers] can't even think about: 'What have I done when I was a child?' 'What was fun?' [...] 'Who was a good teacher?' 'Who was a good coach?' They don't have this experience. We have to start at zero,"⁵ said a sports official familiar with the process.

As a result, few concrete signs of progress in advancing women's physical education have followed the fanfare that accompanied last summer's announcement of the initiative. At a press conference in March, Minister of Education Dr. Ahmed al-Issa could only offer that the ministry was "beginning to implement some activities according to the capacities of different schools."⁶

Taking to the streets

As important as such top-down government initiatives are, they alone cannot transform a conservative country home to 30 million people. Grassroots efforts promoting fitness will have to—and already are—take hold. The Jeddah Running Collective (JRC), which caters to both Saudis and expats, predates top-down government initiatives and since 2013 has expanded to other cities beyond Jeddah.⁷

II. Analysis

Last March, JRC arranged a run on March 8 for International Women's Day in three different cities in Saudi Arabia, which was broadcast live on social media. Some of the event's slogans were: "We are women hear us roar/In numbers too big to ignore!" and "female running renegades." The all-female contingent of the group said on social media (Figure 2) that they "have been changing women's sport narratives since 2013." The group is also growing in Riyadh, the conservative Saudi capital.⁸ While the Riyadh chapter is keeping their runs open to women only, they are also pushing barriers by running in public and in busy urban areas where walking paths exist.⁹ JRC may not be as headline-grabbing as ending the driving ban or sending in 2012 for the first time two female athletes to the Olympics, but the group is still helping carve out and maintain spaces for women.

Figure 2: Jeddah Running Club Instagram page



Saudi Arabia's top-down plans to reform gender relations deserves much praise, but the state must still devote substantial resources to supporting and enforcing its policies far from downtown Riyadh. Centralized policymaking could stand to benefit from more engagement with civil society organizations, like JRC, that are willing to meet state-led efforts halfway. Physical education is an easy target for state-society engagement on social reform issues in Saudi Arabia—demonstrated success here could be a harbinger for other more serious and lasting reforms to come.

Charlotte Lysa is a PhD candidate at the University of Oslo, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages. Andrew Leber is a PhD student at Harvard University, Department of Government.

¹ Abdullah al-D'ayan, "Graduation of 130,000 a Year from Saudi Universities... Riyadh Tops Lists of Unemployed," *al-Hayat*, February 16, 2016.

² Mashael K. Alshaikh, Filippus T. Filippidis, Hussain A. Al-Omar, Salman Rawaf, Azeem Majeed and Abdul-Majeed Salmasi, "The ticking time bomb in lifestyle-related diseases among women in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries; review of systematic reviews," *BMC Public Health* 17 (2017).

³ Author interview, Riyadh, October 2017.

⁴ Author interview, Riyadh, October 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Majid al-Rifai, "Minister of Education to 'Sabq': Physical Education Program for Girls 'Essential and Strategic Decision'," Sabq, March 12, 2018, <https://sabq.org/ZzrCgG>.

⁷ Author interview, Jeddah, October 2017.

⁸ Author interview, Riyadh, December 2017.

⁹ Ibid.