



SAUDI WOMEN ALLOWED AT

The 2012 Summer Olympics could be a watershed event for international sports as every participating nation is expected to field at least one female athlete, including three Muslim countries — Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei — that have previously sent only male competitors. While female athletes from Qatar and Brunei have participated in national and regional competitions, Saudi Arabia has essentially barred sports for women, according to Human Rights Watch.

A pan-Arab newspaper based in London, Al-Hayat, reported in May that the Saudi Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz has approved the participation of female athletes as long as their sports “meet the standards of women’s decency and don’t contradict Islamic laws.”

Human Rights Watch, which has accused the I.O.C. of violating its own charter for equality by allowing Saudi Arabia into the Games while discriminating against women, said it could not confirm the Arab newspaper report. But an official with the rights organization said he believed that at least one Saudi female athlete would compete in London, which he called a modest first step.

Christoph Wilcke, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch’s Middle Eastern and North African division was the lead author of a blistering report issued by Human Rights Watch that detailed the struggles facing female athletes in Saudi Arabia. According to the report, Saudi officials systematically discriminated against women, providing no physical education for girls in state schools, closing gyms for women in 2009 and 2010 and forcing them to play in underground leagues.

Saudi Arabia has faced widespread criticism for its general treatment of women, who must receive permission from male guardians to gain employment, get an education, open a bank account, get married and travel abroad. Effectively, they are forbidden from driving cars.

Human Rights Watch has called on the I.O.C. to make Saudi Arabia’s future Olympic participation dependent on a good-faith effort to lessen discrimination against female athletes. They requested that female Saudi athletes be allowed to participate in the London Games; that women’s divisions



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be opened in the Saudi Olympic Committee, in its various sports organizations and in sports clubs; that physical education for girls be taught in schools; and that an outreach programme be started to encourage women to participate in sports.

Saudi Arabia is required to submit a list of potential athletes to the I.O.C before they are allowed to participate in the Olympics. It is expected that – given their lack of exposure and experience - listed athletes may find it difficult to meet qualifying standards. But the I.O.C. has long granted participation under special conditions to athletes from developing nations and it is under significant pressure to make accommodations for Saudi women in London.



Human Rights Watch has suggested that a female track athlete be among those named to the Saudi Olympic team, given that she could cover herself with a headscarf and an unrevealing uniform as opposed, to say, a swimmer. Experts feel that Saudi Arabia's sending a female athlete to London could put pressure on other countries with restrictions on women's participation to do likewise. However, female athletes in Saudi Arabia could still face headwinds in getting financing to compete.



Should Saudi Arabia also send female officials to the Olympics, that, too, would be "significant progress," said Erika George from S.J. Quinney College of Law at the University of Utah. "That's a power position. Maybe not always a prominent one, but that's women making decisions and I think that's really going to challenge perceptions."

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FAST FACTS

ACCESS TO SAFE WATER

20
SECONDS

A child dies from a water-related illness all over the world.

200
MILLION
HOURS

Women spend a day collecting water all over the world.

11%

More girls attend school when sanitation is available.

780
MILLION

People lack access to an improved water source; approximately one in nine people.

3.41
MILLION

People die from water, sanitation and hygiene-related causes each year.

443
MILLION

School days are lost each year due to water-related illnesses.

1.5
MILLION

Deaths each year are caused by diarrhoea. It kills more children than malaria, AIDS, and measles combined.

Source: www.water.org