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Tradition meets transformation: the rise of women's football in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the emergence and development of women's football in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which can be employed as a lens through which broader societal transformation under the Vision 2030 agenda may be examined. Drawing on a narrative review of policy documents, academic research, and media discourse, the study traces the transition from historical exclusion and informal participation to the establishment of formalised leagues, a national team, and dedicated governance structures. The analysis positions women's football as both reflective and generative of social change. It demonstrates how football has been mobilised as a visible marker of reform, projecting inclusion and modernity domestically and internationally while simultaneously creating new opportunities for participation and leadership among Saudi women. The paper highlights persistent tensions, including regional inequality, uneven access, limited female authority within governance structures, and ongoing cultural and societal negotiation surrounding gender norms. This study argues that women's football operates within a dynamic field, shaped by state policy, grassroots agency, and global sporting frameworks. Findings reiterate the significance of institutional support in enabling rapid transformation while raising questions around sustainability and structural integration.

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Vision 2030; empowerment; governance; modernisation; legitimacy

Introduction

Over the past two decades, women's football has emerged as a significant cultural phenomenon, through which evolving gender relations, the contestation of patriarchal norms, and shifting social imaginaries have been made increasingly visible (Neys & Juskowiak, 2024). Few national contexts have encapsulated this transformation as vividly as the Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia (KSA). Historically characterised by entrenched gender segregation and restricted public space for women (Le Renard, 2008, 2014), the KSA has, in recent years, been subject to a wide-ranging programme of socio-political reform under the Vision 2030 agenda (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). As with other states in the Gulf Region, national reconfiguration and the emergence of

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women's football has been framed as both a symbolic gesture and a substantive policy commitment (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021; Svoboda et al., 2025). Indeed, the once unthinkable prospect of a national women's team representing KSA on the international stage has, within a relatively short timeframe, been realised. However, the development of sport within KSA cannot be understood as either linear or uncontested (Hertog, 2016), rather, it offers a site through which the interplay between modernisation, cultural continuity, and state-led transformation may be critically examined (Zaheer, 2025). Consequently, women's football operates as both a reflection of wider societal change and as a domain in which the complexities and contradictions of reform are actively negotiated. The purpose of this study is to offer a narrative exploration of the development of women's football in the Kingdom, beginning with historical exclusions and progressing toward the structural, institutional, and symbolic changes currently underway. It draws upon a range of literature, policy documents, and media accounts to trace how football has evolved from an underground activity to nationally supported enterprise. The aim of this paper is to interrogate the contradictions, aspirations, and strategies that underpin this transformation and are reshaping debates about identity, power, and progress.

Until recently, the structural and cultural barriers preventing women from participating in sports in the KSA were immense (Le Renard, 2014): In 1955, girls in public schools were excluded from physical education, though it is unclear how this ban took effect (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991; Nahari & Makopoulou, 2026); in addition, women were prohibited from entering sports stadia (Alruwaili, 2020; Al-Sulami & Radwan, 2017); sports facilities were rarely available to women; and organised women's competitions were non-existent (Al-Shahrani, 2020). These long-standing issues, caused by religious interpretations, legal frameworks, and socio-cultural expectations

restricted women's mobility, expression, and visibility (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Galán, 2016). Indeed, women's engagement in sport and physical activity has largely been confined to private spaces, with public expression often stigmatised (Carosella, 2022), reinforced by a conservative public discourse that positioned female athleticism as either inappropriate or irrelevant to the role of women in society (Alruwaili, 2020). However, in 2016, the announcement of Vision 2030 signalled a departure from this, and called for the empowerment of women in the Kingdom (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

The central tenet of Vision 2030 recognised the need for the KSA to diversify its economy and improve the quality of life for citizens. This included increasing female participation in the workforce and public life, encompassing sport. It was reported in 2016 that only 13% of Saudi women engaged in regular physical activity, which was amongst the lowest levels globally (Guthold et al., 2018). Consequently, one of the goals associated with the quality of life vision realisation programme is to increase women's involvement in regular physical activity to 40% (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020). However, this could be considered more than a policy target; instead, it could be viewed as a cultural statement of the country's desire to shift public norms and project a modern image domestically and internationally (Agerschou-Madsen & Malmvig, 2025; Burton & Naraine, 2023).

The Vision 2030 policy framework, while expansive in scope, also serves a diplomatic function, positioning the KSA as a reformist state that can engage with global norms whilst preserving its national identity (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025). Within this context, the trajectory of women's football is important. It took just over one year from allowing women to attend games in stadia in 2018 (Al Omran, 2018) to the establishment and operation of the Saudi Women's Football League (WFL) in 2021; with the first iteration of the league

featuring 24 teams and over 600 players (Saudi Arabian Football Federation, 2021). This was aligned with the inauguration of the first Saudi Women's National Football Team (Saudi Arabian Football Federation, 2019), and participation in their first competitive fixture in early 2022. However, effort was not only focussed on elite performance; the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) created the Women's Football Department to oversee grassroots development, too. This institutional support enabled the expansion of grassroots initiatives across different regions of the country, reinforcing the legitimacy of women's participation in football. These reforms, however, were not been universally embraced, with questions raised regarding the authenticity of the changes or concerns about cultural erosion (Fauzul & Imamuddin, 2023). Similarly, there were mixed reactions from international observers, with some celebrating the changes as long-overdue recognition of women's rights (Imawan et al., 2024) and others framing the developments as an exercise in sportswashing (Black et al., 2024). Whilst the term sportswashing has become fashionable when describing the use of sport for political purposes, it has been criticised for its limited and contradictory definition and for generating more doubt than certainty (Moriconi, 2024).

Empowerment and instrumentalisation is central to understanding the development of women's football in the KSA and football provides opportunities for women to claim space, visibility, and leadership in ways that have previously been denied (Lysa, 2020). The top-down nature of many of these reforms has raised questions over their sustainability. However, football, as a unique vehicle for social and cultural change, has been used by women in the Kingdom for almost two decades. An unsanctioned game played between Al-Yamamah football team against students from Prince Mohammed bin Fahad University took place in January 2008; yet the game resulted in setbacks for women's football. Subsequently,

those involved developed new ways of expanding their activities (Lysa, 2020). Their actions were what O'Brien and Li (2006) would call *rightful resistance*, and these instances of empowerment demonstrated the potent arena that sport, particularly football, has played in the KSA for negotiating gender roles and expressing new forms of national identity. Sport can, indeed, serve as a powerful platform for empowerment, offering women physical agency, social capital, and political agency (Scelles & Pfister, 2021; Streetman & Heinrich, 2024). In conservative societies, the symbolic value of women engaged in sport in public spaces cannot be overstated. Football, as the most popular and culturally significant sport in the world, amplifies this symbolism, transforming individual players into representatives of larger societal shifts.

Cultural and historical context

The idea of women in the KSA participating in sport, in public, was, until recently, inconceivable. Deep-seated social conservatism, a restrictive legal framework, and religious interpretations of gender roles coalesced to make women's physical activity invisible and, at times, illegal (Aljehani et al., 2022). As the national sport, football has been a distinctly male domain, both culturally and institutionally (Alruwaili, 2020). Men have dominated participating, coaching, viewing, as well as having a monopoly over the broader infrastructure of football, all of which were designed without consideration of female inclusion (Taylor et al., 2023). Women's absence was not merely an oversight; it was deliberate exclusion established through various frameworks to discourage women from occupying public space (Alhassan, 2021).

Within this historical context, it must be recognised that the sociopolitical environment produced and sustained these exclusions. Prior to reform during the 2010s, the country's guardianship system and restrictive gender

norms limited women's mobility, curtailed their visibility, and made many aspects of public life inaccessible to them (Le Renard, 2014; Polok, 2024). Physical education (PE) was not part of the official curriculum for girls attending public schools; and women's sports clubs were uncommon and, where they did exist, were unregulated. Even informal participation in sport and physical activity was stigmatised; playing football in private spaces had the potential for personal or familial risk as cultural taboos labelled such behaviour as immodest or inappropriate (Almohammadi, 2023). These social constraints were often justified through religious discourses that associated women's athleticism with moral degradation or cultural westernisation (Alhassan, 2021). Consequently, this created a landscape in which women's sport was not just invisible but actively discouraged.

This position, however, began to incrementally shift in the early 2000s as grassroots and underground initiatives emerged. Early efforts, though modest, laid the groundwork for future change as female athletes, coaches and sports advocates created informal football clubs in Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam (Alruwaili, 2020; Lysa, 2020). These clubs operated outside of formal regulatory frameworks and often used private schools, expat compounds, or makeshift pitches for training and competitions. Media coverage of these activities was scarce, though private networks and eventually social media enabled women to share these experiences, promote matches, and campaign for greater visibility (Almohammadi, 2023). These early pioneers played a critical role in normalising the idea that football could, and should, be accessible to Saudi girls and women.

Until 2017, the Ministry of Education did not officially permit PE for girls in public schools; the absence of female PE teachers, coaches, and administrators further deepened the gender gap in sports participation (Nahari & Makopoulou, 2026). As these issues lacked policy backing, they were rarely challenged,

reinforcing the exclusionary cycle. Moreover, it is important to understand how male football culture in the KSA has reinforced gender divisions; as, historically, football has been a key site for the performance of masculinity in the country (Alsamih, 2024). The passion associated with men's football, at club and national level, served to further marginalise women whose absence became normalised through hyper-masculine framing (Lysa, 2019). Indeed, stadia become spaces of male bonding, nationalist expression, and gender segregation. The notion that women might one day play in these same stadia, or coach from the sidelines, or sit in the stands as spectators was considered a contradiction of tradition (Lysa, 2020); it was rarely questioned in public discourse, and when it was, those doing the questioning were considered cultural dissenters (Shaheed, 2015).

This historical exclusion was compounded by the lack of presence at international competitions. While countries in the Gulf Region and North Africa were slowly integrating women into sport through collaboration and partnership with global organisations (e.g. FIFA, UNESCO), the KSA remained largely absent from such involvement. The country's conservative stance on gender roles was often cited as a barrier to participation in international sports diplomacy efforts (Chadwick, 2022). It was only during the mid 2010s, as the KSA began hosting international sporting events that women's inclusion entered the policy arena in a meaningful way (Ettinger, 2023). The first change emerged when the economic and geopolitical imperatives of reform began to intersect with cultural change: Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016) provided a framework for this transformation. Although the policy document did not single out football as a specific site for girls' and women's development, it did emphasise the importance of increasing females' participation in all aspects of society, including sport, and marked a departure from previous exclusionary policies by

framing gender inclusion as a social good as well as an economic and diplomatic necessity (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025). The development of women's football, thus, became one component of a broader societal tapestry of national modernisation.

The cultural resistance that had defined earlier decades, however, has not disappeared. When women were first permitted to attend football matches as spectators in 2018, public reaction was sharply divided; while many viewed it as a progressive step, others considered it a breach of religious and cultural values (Alhusein, 2022). Similarly, the emergence of women's football teams in 2020 was met with cautious optimism and vocal scepticism. Even within families, the decision to allow daughters or sisters to play football was often fraught with anxiety regarding public perception and moral reputation (Lysa, 2020). Such tensions reflect a broader societal negotiation over the meaning of gender, modernity, and national identity.

In this context, the rise of women's football in the KSA must be understood not as a departure from the past, but as a negotiation between past, present, and future. The visibility of women's football is built upon decades of cultural restriction, informal resistance, and incremental change. The players, coaches, and supporters who populate the women's football ecosystem in the KSA are not merely beneficiaries of reform, they have inherited a long history of struggle and silence (Lysa, 2020). Today, their presence on training grounds and in stadia signals not only sporting achievement, but a reconfiguration of what it means to be a woman in the KSA. This paper is informed by critical sport sociology and scholarship on state-led reform, which conceptualises sport as both a site of social change and a tool of governance (Giulianotti, 2015). From this perspective, women's football in the KSA is not understood simply as an outcome of reform, nor as evidence of linear progress, but as a contested social project, shaped by intersecting

forces of state policy, cultural negotiation, and individual agency. This framing moves analysis beyond a descriptive account of institutional development to examine how women's football is mobilised symbolically and materially within Vision 2030, as a site that enables new forms of participation while also reproducing hierarchies of power, control, and visibility. Rather than asking whether these developments are positive or negative, the paper examines how empowerment, paternalism, soft power and legitimacy operate together in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, narrative review-based approach (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Sukhera, 2022), informed by interpretive traditions commonly used to examine sport within wider social and political contexts (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). As per the purpose of a narrative review, our intention is not to produce an exhaustive or systematically reproducible (Furley & Goldschmied, 2021) catalogue of all developments in women's football in KSA, but to generate a conceptually informed and critically attentive account of how this emergence has been narrated, justified, contested, and institutionalised through policy and public discourse (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Thus, materials are approached as socially situated evidence rather than neutral descriptions, enabling the analysis of the meaning-making work performed by accounts of reform, empowerment, and progress (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011; Collins & Fauser, 2005).

Data collection and sources

Data were collected through purposive selection of secondary materials (Ames et al., 2019). Sources included peer-reviewed academic literature and doctoral theses, relevant policy documents and official statements, and international and regional media coverage (Bowen,

2009). Selection was guided by relevance (Palinkas et al., 2015) to the development of women's football in the KSA and to the political and cultural framing of sport reform, with attention to sources that either documented key milestones (e.g. institutional changes, league developments, national team activity, stadium access) or contributed influential narratives about women's participation and legitimacy.

The search and selection process was iterative (Hirt et al., 2023); initial sources were identified via targeted keyword searching (e.g. "Saudi women's football", "Vision 2030 sport", "women's sport Saudi Arabia", "Saudi Women's Premier League", "Saudi national women's team"), followed by forward and backward searching from key texts and purposeful inclusion of prominent policy and media artefacts that were repeatedly cited, circulated, or referenced across the dataset (Wohlin, 2014). Materials were included where they provided substantive descriptive content, policy positioning, or discursive framing relevant to the paper's aim (Bowen, 2009); items were excluded when they were tangential, purely promotional with no discernible informational content, duplicative reporting of the same claims without added detail, or outside the temporal and thematic focus of the study (Ferrari, 2015; Sukhera, 2022). Consistent with narrative and discourse-oriented approaches, the objective was conceptual depth and interpretive insight.

Data analysis

Analysis proceeded through thematic reading and interpretive synthesis (Flemming & Noyes, 2021; Thomas & Harden, 2008): First, sources were read closely to identify recurring claims and narrative patterns about women's football development; second, provisional themes were generated and refined through repeated comparison across source types with attention to how particular framings were stabilised or challenged depending on whether the source

was governmental, institutional, journalistic, or academic. Third, themes were organised into a coherent interpretive account that foregrounded tensions and contradictions as analytically productive. Across this process, recurring discourses such as visibility, legitimacy, empowerment, symbolism, modernisation, and international reputation were identified and examined as organising frames that structured how women's football was made meaningful in public and policy discourses (Zborowska, 2024). This approach supported the central claim of the paper that women's football can be read simultaneously as a site of opportunity, as a marker of state-led reform, and as a contested social space, without assuming linearity or uniform transformation (Krech, 2020).

Ethical approval was provided by a central university ethics panel (HEALTH/0292) as part of a larger programme of research. This study did not involve human participants, interaction, or collection of private data. Analysis was conducted with attention to responsible representation, avoiding unnecessary reproduction of sensationalised claims and treating sources as situated accounts shaped by institutional interests and communicative purposes (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011; Bowen, 2009). This approach was suited to the early and rapidly evolving context where volume of empirical evidence remains limited and where access to stakeholders can be limited (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010).

Purposeful focus on women in football (2016–2018)

The years between 2016 and 2018 reflect a critical inflection point in the story of women's football in the KSA. These were the years in which long-standing cultural prohibitions began to be challenged by institutional policies; and government rhetoric on reform began to manifest in concrete, if tentative, changes to public life (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025). While

those shifts cannot be understood in isolation from broader geopolitical and economic imperatives, they nonetheless marked the beginning of a profound reimagining of gender roles, particularly in relation to sport. Football, as the KSA's most prominent and symbolically loaded sport, became a highly visible site for this change.

The launch of Vision 2030 marked the beginning of a new national narrative for KSA, one that emphasised modernisation, economic diversification, and improvements to quality of life. This ambitious blueprint, led by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, positioned itself as a bold reorientation toward a more inclusive and globally integrated society. Although Vision 2030s focus on women's engagement in society was primarily linked to the labour market, the quality of life pillar explicitly prioritised expanding access to cultural, entertainment, and athletic opportunities for all, regardless of gender (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, 2020). The language adopted in the documentation framed developments in economic terms, and also in terms of individual wellbeing, social participation, and national pride. Crucially, this reorientation coincided with broader efforts to recalibrate the country's image on the international stage. Hosting major sporting events, offering tourist visas, and developing a public culture of leisure and sport were intended to shape domestic aspirations as well as to broadcast a new vision of Saudi Arabia to the world; one of an open, youthful, forward-looking nation (Sam, 2023). Sport, arguably, became one of the most potent instruments of Vision 2030 (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025). Investment in local infrastructure and reforms to regulatory frameworks around physical activity were all part of a comprehensive *soft power* campaign. In this context, the visibility of women in sport, especially in football, was no longer a peripheral concern, but a central tenet of the reform narrative.

One of the most symbolic moments occurred in January 2018 when women were

allowed to enter stadia as spectators. This was widely covered by local and international media outlets; with images of women waving national flags and cheering from the stands serving as powerful symbols of transformation (Lysa, 2020). For many, particularly young Saudi women, this moment represented a long-awaited affirmation of their place in the national public sphere. Yet, it also represented a performative dimension of reform as women were only allowed into designated "family sections" of the stadiums, with access remaining tightly controlled (Karolak, 2023). Still, the symbolism of the moment far outweighed its immediate logistical constraints. It demonstrated, perhaps for the first time in recent history, that the KSA was willing to challenge entrenched norms around gender and public visibility (Agerschou-Madsen, 2025).

These changes were taking root across government, with the Ministry of Education formally approving the introduction of PE lessons for girls in public schools; laying the foundation for long-term cultural change (Nahari & Makopoulou, 2026). This was closely followed by the creation of women's sports departments in several universities and the appointment of female officials to newly established governmental bodies overseeing sport (Almuawi, 2021). The Ministry of Sport (MoS) focussed on the strategic development of opportunities for increasing female participation across all levels of sport (Alhussein, 2022). Although football was not, initially, a key feature of these developments, it quickly emerged as a site of policy experimentation and public engagement (Dorsey, 2019). Football's symbolic and cultural value provided an opportunity to demonstrate the potential and limits of reform (Agerschou-Madsen, 2025). Indeed, the formation of informal women's football clubs gained momentum, with private and semi-public tournaments beginning to attract media attention (Almohammadi, 2023). Although these teams and competitions existed outside official regulatory frameworks,

they were no longer hidden (Lysa, 2019). Social media played a crucial role in publicising events and allowing female footballers to gain followers, promote their achievements, and advocate for further inclusion (Almohammadi, 2023). Furthermore, public discourse emerged that began to normalise the notion of women in sport across the Kingdom. News outlets, including Arab News and Al Arabiya, featured stories on female athletes, coaches, advocates, and organisers, often framing these individuals as pioneers in the “new Saudi Arabia” (Sam, 2023). Almost simultaneously, the national federation began holding consultations on how to formalise, structure, and launch women’s leagues and development programmes. This culminated in an announcement in 2019 that the WFL would launch the following year.

Despite these rapid developments, the reforms of 2016–2018 were not universally embraced. Conservative voices within Saudi society expressed concern about the pace and scope of change, particularly regarding perceived threats to cultural and religious values (Alhussein, 2022). Critics of these reforms questioned whether they were purely performative, designed to appease international observers rather than substantively transform the domestic reality (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025). It has been suggested that the KSA’s strategy during this period was, indeed, symbolic governance; in which policy initiatives served to project an image of inclusion while actual institutional structures remained uneven or limited in reach (Svoboda et al., 2024). For example, religious and cultural values related to modesty (*ḥayāʾ*) and gender interaction (*ikhtilāt*) are the main reasons why males and females are often required to use separate training environments, and many cities lacked the infrastructure to enable males and females to train and compete. Similarly, though physical education lessons for females was officially endorsed, the implementation varied widely by region and by school system, reflecting lingering hesitations at the grassroots level (Aljehani, 2021).

Despite the performative and symbolic nature of this period of policy development, it undoubtedly laid the foundation for the institutionalisation of women’s football in KSA. Indeed, it was at this juncture that the state moved from tolerance of informal play to active encouragement of women’s participation in sport. The shifts, while uneven and contested, represented a decisive break with decades of exclusion: the presence of women in stadia, the recognition of the importance of physical activity for girls through PE, and the tentative support for formal football programmes all pointed toward a new social contract, one in which females were no longer hidden, but celebrated as symbols of national ambition and modernity (Imawan et al., 2024). What distinguished this turning point was not only its symbolic resonance but its generative potential. The reforms initiated during this period created the institutional and cultural scaffolding upon which subsequent developments in women’s football would be built (Ettinger, 2023): They opened spaces, legally, socially, and politically, for women to imagine themselves and enact being athletes, coaches, fans, and leaders within a sport that had long excluded them.

Birth of the Saudi women’s league and women’s national team

By 2019, the cultural groundwork laid by Vision 2030 and the initial policy shifts had crystallised into formalised structures, leagues, and national team representation. For the first time, women were not only permitted to play football in public, they were actively encouraged to do so by the state (Imawan et al., 2024). The establishment of organised women’s leagues and women’s national team did more than provide athletic opportunities, it transformed women’s football into a vehicle for expressing a new national identity.

The most significant milestone during this transformation came in November 2020 with

the launch of the WFL. Organised by the Saudi Sports for All Federation in collaboration with SAFF and the MoS, the league was the first government-backed initiative to formalise women's football on a national scale (Shahab et al., 2021). The league was structured regionally, with qualifying teams from each region competing in a national championship known as the Kingdom Final Championship. The level of resource and organisation was unprecedented for women's sport in KSA. The WFL also attracted sponsors from the private sector, some of whom had purposely avoided association with women's athletics (Svoboda et al., 2024). This pushed women's football beyond symbolic gesture, it was quickly becoming integral to the sports ecosystem in the KSA.

The league's establishment followed years of informal play within the country, which had created a talent pool that was ready to train and compete at a higher level. This rapid emergence onto the national and international stage was testament to the resilience and passion of the early pioneers who had organised, maintained, and sustained women's football under adverse conditions. Indeed, the WFL provided a competitive platform as well as validation for those years of unseen challenges and labour. With the WFL operational, the next logical step was the formation of a Women's National Team (WNT). In 2022, the team made its international debut in a friendly match versus Seychelles, held in the Maldives and coached by German coach Monika Staab. The team represented a bold statement of global aspiration, with the symbolism inescapable: a Saudi WNT, led by a European woman, playing an international match in public. For a country that had prohibited women from attending football games as spectators just four years earlier, the transformation was profound (Satish et al., 2024). Team selection was carefully managed to ensure representation across various regional teams, with coaching staff emphasising technical skill, discipline, and teamwork as core principles that could be

deliberately framed as consistent with Islamic cultural frameworks and projecting national cohesion, values, and a new, modern identity (Alruwaili, 2023). This carefully crafted team was an ambassadorial body responsible for representing the "new Saudi Arabia" on an international stage.

The institutional support extended beyond coaches and facilities. The federation established an entire women's football department to oversee development programmes, league organisation, and youth training initiatives. Grassroots initiatives, aimed at introducing girls to football in schools and communities, creating youth academies, women-only coach education opportunities, and public awareness campaigns were launched and emphasised the compatibility of football with cultural and religious values (Imawan et al., 2024). These activities were further strengthened by the appointment of the first female vice-president of SAFF, Lamia Bahaian. Furthermore, through the FIFA Talent Development Scheme (TDS; FIFA, 2021), SAFF also formalised their national strategy for long-term growth, adopting the three key pillars extolled by FIFA: (1) expanding access, (2) raising competitive standards, and (3) building sustainable pathways for female athletes. FIFAs involvement afforded international legitimacy to this activity while also placing KSA within a global framework of women's sport promotion.

Despite the successes and progress made, some challenges, particularly infrastructural within rural areas, have persisted. Moreover, the visibility of women's football, though growing, continued to face social negativity from conservative sections of society (Lysa, 2020). Some commentators continued to question whether these reforms represented genuine change or a form of state-managed image management (Ettinger, 2023). Yet for participants, these questions did not diminish the significance of their progress. Indeed, the emergence of the WFL and WNT was so impactful due to the convergence of institutional

backing, grassroots enthusiasm, and symbolic resonance. The establishment of the WFL and WNT was not merely about competition, it was about representation, inclusion, and the redefinition of national identity. In a region where women's rights remain deeply contested and frequently politicised, the rise of women's football in the KSA stands as a rare case of such rapid transformation, supported by state and segments of society.

Public reception and media responses to women's football in KSA

As women's football in the KSA shifted from informal play to the centre of institutional recognition, it entered not just stadiums and sports federations but also the public imagination (Lysa, 2020). Media representations, social commentary, and public debates became central to how this new era of women's participation in football was framed, challenged, and understood (Alshammari, 2023). The introduction of official women's leagues and the national team did not simply provide a new arena for female athletes; it generated a dynamic and, at times, polarising conversation about gender, culture, and identity in a changing society. The reception to these developments was marked by a combination of optimism, scepticism, and cultural negotiation (Al-Khalifa, 2022). For many Saudis, particularly the urban youth and middle classes, the emergence of women's football was a welcome and long-overdue reform (Agerschou-Madsen, 2025).

This population are also responsible for the high usage rates of social media platforms, especially Instagram and Snapchat, which were instrumental in amplifying awareness and support (Almohammadi, 2023). Female players gained substantial followings, not only for their achievements in beating Seychelles, but also because of their symbolic value as representatives of a modern Saudi Arabia (Satish et al., 2024). These platforms allowed

players to narrate their own experiences, to challenge stereotypes, and inspire younger generations of girls who might now believe in a future in football.

National media coverall also reflected optimism, adopting celebratory language and tone. National newspapers like *Arab News*, *Saudi Gazette*, and *Okaz* published profiles of prominent female athletes and coaches, framing them as national heroes (Ajeel et al., 2024). These stories emphasised not only sports performance but also resilience and patriotism; once again aligning women's participation in football with the broader goals of Vision 2030. In many cases, media outlets positioned women's football as a tangible manifestation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reform agenda, using the language of "progress," "empowerment," and "inclusion" (Karolak, 2023). This alignment between media narratives and state discourse served to legitimise women's football as both a social good and a national project. International media were also positive, but often through a more critical lens. Outlets reported on the Kingdom's reforms with cautious interest, often juxtaposing the rise of women's football with ongoing concerns over gender-based legal restrictions and human rights. While praising the expansion of female participation in sports, many reports questioned whether these reforms reflected genuine empowerment or functioned primarily as public relations tools designed to soften the country's global image (Ettinger, 2023). It has been argued that Saudi Arabia's rapid embrace of women's football must be understood within the broader context of cultural diplomacy, in which highly visible reforms serve to redirect international attention away from political constraints (Chadwick, 2018; Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Costa & Moriconi, 2024).

Yet this binary, between symbolic reform and substantive change, risks overlooking the complex and often contradictory responses from Saudi society itself. While the state and

its media apparatus have presented women's football as a sign of national evolution, segments of the population responded with ambivalence or resistance (Karolak, 2023; Lysa, 2020). Conservative commentators questioned the propriety of women playing football in public, raising concerns about modesty, gender mixing, and Western cultural influence. These critiques often drew upon religious language, asserting that while sport itself was not haram (forbidden), the manner in which it was being introduced and celebrated was in violation of cultural and moral norms (Alruwaili, 2020). In online forums and private conversations, detractors expressed fears that women's football was emblematic of a slippery slope toward secularisation and the erosion of traditional values (Almohammadi, 2023).

This resistance was particularly pronounced in rural and conservative regions, where implementation of reforms was more uneven and where local officials and families exercised greater discretion over social norms (Almohammadi, 2023). For example, whilst PE for girls was formally introduced in 2017, many schools, especially outside of major cities, were slow to engage in the subject; and a recent study found that numerous girls' schools lacked basic facilities for PE, and that teachers also lacked sufficient training, expertise, and experience to deliver the curriculum (Aldukair et al., 2024). Thus, whilst national policy had shifted, the on-the-ground realities of infrastructure, resourcing, and social acceptance remained significant obstacles to full inclusion (Aldukair et al., 2024).

At the same time, public perception was far from monolithic. Many conservative families supported their daughters' participation in football, provided it was done within socially acceptable frameworks, including female-only spaces, appropriate dress codes, and religious accommodations (Karolak, 2023). In these cases, football became a site of negotiation rather than confrontation. Families, schools, and communities engaged in a

quiet redefinition of norms, balancing tradition with aspiration (Almohammadi, 2023). Some parents proudly shared images of their daughters in football kits, and religious leaders who supported the reforms publicly cited examples of Islamic history that affirmed the value of physical activity for women (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021). These acts of support, often misunderstood, signalled a broader cultural shift beneath the surface of official discourse.

The media, thus, served not only as a mirror of societal attitudes but as an active participant in shaping them. Documentaries, talk shows, and YouTube channels began to explore women's experiences in football, featuring interviews with players, coaches, and policy-makers (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021; Almohammadi, 2023). These narratives were crucial in expanding the visibility of women's sport beyond major cities and upper-class society. Representation, once entirely absent, became a catalyst for imagination and ambition. This interplay between media, public discourse, and policy reform reveals the cultural complexity experienced; where women's football in KSA is not merely a top-down initiative of the state, nor simply an organic grassroots movement, untainted by political calculation. It is a hybrid process, animated by competing forces of modernity, tradition, and ambition (Kinawy, 2025). It reveals itself in stadia, training grounds, classrooms, living rooms, and digital platforms where new meanings of gender, identity, and citizenship within the KSA are being negotiated.

Undoubtedly, both traditional and digital media have played a crucial role in legitimising, contesting, and reimagining women's football in-country (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021; O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021). Providing a space for dialogue, resistance, recognition, and celebration; enabling players to tell their own stories that have challenged long-standing narratives and beliefs that have previously silenced women's position within sport. It has helped transform

football from a game for boys and men into a social force capable of mobilising emotion, shaping norms, and envisaging a different future for women in Saudi Arabia (Alshammari, 2023).

Institutional and global support

The rapid emergence of women's football did not happen in isolation; it was nurtured and accelerated through a confluence of domestic institutional support and international partnerships. The interplay between national ambition and global frameworks of gender and sport reform created the conditions for what is now one of the most visible symbols of the country's broader social transformation (Kinawy, 2025). If preceding decades were marked by structural exclusion, inequality, and informal resistance, the current era has been defined by a deliberate alignment of local policy with global norms; a convergence that has provided both legitimacy and leverage to the movement for women's inclusion in football.

Domestically, the most influential institutional actor has been the SAFF, once exclusively the governing body for only men's football, the federation has reoriented itself to ensure gender inclusion as a strategic priority (Fauzul & Imamuddin, 2023). The establishment of a dedicated Women's Football Department created high-level administrative roles, specifically for female leaders. This was a powerful message that inclusive gender practices were not merely symbolic, but institutional. SAFF's approach was methodical and multi-layered, seeking to create a sustainable ecosystem for women's football by focussing on three inter-linked domains: grassroots participation, elite development, and professional pathways. Programmes were launched to introduce football in girls' schools through collaboration with the Ministry of Education (Albujulaya et al., 2024). Regional talent centres (RTCs) were formed, repurposing and upgrading facilities that had fallen into disrepair across different

regions of the country (Sam, 2023). These RTCs supported talent identification activities and provided unique development opportunities for females that included scholarships for those wishing to pursue careers in sports science, coaching, and sports management (Imawan et al., 2024). Thus, efforts were not only focussed on identifying and developing female players, but also creating greater professional opportunities where women could thrive as officials, coaches, administrators, sports scientists, and other professional support staff.

Importantly, these domestic initiatives were supported by international partnerships, including FIFA's Women's Development Programme, a global initiative designed to support national associations in promoting the women's game. This FIFA initiative provided technical expertise, curriculum support for coaching programmes, and consultation on league structures. They also provided legitimacy to the KSA's ambitions within the global football community. Involvement in FIFA workshops and development summits marked a departure from its former exclusion of women's football. The collaboration allowed Saudi officials to benchmark themselves against international standards and access a network of federations, coaches, and expertise that could help advance gender equity. Similarly, other regional and international bodies also lent their support; The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) launched development projects focussed on female participation in West Asia, in which Saudi Arabia became increasingly active. UEFA-affiliated clubs and private academies also began forming training exchanges and scouting initiatives with private academies. This forged alliances that were, once again, more than technical arrangements, they were acts of cultural diplomacy. By forging ties with recognised and respected organisations in world football, the KSA positioned itself as a country serious about not only reforming its gender norms, but also about becoming a

stakeholder in global sporting culture (Satish et al., 2024).

This strategic engagement with international partners also served a reputational function, as football has increasingly being used as a tool of soft power – a means by which nations shape their image and influence through non-coercive means (Ettlinger, 2023; Grix & Brannagan, 2016). For the KSA, which has faced international criticism on human rights issues to authoritarian governance, the investment in women’s football presented an opportunity to convey a different image (Sam, 2023). Images of Saudi women in national team kits, scoring goals in international competitions, offered a compelling counterpoint to narratives of repression. The hosting of women’s football events, participation in global tournaments, and representation in international football bodies all contributed to the construction of a new diplomatic identity; one that emphasised inclusion, modernity, and global citizenship (Imawan et al., 2024).

Whilst international alliances provided resources and visibility, the most impactful support often came from within. Private academies, non-governmental organisations, and sports foundations began to engage with women’s football in new and creative ways (Al-Khalifa, 2022). For example, Saudi Sports For All (SSFA) launched campaigns to encourage family-based sports participation, framing women’s involvement in football as a shared community value. Corporate sponsors, once reluctant, were now keen to support teams, tournaments, and media campaigns, recognising the market potential and the public relations value of aligning with progressive reforms (Satish et al., 2024). However, these partnerships were not without complexity; many companies remained cautious, fearing backlash from conservative elements of society, but they nonetheless marked a shift toward normalisation.

Importantly, the state’s role in fostering these developments must be understood within the context of its broader nation-building activities.

Vision 2030 was not merely a set of economic targets, but a cultural agenda aimed at redefining what it means to be Saudi (Sam, 2023). In official discourse, females were cast as role models, agents of change, and embodiments of the country’s new spirit (Favre, 2025; Imawan et al., 2024). This discursive framing was powerful in shaping public attitudes, particularly amongst young people, for whom football has always been a potent symbol of aspiration, resilience, and collective pride (Al-Khalifa, 2022). Still, the rapid expansion of women’s football raised important questions about sustainability and inclusivity that remain open. For example, will current infrastructure be sufficient to support long-term growth? Will reforms extend beyond urban centres and elite institutions to reach rural areas and marginalised communities? Will the enthusiasm generated by national and international matches translate into everyday access for girls and women across the country? These questions point toward the need for continued investment, policy consistency, and grassroots engagement (Angerer, 2025; Brannagan & Reiche, 2025). What cannot be denied, however, is that institutional and global support has, fundamentally, altered the landscape of women’s football in the Kingdom. A sport once off limits has become emblematic of a nation in transition (Angerer, 2025; Imawan et al., 2024). Through partnerships, programmes, and policies, women have been given a platform to play, to lead, and to inspire (Alruwaili, 2023). In the process, football has ceased to be a male preserve and has become a shared domain that reflects the complex, contested, and hopeful path of a society in motion (Almohammadi, 2023).

Challenges and criticism

While the emergence of women’s football in Saudi Arabia has been widely hailed as a hallmark of reform and progress, it is essential to acknowledge the persistent challenges and criticisms that complicate this narrative. The

impressive achievements of recent years do not erase the structural, cultural, and political barriers that continue to shape the lived experiences of female athletes in the country (Lysa, 2020). These obstacles reveal the underlying tensions between symbolic reform and substantive transformation, between top-down modernisation and grassroots realities.

One of the most enduring challenges is the uneven implementation of reforms across regions and social classes. Although national policies now encourage women's participation in sport, access to football remains highly stratified. Urban centres such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam have benefited disproportionately from the state's investment in sports infrastructure and programme developments. These cities are home to most of the women's football clubs, academies, and competitions. In contrast, rural, often conservative, regions lack basic facilities, trained coaches, and community support. Women and girls in these areas face, not only logistical barriers, but also stronger social resistance, making participation in football a difficult and sometimes impossible ambition (Nahari & Makopoulou, 2026). This geographic imbalance threatens to reproduce existing inequalities under the guise of reform. Furthermore, football opportunities remain far more accessible to middle – and upper-class women, who are more likely to attend private schools, travel freely, and possess the financial means to pay for equipment, training, and tournament fees. Many of the players who now populate the WFL and the national team emerged from informal club scenes that required family support and social networks (Lysa, 2020). For girls from working-class backgrounds, particularly those in conservative or economically marginalised families, these avenues are rarely available. As such, the current structure of women's football risks creating an elite bubble, where representation is concentrated among a small demographic that may not reflect the broader aspirations of Saudi women.

Another area of concern is the limited integration of women into leadership and decision-making roles within football institutions. Whilst we have recognised the appointment of some females into senior administrative roles, the overall governance of sport in the KSA remains male-dominated (Alhazza, 2024). This situation, however, is not unique to KSA, with many other nations around the world struggling with the same gender equity issues (Senne, 2016). Key decisions about funding, scheduling, coaching, and media coverage are still made primarily by men, often without consultation from female athletes or administrators. This imbalance perpetuates a paternalistic model of reform, in which women are granted visibility but denied authority (Shaheed, 2015). This raises important questions about agency: Who speaks for women in Saudi football? Who defines their priorities, and who evaluates their success? In addition, cultural opposition to women's football remains significant, even as legal restrictions have been lifted (Lysa, 2020). Many Saudis continue to question the legitimacy of female participation in what is traditionally seen as a masculine sport. Critics often frame women's football as a Western import incompatible with Islamic and Saudi values; they argue that the visibility of women on football pitches and in media campaigns erodes national identity and religious morality (Alruwaili, 2020). While these voices may not dominate official discourse, they are influential in communities, schools, and families, where informal norms still shape daily life (Agerschou-Madsen, 2025). For many aspiring players, these social attitudes can create a hostile environment that discourages participation or forces it into secrecy.

Scholars have also questioned the symbolic function of women's football in Saudi Arabia's broader reform agenda, particularly within the context of sportswashing (Ettinger, 2023; Favre, 2025; Taylor et al., 2023; Ulrichsen, 2025). By promoting images of modernity and inclusion, the state seeks to counterbalance international criticisms related to gender

inequality, censorship, and political repression (Costa & Moriconi, 2024; Ettinger, 2023). In this view, women's football becomes not a site of empowerment, but a public relations tool, used to signal change without addressing its deeper structural foundations (Taylor et al., 2023). While this critique does not negate the real opportunities created by reform, it does highlight the need for critical scrutiny of intent, implementation, and impact. Moreover, there are questions about the sustainability of current reform; the expansion of women's football has, thus far, been driven by strong central support, both politically and financially (Svoboda et al., 2025). But, if that support is withdrawn, the programmes, systems, and even leagues that have been created would be under threat. Indeed, the growth of women's football in the KSA remains heavily dependent on state sponsorship and high-profile campaigns. Independent clubs, leagues, and youth programmes are hallmarks of mature football cultures, but in this case are still in their infancy. Without mechanisms for local ownership and community engagement, there is a risk that women's football will remain a top-heavy system vulnerable to political shifts and changing policy priorities (Madsen & Glebova, 2025).

Finally, it is important to consider the mental and emotional toll on female athletes, many of whom bear the weight of national expectations, media scrutiny, and social pushback. Such expectations may cause mental distress associated with the high-pressured position these women find themselves, highlighting the broader psychosocial environment that women in the KSA now operate. They are expected to perform as athletes, but also serve as symbols of reform, role models, and ambassadors of national progress. Such pressure(s) can be immense, especially in a society where their presence remains contested. However, these challenges do not diminish the significance of what has been achieved. The rise of women's football in the KSA has

been a profound development reflecting the shifting cultural landscape, new possibilities for public life, and the reimagining of gender norms through sport (Almohammadi, 2023). For women's football to fulfil its transformative potential, it must grapple with the forces that once excluded it: inequality, marginalisation, and structural inertia. It must become, not only a symbol of reform, but a platform for equity, empowerment, and enduring change (Imawan et al., 2024).

The road ahead

Since 2016, women's football in the KSA, a once marginalised, underground activity, has become a state-supported, internationally recognised endeavour. The creation of formal leagues, the emergence of a national team, and partnerships with global institutions have placed the country in the spotlight, redefining its relationship to gender and sport. The development of women's football in the KSA will depend not only on the preservation of current momentum but on the deepening of reform in more structural, equitable, and sustainable ways (Svoboda et al., 2025). Central to this will be institutional resilience: At present, much of the sport's growth has relied on centralised support, including funding, policy direction, and visibility, driven by the Ministry of Sport, the SAFF, and Vision 2030. These top-down efforts have provided crucial scaffolding, but true sustainability will require a shift toward localised, community-based structures (Angerer, 2025). Therefore, in order for women's football to thrive long-term, it must be more fully integrated into schools, grassroots clubs, and regional sports ecosystems, not merely celebrated on national and international stages during high-profile competition.

This decentralisation is particularly important for expanding access beyond urban areas offering adaptive structures that support national visions and strategies (Madsen &

Glebova, 2025). As discussed, many opportunities associated with coaching, facilities, and competitions are concentrated in major cities. Expanding football to smaller towns, rural areas, and lower-income communities will require deliberate investment, infrastructure, and adaptation to diverse contexts, as well as reforms to address material access and cultural barriers. Education campaigns, parental outreach, and religiously grounded discourse supporting women's participation can play an essential role in cultivating a broader base of support. The future of women's football, therefore, will be determined not only by athletes and institutions, but also by educators, parents, religious leaders, and local officials who shape everyday social norms.

Professionalisation of women's football is another dimension of the road ahead. While the formation of leagues and a national team mark an essential starting point, full professionalisation remains a work in progress. Many female players currently balance sport with academic or professional careers, and very few earn a living wage from football. Coaching, sport science, medical, and administrative roles within the women's football ecosystem are still developing. To ensure long-term viability, career pipelines need to be established that allow women to not only participate, but to lead, manage, and innovate within their organisation. This requires understanding and investment in higher education, certification programmes, and cross-sector collaboration with media, health and the wider education sector.

Equally as important is the role of the private sector in supporting women's teams to become financially sustainable. Corporate sponsorship and media rights will play a decisive role in determining the visibility, reach, and overall financial capabilities of women's football. While early activities have been promising, there remains considerable room for growth (Satish et al., 2024). Brand partnerships that are thoughtfully aligned with community

engagement can expand football's cultural legitimacy and economic influence (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021). This will also require sponsors being held accountable to values of inclusion, fairness, and equity, particularly in a context where representation is still in its formative stages (Jensen & Smith, 2024).

Continued engagement in international competitions will also continue to shape the future of women's football in the KSA. Indeed, participation in regional and global competition has introduced new standards, expectations, and opportunities. Saudi Arabia's potential and desire to host more women's tournaments, whether continental or global, will bring further scrutiny and attention. This is both a risk and opportunity, as international partnerships can enhance the quality and credibility of domestic programme, though they may also amplify criticisms of sportswashing if reforms in women's football are not matched by broader commitments to gender equity and human rights. As such, the country's football diplomacy must continue to evolve beyond spectacle to greater substance. Furthermore, the future of women's football is inherently tied to the evolving gender dynamics of Saudi society. As women gain greater access to education, employment, and public life, their participation in sport becomes both a reflection and an engine of societal transformation (Imawan et al., 2024).

Football, with its visibility, popularity, and emotional resonance, has the potential to redefine cultural narratives about femininity, strength, and leadership in the KSA (Al-Khalifa, 2022). Moreover, football can serve as a platform for advancing dialogue on body autonomy, teamwork, discipline, and resilience; it can help challenge long-held assumptions about gender roles and inspire young girls to imagine futures that include not only athletic success but civic engagement and professional fulfilment. However, this transformative potential will only be realised if women themselves are empowered to lead the future of football in all roles

connected to the sport; they must be given the authority to shape football's development across the KSA. That will require institutional power sharing and women being central to the decision-making processes that define the future of the women's game in the country. This will include girls and women across the entirety of the sport development continuum, from PE lessons to the WNT.

The future of women's football in the KSA is not yet guaranteed, reforms can stall, funding can be reallocated, and social backlash might intensify. However, the past five years have indicated that women's football in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia should not be considered an experiment; it has taken root at the intersection of state policy, cultural transformation, and individual agency (Al-Khalifa, 2022; Angerer, 2025). The next chapter will depend on whether women's football in the country can move to integration; shifting participation in football to being the norm for women and girls. In many ways, the development of women's football mirrors the broader national transformation that Vision 2030 aspired to achieve. It encapsulates the contradictions and aspirations of a society navigating tradition and modernity and between global integration and local identity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the development of women's football in the KSA as a lens through which broader processes of gender renegotiation, nation building, and state-led reform may be understood. It has demonstrated that women's football cannot be reduced to either authentic empowerment or strategic image management. It is at once an expanding space of participation and visibility, a vehicle through which reform is symbolised, and a contested domain shaped by uneven access, institutional hierarchy, and ongoing cultural and social negotiation.

The rapid formation of leagues, national representation, and administrative structures marked a decisive break from decades of exclusion. Women in Saudi Arabia are now visible as players, officials, and supporters within a sport that historically functioned as a male preserve. However, this transformation remains structurally incomplete, with much of the current ecosystem sustained by centralised political and financial support; with access continuing to vary across regions, class structures, and local contexts. Thus, whilst visibility has increased, authority and governance structures remain uneven and the shift from symbolic inclusion to embedded equality is still in progress.

There are several limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. Methodologically, the narrative review approach privileges interpretive synthesis over systematic exhaustiveness and relies on publicly available sources shaped by individual and institutional interests. The absence of primary empirical data means that the lived experiences of players, coaches, and families are mediated rather than directly examined. Analysis is also temporally bounded, capturing a rapidly evolving phenomenon, with the long-term trajectory still uncertain. These boundaries, however, indicate future avenues for research. Empirical studies attempting to understand how reforms are experienced and negotiated in everyday settings would be a welcome start. Additionally, longitudinal studies should assess the sustainability of leagues, funding models, and grassroots integration beyond central state support. Comparative work across Gulf and wider regional contexts would help refine our understanding of sport-led modernisation, while focussed analysis of governance structures could examine women's substantive influence in decision-making. Continued scrutiny of media framing and digital discourse will also remain essential.

The transformation of women's football in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies both symbolic and practical space. Its enduring

significance will require the normalisation of participation at grassroots across communities, and the continued empowerment of women, not only to play, but to shape and lead the future development of football.

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