

Why Won't IOC Push Saudi Arabia on Women for Olympic Games?

by Nikki Dryden | February 20, 2012 4:45 AM EST

When Women's World Cup soccer fever can overwhelm Twitter, it may be hard for Americans to imagine a place where women are banned from all playing fields. That is Saudi Arabia today.

In Saudi, women do not get to compete in elite sport—let alone exercise, play, or even participate in physical education. They can't even watch a sports match. "No women allowed" is what life is like for girls and women in Saudi Arabia who aspire to run, throw a ball, swim, or ride a bike. In six months, the London Summer Olympics will open with fireworks and fanfare. Teams from every country will parade proudly at the Opening Ceremony. One team, Saudi Arabia, plans to send only men.

The International Olympic Committee is the keeper of the Olympic flame, and has immense power over national Olympic committees. In the same way we demand that athletes play by the rules, Saudi Arabia should not be allowed to violate the Olympic Charter's ban on "discrimination of any kind."

Saudi has never fielded a woman on its national Olympic team, and effectively imposes a ban on girls and women playing sports in the kingdom. Boys in state schools get physical education. Girls don't—by state policy. The government has shuttered gyms for women. Women are forced to play in underground leagues, while the 153 government-supported sports clubs provide facilities only for men. As an Olympian, I take my duty to uphold the values of the Olympic Games seriously. And as a woman athlete, I have a clear duty to promote the rights of women athletes around the world. The Olympic ideals of human dignity and gender equity are my ideals, too, and it is time for the Olympic movement to find its voice and demand access for Saudi Arabia's women to the 2012 Olympics.

Human Rights Watch's new report, *Steps of the Devil: Denial of Women and Girls' Right to Sport in Saudi Arabia*, includes interviews with women inside Saudi Arabia who dream of days past when they could "swim with their brothers" and a future when they will compete in the Olympics. Yet today, these girls and women can't realize their dreams.

I am the daughter of two phys-ed teachers, so sport has always been a huge part of my life. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of playing tag with my brother and the neighborhood kids—something wholly out of reach for girls in Saudi Arabia. My Olympic dreams were apparent at a young age, as I organized the mini-Olympics in our backyard—running, standing long jump, chin-ups, and miniature golf.

In reaching for my dreams, I unearthed opportunities that surpassed them. I had a full scholarship to swim at the University of Florida, funding from the Canadian government, and the emotional support of my family and community. My education, caring friends and teammates, and international travel led me to the path of human-rights law, and my commitment provided lessons of empowerment and the ability to lose with dignity and win with humility.

My goal today is for the IOC and the Olympic movement to enforce its own rules, uphold its own ideals, and to end the ban on women's participation in sport in Saudi Arabia. For IOC members and Olympians past and present, our Olympic movement is at stake when countries like Saudi Arabia are allowed to freely violate the Olympic charter.

Yet the IOC announced this week that it will not condition Saudi Arabia's membership in the Olympic movement on sending women to the Olympic Games. In taking this position, it violates its own values and rules, as well as rules of international law.



Saudi members of the King's United women football club train at a stadium in Jeddah in 2009 despite strict religious taboos in the desert kingdom. They have divided themselves into three teams to compete against one another in a country where sports for women are strictly forbidden, Omar Salem, AFP / Getty Images

The IOC has gotten tough in the past: it banned South Africa during apartheid and Afghanistan during Taliban rule.

The Olympic ideals of human dignity and gender equity are my ideals, too, and it is time for the Olympic movement to find its voice and demand access for Saudi Arabia's women to the 2012 Olympics.

Saudi Arabia has long had a seat on the IOC, held by Prince Nawaf bin Faisal. So there should be no problem telling the prince that Saudi Arabia is not welcome in the Olympic movement unless his country commits to strict timelines for providing sporting opportunities for women and girls, including sports in public schools, access to sporting facilities, and support for elite sportswomen.

Watered-down criticism is no longer enough. The IOC, with its recently acquired United Nations observer status, needs to condition Saudi Arabia's participation in the Olympics Games in London this summer on ending discrimination against women in sport.

Women still don't have a level playing field in the IOC, from the lack of women IOC members (just 19 percent) to the inequality in participation levels and sports (there is still no women's canoeing in the Olympic Games). The best way to start addressing this inequality is to insist that Saudi Arabia's women be allowed to play.