

## **Islamic Conservatism Negotiations: Women's Involvement in Saudi Arabian Football**

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### **Abstract**

*This research will discuss the dynamics of women's involvement in Saudi Arabian football and its influence on the culture of conservatism in that state. Saudi Arabia is known as a conservative state and tends to discriminate against women. However, in recent years, Saudi Arabia has begun to take an open and moderate stance, including in sports. This research is interesting to discuss because football, the most popular sport in Saudi Arabia, is a channel for creating a cultural transformation from conservative to moderate. This research aims to explain Saudi Arabia's efforts to change conservatism that has been rooted for a long time through the involvement of women in football. It is a descriptive qualitative research using library resources, and the approach is constructivism. The results of the study showed that the role of Prince Muhammad bin Salman through Saudi Vision 2030 could change Saudi Arabia's culture of conservatism into a culture of moderation by relaxing existing norms such as allowing women to watch football matches in stadiums, establishing competitions and women's national team, being able to accommodate Saudi women to get involved in football and express their interests and talents after previously being restricted by the rules created by Wahhabism.*

**Keywords:** Football; Woman; Saudi Arabia; Conservative

## **Introduction**

In the annals of contemporary society, football is the most popular sport globally. As reported by *Detik.com*, the football association has 4 billion fervent devotees scattered around the world, more than half the Earth's inhabitants. Although modern football traces back to England in the 19th century, the roots of this beloved sport span approximately two millennia of heritage in China. The allure of football lies in its simplicity and accessibility, as it does not require fancy equipment, making it a game that is quickly gaining popularity worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

Known for its rigorous demands on skill and physical power, the football's domain is primarily dominated by male participants. Despite the common association of football with men's sports, women have actively participated in the game for centuries. Historical records show that women have been involved in football since ancient times, dating back to the *Donghan* Dynasty in China. Evidence of women playing football can be seen in wall paintings from that era (25-220 AD)<sup>2</sup>. The participation of women in football started gaining momentum in England, especially after the Football Association (FA) of England established standardized rules for women's matches. The first documented women's football game occurred on May 7 1881, when the Scottish Women's Team emerged victorious over the England Women's Team with a 2-0 win at Easter Road in

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<sup>1</sup>Fahri Zulfikar, "10 Olahraga Paling Populer di Dunia, Mana yang Kamu Suka?", March 26, 2022, <https://www.detik.com/edu/detikpedia/d-6002092/10-olahraga-paling-populer-di-dunia-mana-yang-kamu-suka>.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Katherine Flanagan, Dissertation: "Managing Coed Soccer: Gender, Power, and Participation" (Florida State University, 2013), p. 20.

Edinburgh.<sup>3</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, women face severe limitations when it comes to participating in sports, particularly football. The belief that football is a sport reserved exclusively for men because of its physical demands has led to the exclusion of women. However, Kaye Smith reached a milestone in 2006 by establishing the first women's football club, Eastern Flames, in Dammam. Despite initial struggles in recruiting players and coaches, the club pushed forward. 2009, the Flames debuted in the Rotary Club of Manama Charity Tournament. In 2010, they joined the Arsenal Soccer School Cup league in Bahrain, intending to improve competitiveness and enhance player performance by facing more experienced adversaries.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, world football fans have been recently shocked by the manoeuvres of Saudi Arabian clubs in developing their football industry. Several world football stars who have built successful European careers have opted for Saudi Pro League clubs in the last two years to further their careers. Saudi Arabian clubs have attracted global football stars like Cristiano Ronaldo, Sadio Mane, and Neymar to play in Saudi Arabia. The arrival of world football stars to Saudi Arabia will further advance Saudi Arabian football. Saudi women's football will be affected; the arrival of these world stars coincides with the football reforms conducted by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The prince had previously permitted Saudi women to attend football matches in 2017. Additionally, in December 2019, the Saudi Arabian

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<sup>3</sup>Lee Grimsditch. "14 defining moments in the history of women's football in Britain", August 19, 2023, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/nostalgia/14-defining-moments-history-womens-27544509>.

<sup>4</sup>Noor Algadheb, "The Rise of the First Women's Football Club in Saudi Arabia", August 12, 2020, <https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/the-rise-of-the-first-women-s-football-club-in-saudi-arabia/>

Football Federation (SAFF) created an informal women's football tournament in Jeddah to encourage the involvement of Saudi women in football<sup>5</sup>.

In this research, the author emphasizes the immense significance of Muhammad bin Salman's football reforms, particularly in Saudi Arabian women's football. Not only is football traditionally associated with men as a physically demanding sport, but the Saud family-controlled state has also been perceived as unwelcoming and restrictive towards women's mobility. Wahhabism heavily influences women's education at all levels. This conservative religious doctrine dictates how women should conduct themselves as dutiful wives and mothers and steer them towards certain professions deemed appropriate by Saudi society, such as teaching and nursing, which are considered most fitting for their innate qualities. The prevailing conservative Islamic ideology under Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia continues to reinforce the idea of stark gender disparities, segregating women from men and imposing restrictions on women working in various fields. Consequently, only a few professions, such as teaching and nursing, suit women in this context.<sup>6</sup>

This research is interesting to discuss because the author will reveal how Saudi Arabia's efforts to change its image from a state that is less friendly towards women due to the implementation of conservative Islamic law become a state that is more secular in society and moderate in religion. It can be seen from the Saudi Vision 2030 design that it is seen as a pillar to change this image

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<sup>5</sup>Deema Al-Khudair, "Jeddah Eagles flying high with women's football win", December 9, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1596096/saudi-arabia>.

<sup>6</sup>Safaa Fouad Rajkhan, Thesis: "Women in Saudi Arabia, Status, Rights, and Limitations", (University of Washington Bothell, 2014) p. 7.

and that the sports entertainment sector, especially football, is one of the focuses. Prince Muhammad bin Salman has become an agent of football reform by allowing Saudi women to be actively involved in football. This involvement not only introduces the direction of the secular state but also promotes moderate Islam and a more tolerant society to the world, especially for individual organizations and a state that has long viewed Saudi Arabia as a state that is intolerant towards women and often discriminates against them. From the description above, the author formulates the problem to be discussed into a question: How does Saudi Arabia attempt to negotiate the order of its society to change the state's image through the involvement of women in football?

## **Method**

This research uses qualitative and descriptive analysis to understand social processes and interactions. Qualitative research analyzes and interprets facts, symptoms, and events based on what happened so that it becomes study material to discuss. This research does not use statistics or other calculations to obtain information.<sup>7</sup> This library research collects data by reading, reviewing, or examining library materials that support the research. The author will use documentation studies as a data collection technique. Documentation study collects qualitative data by viewing and analyzing documents created by the subject himself or others about the topic. Documentation studies are one way qualitative researchers can get an overview from the subject's point of view through written media and other documents. Based on needs and suitability to the research objectives, the data in this research will be taken from several sources related to the research theme in the form of photos, audio, video, or written data such as books, journals, thesis, dissertation, and news sources from social

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<sup>7</sup>Abdul Fattah Nasution, "Metode Penelitian Kualitatif", (Bandung: Harfa Creative, 2023), p. 22.

media and the internet. The objectives of this research include the involvement of women in Saudi Arabian football through the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030 by Prince Muhammad bin Salman and the development of moderate Islamic identity in Saudi Arabia.

To give a more critical view, it also utilizes a constructivist approach. Constructivism is not an international relations approach but a social approach in sociological studies. The main focus of constructivism in this research is the relationship between Muhammad bin Salman as an agent and the structure of Saudi society, where both are bound together and influence each other. Two key constructivist ideas are relevant to the study of international relations. First, the belief is that the structures that unite humanity are determined more by shared ideas (ideas that are believed together) than by material strength. Second is the belief that shared ideas determine actors' identities and interests more than natural factors. It means that the actions of each actor are not solely determined by their motives, reasons, and interests but more shaped by interactions between individuals in the surrounding environment (social, political, economic, cultural structures, and so on)<sup>8</sup>. Saudi Arabian policy underwent significant changes in the era of Muhammad bin Salman, who wanted to change the structure of Saudi society, which was still strongly influenced by conservative Islam under Wahhabism. The launch of Vision 2030 as Saudi Arabia's effort to diversify its economy has allowed women to help make development programs successful in various fields. The sports entertainment sector, especially football, has become one of the focuses of diversification of the Kingdom's

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<sup>8</sup>Sugiarto Pramono dan Andi Purwono, "Konstruktivisme dalam Studi Hubungan Internasional: Gagasan dan Posisi Teriotik", *Jurnal Spektrum*: Vol. 7, No. 2, 2010, p. 15.

economy, which has relied on oil and gas.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Wahhabism and Its Restrictions on Women**

Wahhabism is a renewal and purification movement of Islam. Its purpose is to invite people to return to Islam following the *Qur'an*, prophet tradition, *sahabah*, and *salaf* scholars. This movement was pioneered by Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab bin Sulaiman at-Tamimi from Najd, Arabian Peninsula. Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab's opponents popularized the name Wahhabism itself as a stigma of dislike for the movement.<sup>9</sup> The thoughts of Ahmad Bin Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyah are some scholars who influenced Ibn Abdul Wahab in fostering this movement. This movement began to develop in the 18th century in Diriyah, a remote hamlet on the Arabian Peninsula in the Najd area. Wahhabism is also known as an Islamic fundamentalist movement that takes the position of right-wing Islam or Islamic radicalism.<sup>10</sup>

Wahhabism and the Saudi Royal family have been an inseparable unit for a long time. Wahhabism has always supported the legitimacy and assisted the Saud family in expanding political influence through its teachings. The Saud family repaid this service by helping the spread of Wahhabi beliefs worldwide through educational scholarship programs and international aid. This movement also prohibits anything that smacks of freedom, such as restrictions on women's rights, the establishment of entertainment venues such as cinemas and music concerts, control over the way Saudi people dress, especially women, and their involvement in

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<sup>9</sup>Ahmad Hanafi, "Pengantar teologi Islam" (Jakarta: PT. Pustaka Al Husna Baru, 2003), p. 198.

<sup>10</sup>Syaikh Idahram, "Mereka Memalsukan Kitab-Kitab Karya Ulama Klasik: Episode Kebohongan Publik Sekte Salafi Wahabi", (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pesantren, 2011), p. 15.

public spaces.<sup>11</sup>

Gender separation is a central part of the Saudi Wahhabi moral vision. The government created the *Muṭawwaʿun* Commission, dedicated to enforcing moral codes and sex segregation in nearly all workplaces, with exceptions like hospitals. Furthermore, the *Muṭawwaʿun* was given the authority to arrest individuals for violating uncoded rules, mostly customary law. Women in Saudi Arabia are subject to a male guardianship system, initially overseen by their fathers and later by their husbands upon marriage. They are also required to wear an abaya (a loose robe) and niqab (a face veil) in public. Opportunities for access to education and employment are limited. In Saudi Arabia, there is still much unfair behaviour between men and women because of the ideology of Wahhabism that is still inherent in the country. The small number of women's participation in community activities shows that Saudi Arabia is very close and firm to the teachings of Wahhabism. Wahhabism influences women's education at all levels, from elementary school through university, with the goal of preparing them to be wives and mothers. It also steers them towards professions deemed suitable for women in Saudi Arabia, like teaching and nursing, which are considered to align with their perceived nature.<sup>12</sup>

Based on a survey conducted by Madawi Al-Rasheed in his book, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, it shows that the interpretation of Islam used to be a tool to limit the presence of women in public activities. This research also shows that women cannot obtain positions as civil

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<sup>11</sup>Fatmawatu, Thesis: "Kritik Terhadap Teologi Wahabiyyah Di Indonesia Dalam Pemikiran Said Aqil Siradj". (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2019), p. 14-15.

<sup>12</sup>Safaa Fouad Rajkhan, Thesis: "Women in Saudi Arabia, Status, Rights, and Limitations", (University of Washington Bothell, 2014) p. 7.



servants.<sup>13</sup> This is related to the customs of Arab and Muslim society, which consider a woman's body to be the honour of the family, as the Arabic proverb says, "Honor is in a woman's skirt". Therefore, women are considered more responsible for upholding family honour than men.<sup>14</sup> An inappropriate act committed by a woman will bring disgrace to all members of her family, especially to her male relatives. Therefore, Saudi women's behaviour is strictly limited by state regulations and customs. Although these regulations slightly conflict with Article 8 of the Saudi Arabian Constitution, which states, "The system of government in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is based on justice, deliberation, and equality according to Islamic law".

However, when Prince Muhammad bin Salman was appointed as a crown prince on June 21, 2017, and began to make several changes. The crown prince, as an agent, has the ambition to change the image of Saudi Arabia from a very conservative state with their *sharia* law and only dependent on oil and gas to a state that can diversify its economy and develop public sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation and tourism. This certainly poses a tough challenge for the prince because he has to change the structure of Saudi Arabian society, which is known to be conservative under Wahhabism, to become a state that is more secular in society, moderate in religion, and able to accept differences. Changes in the structure of society are expected to attract more significant investment, both domestic and international.

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<sup>13</sup>Analieza Ilmiatun Mufiedah, "Reformasi Hak-Hak Perempuan Arab Saudi Melalui Saudi Vision 2030 Tahun 2017-2019", *Solidaritas Jurnal Ilmu Sosial*, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup>Aziz Douai, "New Media Discourses, Culture and Politics after the Arab Spring" (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p. 27.

## **Negotiation of Islamic Conservatism Through Football**

The fall in oil prices in 2014 was a significant economic event that affected the global oil market. The cost of Brent crude oil, considered the international standard for oil prices, fell from nearly 115 dollars per barrel in June 2014 to around 30 dollars per barrel in January 2016. This was the highest price decline of 74% in less than 18 months<sup>15</sup>. The decline in oil prices and lower demand has pushed Saudi Arabia, one of the world's largest oil-exporting countries, to look for new sources of income or markets to maximize revenue. Thus, Saudi Arabia must diversify its economy. With the decline in market demand, especially from the United States, Saudi Arabia realized that the state could only depend on oil for a while.

The United Nations (UN) also asked countries worldwide to reduce the use of fossil-based fuels, including coal. Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Australia are among the countries that asked the UN to drop the recommendation in its draft report. This recommendation is undoubtedly related to the UN's significant commitment to addressing climate change and ensuring that the increase in global warming is no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. Several countries support the emergence of expensive technology currently designed to permanently capture and store carbon dioxide underground, called carbon capture and storage (CCS). As the world's largest oil producer, Saudi Arabia asked UN scientists to remove their conclusion that the focus of decarbonization efforts in the energy system must rapidly shift to zero-carbon sources and actively phase out fossil fuels.<sup>16</sup> This means that Saudi Arabia can

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<sup>15</sup>Terry Macalister, "Oil slump - the true cost of falling prices", January 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jan/17/oil-price-slump-true-cost-uk-economy>

<sup>16</sup>Justin Rowlett, "Perubahan iklim: Bocoran dokumen negara-negara persiapkan laporan PBB soal iklim, termasuk komentar Indonesia tentang bahan

only continue to depend on income from fossil fuels if these natural resources are limited and have a detrimental environmental impact.

On April 25, 2016, Prince Mohammad bin Salman announced a long-term program, Saudi Vision 2030. Saudi Vision or Saudi Vision 2030 is a framework for Saudi Arabia that the Kingdom's crown prince ratified during the reign of King Salman. Saudi Vision 2030 contains long-term goals based on the unique strengths and capabilities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The significant changes planned in Saudi Vision 2030 are supported by policies designed to improve the overall quality of life in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that benefit Saudi society, both from the upper, middle, and lower classes, and attract more significant investment, both domestic and international.<sup>17</sup>

The main goal is to increase the share of non-oil and gas business sectors, such as tourism, entertainment, sports, banking, and information technology, and display an open-minded and secular national image globally. Saudi Vision 2030 also aims to make the country an essential economic and political centre at regional and global levels in the next few years. Saudi Vision 2030 has three pillars: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. Specifically, Saudi Arabia has further details for a thriving economy, namely a developing economy that provides opportunities and benefits, is open to long-term investment, and is open to business.<sup>18</sup>

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bakar fosil”, October 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/dunia-58992865>

<sup>17</sup>Reem Abdellatif, “What you need to know: A timeline of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 reforms”, May 20, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/business/economy/2019/10/28/What-you-need-to-know-A-timeline-of-Saudi-Arabia-s-key-Vision-2030-reforms>

<sup>18</sup>Fakhriansyah, “Cerita Perubahan Arab Saudi, Katanya Mulai Lepas Nilai Islam?”, January 26, 2023,

The sports industry, especially football, is essential to the Kingdom's strategy to achieve its vision. Football, considered the most popular sport in the world, is included in the crown prince's economic diversification plan to reduce the Kingdom's dependence on oil exports. Saudi Arabia, with its conservative Islamic culture, must be transformed into a comfortable place to play football and attract tourists to come to watch the match. World football star players brought in by Saudi clubs add to the impression that Saudi Arabia is a comfortable place to play football. The appointment of the world's best football player, Lionel Messi and his family as tourism ambassadors for Saudi Arabia for three years from mid-2022 confirms this ambition. Saudi Arabia paid Messi an expensive contract worth 22.5 million euros, or the equivalent of 369 billion rupiahs, so Messi and his family would become tourism ambassadors and promote Saudi Arabia through social media.<sup>19</sup>

In foreign policy, Saudi Arabia wants to emulate the success of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in investing in the sports sector to reduce dependence on the oil sector. Through the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), Qatar took over ownership of the French football club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2012, followed by the United Arab Emirates through Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan from a member of the Abu Dhabi royal family who succeeded in buying the Manchester City club. Through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth foundation, Saudi Arabia succeeded in buying 80% of the shares in the Premier League club Newcastle United. PIF acquired the club from the city of Newcastle for 300 million

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<https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20230125120316-4-408100/cerita-perubahan-arab-saudi-katanya-mulai-lepas-nilai-islam>

<sup>19</sup>CNN Indonesia, "*Liburan di Arab Saudi, Messi Dibayar Hampir Rp30 Miliar*", June 22, 2023, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/olahraga/20230622171313-142-965426/liburan-di-arab-saudi-messi-dibayar-hampir-rp30-miliar>

pounds or around 5.8 trillion rupiah and made the football club ranked among the wealthiest clubs in the world<sup>20</sup>.

Outside of government, the Saudi Pro League clubs' ambitions are to bring in many world football stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Sadio Mane, Neymar, Kalidou Koulibaly, Ruben Neves, Karim Benzema, N'gola Kante, Riyad Mahrez, Fabinho and many famous players who play in Saudi Arabia is turning the Saudi Professional League into one of the five best leagues in the world, no longer the best in Asia, as they have been since 2021. This can be seen from Cristiano Ronaldo's statement, *"We are much better, and the Saudi league is getting better, and the next year will be even better. Step-by-step: I think this league will be among the top five leagues in the world, but they need time, players, and infrastructure. But this country has amazing potential and people, and the league will be great."*<sup>21</sup> The Kingdom certainly supports the desire of the Saudi Pro League club to make football an attraction for Saudi Arabia, which will have an impact on improving its economy and making this oil-rich country better known to the world.

Saudi Arabia is also starting to invest in involving Saudi women in football as supporters, players, and match officials. The Saudi Arabian government allowed women to come to stadiums and watch football matches in 2017, followed by the formation of the Saudi Arabian Women's Football Association (SAFF Women's Football Department) and the Saudi Arabian Women's National Football Team in 2019. SAFF President Yassir al-Mishehal

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<sup>20</sup>Kefa Yazid Rizqullah, Thesis: "Agenda Arab Saudi Dibalik Pembelian Newcastle United Football Club Melalui Public Investment Fund", (UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2022). P. 12-13.

<sup>21</sup>Reuters, "Cristiano Ronaldo: Saudi league could become top five in the world", Mei 24, 2023, [https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/\\_/id/37719053/cristiano-ronaldo-saudi-league-become-top-five-world](https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/37719053/cristiano-ronaldo-saudi-league-become-top-five-world)

explained that Arab Saudi Arabia has established a Women's National Team, a Women's Premier League, and a women's football school. Furthermore, in the first two years since its formation until now, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in increasing the number of female players, clubs, referees, coaches, and coaching staff. Nearly 700 active players are registered in 25 Saudi Women's Football Competition professional clubs. The Saudi Women's National Team officially played its first international match in February 2022 against the Seychelles and Maldives.<sup>22</sup>

Football will make the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia better known as one of the leading powers in the new multipolar world order. With many famous star players playing for Saudi clubs, changes in regulations regarding women in football will improve the position of the Kingdom led by Salman bin Abdul Aziz in the eyes of the world and strengthen Saudi national identity. Recently, Saudi Arabia has also become the strongest candidate as one of the sole hosts for the 2034 World Cup, which will be held on the Asian continent, after securing itself the opportunity to host the Asian Cup in 2027. If selected to host the 2034 World Cup, Saudi Arabia must be ready to welcome the arrival of millions of people from all over the world with various national, ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds. If the controversy in Qatar in 2022 regarding the ban on LGBT matters invites much criticism from world football supporters, then Saudi Arabia must be ready for things like that. The possibility that Israel will qualify and take part in the performance must be anticipated because, up to now, Israel does not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. However, Muhammad bin Salman will try to resolve this with the news that

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<sup>22</sup>Zawya, "Saudi Arabian Women's National Team continues rapid growth journey by officially entering FIFA World Ranking for first time", March 24, 2023, <https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/events-and-conferences/saudi-arabian-womens-national-team-continues-rapid-growth-journey-by-officially-entering-fifa-world-ranking-for-first-time-d1e3qdq3>.

diplomatic relations will be opened between Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>23</sup> If Saudi Arabia still maintains its conservative culture, FIFA can cancel Saudi Arabia's candidacy to host the 2034 World Cup.

### **Women's Involvement in Saudi Arabian Football**

The United Nations (UN) program is suspected of having a role in changing Saudi Arabia's policies, especially those relating to women in it. UN member countries are expected to adopt national policies and frameworks to achieve the entire sustainable development agenda. In the 17 points of The Sustainable Development Goals or the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, it is stated that point number 5 is gender equality, which does not differentiate between women's and men's rights. Saudi Arabia has made minor improvements to women's rights in recent years. According to UN reports on April 19 2017, UN member states elected Saudi Arabia to serve on the UN Commission on the Status of Women, a body tasked with promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The election of Saudi Arabia as a member of the commissions was supported by 47 countries, including 3 European countries.<sup>24</sup> On March 27, 2024, Saudi Arabia was selected by the UN to chair the UN Commission on the Status of Women, although this election received criticism from women's rights advocates.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Tommy Patrio Sorongan, "Israel & Arab Saudi Makin Mesra, Ini Bukti Terbaru MBS", September 21, 2023, <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20230921175335-4-474546/israel-arab-saudi-makin-mesra-ini-bukti-terbaru-mbs>

<sup>24</sup>Adam Coogle, "How was Saudi Arabia Voted onto a UN Women's Panel?", April 28, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/28/how-was-saudi-arabia-voted-un-womens-panel>

<sup>25</sup>Jennifer Hauser, "*Saudi Arabia to chair UN forum on women's rights and gender equality*", March 28, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/28/middleeast/saudi-arabia-chair-un-gender->

The appointment of Saudi Arabia as chairman of the UN Commission on the Status of Women is undoubtedly related to the country's desire to change its image, especially in terms of women's rights. Saudi Vision 2030 also includes priorities and targets that focus on the full participation of women at all levels and investing their energy in a way consistent with their abilities, even in the male-identified sport of football.<sup>26</sup> Some of the regulations that Saudi Arabia changed regarding football, which had an impact on Saudi women in changing the country's image to become more secular, were:

1. Women are allowed to live independently

Saudi Arabia allows women to travel and live independently without guardians. This policy, previously regulated in Article 169, has now been removed from Saudi Arabia's procedural law. The revised law states that a woman's guardians can only report it if they find the woman has committed a crime. In addition, women released from prison will no longer be handed over to their guardians. Besides living independently, Saudi Arabia allows women to travel without a *mahram* or male companion. The regulations state that women over 21 can apply for a passport and travel freely.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, this makes it easier for women to travel alone and watch football matches without being accompanied; they can also play

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[equality-forum-intl/index.html](https://www.equality-forum-intl/index.html)

<sup>26</sup>Novia Tri Ramadhani, "Saudi Vision 2030 Sebagai Katalisator Sustainable Development Goals Butir Kelima (Kesetaraan Gender) Di Arab Saudi Tahun 2015-2022", JOM FISIP UNRI, 2023, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> CNN Indonesia, "9 Aturan Baru Pangeran MbS Buat Arab Saudi Lebih Sekuler", January 22, 2022, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/internasional/20220112230554-120-745903/9-aturan-baru-pangeran-mbs-buat-arab-saudi-lebih-sekuler>



football without waiting for their guardian's approval.

2. Women are allowed to come to the stadium to watch football matches and mingle with male spectators

For the first time in 2017, women were allowed to watch football matches in three major cities: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam. Even though women can enter football stadiums, they are still not allowed to mix with male spectators. Women will sit in sections specifically for women and families so that they will sit with other women or with children<sup>28</sup>. However, after it was allowed for female and male spectators to mix at music concerts in 2021, this was also implemented in watching sports matches so that women and men could mix watching football matches.

3. Women are allowed to play football.

Football for women in Saudi Arabia still has pros and cons. For those who are against it, women are prohibited from playing football because it clashes with Islamic religious rules. In fact, in 2012, the Saudi Arabian government, through their football federation, softened a bit regarding women playing football. Saudi Arabia asked FIFA to allow Muslim female footballers to wear the hijab when competing. However, because there are no women's football clubs in Saudi Arabia, they did not channel their hobby of playing football.<sup>29</sup> It was only in 2019 that the Saudi Arabian Women's Football Association (SAFF

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<sup>28</sup>BBC, "Perempuan Arab Saudi untuk pertama kali boleh tonton sepak bola di stadion", January 13, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/majalah-42661593>

<sup>29</sup>Galih Prasetyo, "(VIDEO) Kegelisahan Pemain Wanita di Arab Saudi", March 2, 2017, <https://www.indosport.com/sepakbola/20170302/video-kegelisahan-pesepakbola-wanita-di-negeri-raja-salman>

Women's Football Department) and the Saudi Arabian Women's National Football Team formed 2019 as a platform for Saudi women to play football.

4. Saudi Arabian women are allowed not to wear abayas

Sheikh Abdullah al-Mutlaq, a prominent figure in Saudi Arabia's Ulema Council, emphasized the importance of women dressing modestly, pointing out that this does not necessarily mean they must wear abayas<sup>30</sup>. This viewpoint resonates with the ongoing efforts to bring about modernization in Saudi society, a vital aspect of the comprehensive social reform agenda championed by Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This stance is likely to benefit Saudi women involved in sports such as football, as they can adhere to standards of modesty while wearing appropriate sportswear paired with a hijab. This shift in perspective comes after FIFA, the governing body of international football, permitted female athletes to wear the hijab during matches in 2014, signaling a positive development for women's participation in sports in the region.

5. Women are allowed not to wear the hijab and cut their hair like men.

One of the impacts of implementing Vision 2030 is that women have the opportunity to help make development programs in various fields a success. This also directly influences the way they dress. Saudi Arabian women are

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<sup>30</sup>Agni Vidya Perdana, "Perempuan Arab Saudi Tak Harus Pakai Abaya", Februari 11, 2018, <https://internasional.kompas.com/read/2018/02/11/20421511/perempuan-arab-saudi-tak-harus-pakai-abaya>

now free to wear clothes according to their taste as long as they maintain modesty values. Saudi Arabia previously required women to wear the hijab when doing activities outside. In 2022, the Saudi Arabian government will no longer apply the mandatory rule of wearing the hijab. Every Saudi Arabian woman is allowed not to wear Muslim clothing such as the hijab, burka, veil, and niqab when doing activities outside the home. This step is in line with the modernization program initiated by the government. The easing of these regulations created a trend for cutting short hair, known locally as "boy". This can ease the burden of Saudi female footballers when playing football; they can minimize the disturbance and discomfort caused by wearing the hijab and long hair.<sup>31</sup>

6. Women are allowed to be referees in football matches.

FIFA appreciates Saudi women's involvement in football and appointed Anoud Al-Asmari as the first female international referee from Saudi Arabia on January 5, 2023. Asmari started her career as a referee in 2018; she led a series of matches for the women's football team in Saudi Arabia. However, for men's football matches, Al-Asmari admitted that he had to wait for approval from the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF)<sup>32</sup>.

After several regulations regarding women were changed, they could fully participate in every activity, especially football.

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<sup>31</sup>Bernadette Aderi Puspaningrum, "Arab Saudi Cabut Aturan Wajib Hijab, Kenapa Banyak Wanita Pilih Potong Rambut Pendek Gaya "Boy", June 28, 2022, <https://www.kompas.com/global/read/2022/06/28/213200270/arab-saudi-cabut-aturan-wajib-hijab-kenapa-banyak-wanita-pilih-potong?page=all>

<sup>32</sup>Erly Nasrun, "FIFA Tunjuk Wasit Perempuan Pertama Arab Saudi", Januari 6, 2023, <https://sport.republika.co.id/berita/ro115c451/fifa-tunjuk-wasit-perempuan-pertama-arab-saudi?>

Saudi Arabia is starting to implement these changes by introducing Saudi women through football to the international community. Successfully locked in tickets to host the AFC Asian Cup or Men's Asian Cup in 2027 and became the strongest candidate to host the FIFA or 2034 World Cup. Saudi Arabia is running as a candidate to host the AFC Women's Asian Cup or Women's Asian Cup in 2026. Saudi Arabia competed with Australia, Jordan, and Uzbekistan for the opportunity to hold the championship, although in the end, the AFC preferred Australia as host. Saudi Arabia's efforts to become hosts certainly want to promote their country as more friendly towards women to the world through their candidacy to host the 2026 Women's Asian Cup<sup>33</sup>.

**Figure 1.** Tim Nasional Wanita



Source: [www.arabnews.com/node/2244086/football](http://www.arabnews.com/node/2244086/football)

The new regulations above will have a positive impact that

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<sup>33</sup>Josh Ball, "Saudi Arabia bidding to host AFC Women's Asian Cup in 2026, national coach says success could 'inspire a generation'", December 4, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/sport/football/article/3202012/saudi-arabia-bidding-host-afc-womens-asian-cup-2026-national-coach-says-success-could-inspire>.

can change the perspective of countries, organizations, or individuals who have criticized and highlighted Saudi Arabia regarding its discrimination against women. The structural identity of Saudi Arabia under the Wahhabism movement, which was previously known as conservative, restricting and making it difficult for Saudi women to move, now its influence is not as strong as before. A series of breakthroughs made by Prince Muhammad bin Salman through Saudi Vision 2030 have provided space for Saudi women who have been marginalized to express themselves and their talents. Critical ulama figures were intimidated and even arrested on charges of violating sharia by openly criticizing the Kingdom. It was recorded that many clerics and imams were arrested in the era of Prince Muhammad bin Salman, such as Sheikh Abdullah Basfar, Saud Al-Funaisan, Salman Al-Awda, Badr Al-Meshari, and Saleh Al-Tabib, whose sermons criticized the government regarding policies that began to allow women and men gather at public events such as music festivals and sports matches. Meanwhile, some ulama, including the Council of Senior Ulama, were more compromising in supporting this policy through their fatwa.<sup>34</sup>

In return, various groups who have criticized Saudi Arabia regarding its discrimination against women will promote a Saudi Arabia that is more secular in structure and friendly towards women. This can be seen from the UN's appointment of Saudi Arabia as chairperson of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Changing several regulations regarding Saudi women through their involvement in football will change the way the world community views Islam in Saudi Arabia, which is known to be conservative. Saudi Arabian clubs that compete in the Saudi

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<sup>34</sup>Sainul Rahman, Thesis: "Arab Saudi Baru: Visi 2030, Reformasi, dan Wahabisme" (UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2019), p. 120-121.

Women's Premier League or Saudi Arabian Women's League have also started to bring in foreign players to play in their league, following the success of Saudi Pro League clubs, which bring in world football stars. Fani Supriyanto is a female footballer and goalkeeper for the Indonesian Women's National Team who is contracted by the Al-Hammah FC club, which competes in the Saudi Women's Premier League for one year, starting from 2023-2024<sup>35</sup>.

@\_fanii\_ shares his daily moments playing football in Saudi Arabia through his Instagram account. Fani is seen not wearing the hijab when playing football or carrying out daily activities, indicating that there is no longer a problem in dressing for women when playing football. Fani was also seen watching live at the stadium of the Al-Nassr FC Club match played by Cristiano Ronaldo and mingling with the male audience. This woman from Banjarnegara was seen enjoying several tourist attractions in Saudi Arabia without being accompanied by a guardian, which was initially a requirement in Saudi Arabia.

In an interview with the Indonesian Embassy in Riyadh, Fani said that he was pleased and proud to be able to play in the Saudi Arabian League. Fani also noted that the Saudi people were amiable and often invited her to talk so she didn't feel lonely. Fani was also surprised that Saudi Arabian women's football had more fans and more than Indonesia. In fact, according to him, women were previously prohibited from coming to the stadium to watch football, but now they are allowed to play football. Fani also said that at the Al-Hammah FC club, five female foreign players come

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<sup>35</sup>Uje Hartono, "Cerita Membanggakan Fani, Kiper Timnas Putri yang Tembus Main Liga Arab", November 24, 2023, <https://www.detik.com/jogja/sepakbola/d-7055264/cerita-membanggakan-fani-kiper-timnas-putri-yang-tembus-main-liga-arab>

from Morocco, Togo, 2 Colombians, and Fani from Indonesia. In Saudi Arabia, Fani also gets a bigger salary than in Indonesia.

From Fani's statement above, it can be seen that women are starting to gain a place in Saudi Arabia. They can express their hobbies and talents, especially in football, without feeling fear of conservative Sharia law. Women who were previously required to wear abayas, making it difficult to play football, can now dress according to their wishes when playing, although there are still modest limits within it. From football, women can not only channel their talents but also as a place to earn a living. Adequate salaries and suitable housing also support female foreign football players in the form of apartments. This follows the wishes of the Saudi Vision 2030, which includes priorities and targets that focus on the full participation of women at all levels, and point 5 of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda focuses on gender equality.

The enabling of Sharia regulations in Saudi Arabia regarding the involvement of women in football certainly indicates that Saudi Arabia is very serious about changing its conservative image under Wahhabism. Although he got criticism from conservative Saudi Arabian clerics, the Prince, leader of an absolute monarchy, attempts to quell criticism and gain widespread acceptance for his efforts to create a more secular and religiously moderate Saudi Arabia, encompassing the royal family, the government, and the general populace. The hope is that football and the involvement of women in it can change the way Saudi Arabia views Islam, which was previously known to be conservative. However, this still cannot erase the stigma of Saudi Arabia as an authoritarian country with a democracy index that is ranked 150th in the world, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) report.

## **Conclusion**

Wahhabi ideology, as a Saudi Arabian ideology in religion, restrains Saudi women with its conservative regulations through gender separation, which is a central part of the Saudi Wahhabi moral vision. This creates a gap and makes Saudi women unable to channel their hobbies and talents. Prince Muhammad bin Salman desires to diversify the economy and develop several sectors to eliminate Saudi Arabia's economic dependence on oil and gas through Saudi Vision 2030. Football, considered the most popular sport in the world, is one of the focuses of the prince's economic diversification in the sports entertainment sector. Saudi Arabia's football reform allows Saudi women to participate actively in football as spectators, players, coaches, and match officials. Changes in regulations regarding women in football have introduced Saudi Arabia as a country that is moving towards a more secular society and promoting a more moderate and tolerant Islam internationally. Although this received criticism from several conservative Saudi clerics, it did not dampen Prince Muhammad's desire to change the order of Saudi society.



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