

# FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN MENA SPORTS

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“We are proud of what the Emirates Knights have achieved...thanks to their determination and insistence on success and achievement, to leave their honorable mark and book their place on the podiums in the various races hosted by the UAE [United Arab Emirates], to deserve the organization of special races for women in honor and support for them to practice.”<sup>1</sup>

These words by Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak, president of the General Women's Union in the UAE, echoed across Abu Dhabi's jockey stables last December, during the 10th Race for Women's Private Stables.

Her bold statement shocked many in the Middle East, where for centuries sports were considered morally unacceptable for women. Even today, there remains a blatant disparity in the representation of female athletes in the international sports scene between countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and those from other regions. In last year's Tokyo Summer Olympics, just 14 out of hundreds of female athletes came from the MENA region.<sup>2</sup> The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup did not have

a single team from the area, despite the undeniable popularity of the sport across the region. In contrast, the region's complete absence from the World Cup is unheard of in the men's tournament, showcasing a discrepancy between the prevalence of sports in these countries and the visibility of women's teams and athletic programs.

Certainly, a conversation about women's sports in the MENA doesn't come without a discussion of the region's social norms. Conservatives have long alleged that shorts and other athletic attire represent a degradation of morality, shaming women who wear them for embracing imports from the secular West.<sup>3</sup> Growing up under stringent rules surrounding modesty, most Muslim women are socialized to believe that playing sports and practicing Islam are irreconcilable. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, women are traditionally prohibited from taking part in sports on an amateur level, let alone in organized leagues. Discrimination is even more flagrant in Iran, where women are still banned from stadiums.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, many MENA countries are decades behind in creating sports leagues for women and paying them fair wages.

It is in this context that female inclusion in sports is making huge strides in the MENA. For the first time since 2006, and for the second

time ever, the Union of Arab Football Associations hosted the Arab Women's Cup in 2021, where seven national women's teams competed. For a few countries, such as Sudan and Jordan, this was their first time participating in the tournament. More than just rejecting dress policing, female Muslim athletes compete to validate their personhood, asserting that they are not defined by their veils and should be treated as equals to their male counterparts.

Turkey and the United Arab Emirates are leading the liberalization; through joint efforts between the General Authority of Sports and the National Olympic Committee, the UAE government launched the Sports Federations Governance Guide in 2021, a blueprint for building sports leagues with a focus on women's participation.<sup>5</sup> In March 2022, the Arab League hosted the first ever Worldwide Discussion Board on Arab Ladies' Sports Activities, where member states discussed ways to empower female athletes.<sup>6</sup> Turkey is also known for its women's basketball league, which was founded in the 1980s and remains the most successful both in the Middle East and internationally.

Another, and perhaps more surprising, example is Saudi Arabia. Despite its religious puritanism, the kingdom has successfully led initiatives that encourage women's partic-

ipation in sports as well as social media campaigns that increase the visibility of female sports competitions.<sup>7</sup> In November 2020, it launched a women's football league consisting of 24 teams.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, female representation in the boardroom meetings of national sports federations increased, with even greater female participation projected in the future. For example, Sham Al Shamdi recently became the first Saudi female international referee.<sup>9</sup>

Female athletes in the Middle East are also capitalizing on their popularity to encourage more women to join sports. In 2021, Aya Medany, a three-time Egyptian Olympian, joined the parliament of Egypt, where she plays a direct role in the governance and advocacy for women's rights, especially regarding athletic opportunities.<sup>10</sup> The success of Tunisian fencer Inès Boubakri in the Olympics has led to an increase in the popularity of the sport, not only for girls in her home country but across the entire region.<sup>11</sup> Both athletes represent a growing body of women from the MENA region who are testaments to the athletic potential of Muslim women. Thanks to their valiant defiance, Muslim women in the region are reclaiming their rightful place in sports and society, slowly but resolutely toppling the patriarchy that has held them back for too long.