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Fighting for the right to play:

Women's Football and regime-loyal resistance in Saudi Arabia

Abstract: This paper seeks to contribute to the scholarship on women and social change in Saudi Arabia through the case of female football players in Riyadh. Officially, there has been no women's football in the Kingdom, but under the surface women have been playing for more than a decade. The women are actively promoting and engaging in change and women's opportunities to practice sport by building organization, creating awareness and negotiating norms and regulations. They are not in opposition to the regime, but supportive of reforms in favour of increased rights for women, while seeing conservative elements in the society as their opponents and the royal family as their allies. They are thus engaging in what O'Brian and Li has termed "rightful resistance" by deploying the language of the rulers to express their perspectives and aims, and are engaged in a three party game with the rulers and conservatives, where divisions within the state and elite allies matter greatly.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; women; football

Introduction

In January 2008, ten years before Saudi Arabia allowed women into football stadiums, AlYamamah football team travelled to the Eastern Province to play the first women's football game in the Kingdom, against students at Prince Mohammed bin Fahad University. The score was 2-2 at full time, but after a penalty shoot-out, AlYamamah could return victorious to Riyadh. The word about the female footballers spread fast and negative feedback resulted in setbacks. Yet, instead of departing from their project of promoting women's football in the Kingdom, players regrouped and developed new ways of expanding their activities in the years that followed.¹

This paper examines how the female football players sought to encourage women's football after the initial setback, based on data collected through observations and interviews conducted in Saudi Arabia in 2014 and 2017. A discussion of the footballers' negotiation with state and society brings about new knowledge, not only on women's football in Saudi Arabia, but on Saudi society and on how women manoeuvre political and societal realities. It sets out with a brief review of the literature on women, society and sports in Saudi Arabia, and a discussion of the contextual background and the factors influencing women in Saudi Arabia. Secondly follows an overview of the theoretical focus of this paper, including a discussion of benevolent patriarchy and rightful resistance. The research methodology is outlined before finally presenting and discussing the empirical findings.

Contextual background: Saudi Arabia and the dynamics of the "women question"

An emerging body of scholarship deals with the social and political implications of football in

the Middle East, much due to the role football supporters have played in protest² and from Qatar being selected as host nation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.³ These often centre on men as the primary actors, and overlook women in football, and studies on women's football are still few and far apart. Studies on women's football have in common that they examine the possibility that football might function as a field where patriarchal structures and stereotypical gender roles are being challenged.⁴ Despite a few important contributions, the literature on the dynamics of Saudi society remain scarce.⁵ Considering that Saudi Arabia is widely known for its distinct gender policies, the lack of studies is remarkable in the case of women's role in society and female subjectivities.⁶ Studies has shown restrictions on women's employment in the work force in Saudi Arabia are stricter than in other Middle Eastern and Gulf-countries and that certain norms and beliefs affects their participation⁷, which can also be said to be the case for women's participation in organized sports.⁸ As it is well documented that sport has historically been marked by a masculine hegemony across the world and that this hegemony has been contested,⁹ it is a highly relevant arena to examine how women engages with restrictions, especially in a time of change.

After the current Saudi state was established in 1932, a tenet of religious nationalism based on the idea of a pious nation was central in the state-building project.¹⁰ The Al Saud family had since the foundation of the first Saudi state in 1744 nurtured an alliance with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the conservative interpretation of Islam referred to as Wahhabism, and his descendants. A new Saudi national identity, intertwined with religious identity, was promoted, at the expense of existing ethnic, regional and tribal identities. In this narrative, the Saudi female piety – as understood in the Wahhabi tradition – became a symbol for the whole nation. Women have throughout the different historical stages been central symbols of the piety of the nation, and the historical legacy of Wahhabism and its transformation into a religious national movement has shaped the contemporary status of women in Saudi Arabia.¹¹

In the aftermath of the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, Saudi Arabia provided the religious establishment with extended powers. Simultaneously, more women got involved in the public sphere.¹² In the following years women were subject to a number of fatwas reducing their rights and restricting their participation in society. The Saudi guardianship system required women to obtain the permit of their legal guardian, the closest male relative, to obtain a passport, travel internationally, marry and exit prison. In 2019, some amendments were effectuated, in particular related to traveling.¹³

After 9/11 women, as a symbol of the state and the society, were increasingly presented as “modern” and “cosmopolitan”.¹⁴ The influence of religious scholars was gradually reduced, and Saudi women's achievements were celebrated in the media.¹⁵ The pace of these developments has increased drastically during the reign of King Salman, not least following the appointment of his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as crown prince in 2017. Recent policies, including removing the infamous ban on women driving, is in accordance with the new regime's political and economic priorities, of which promoting Saudi Arabia as a “modern” state ranks high. The symbol of the pious, yet modern Saudi women plays a pivotal role in contemporary Saudi religious nationalism.¹⁶

Shifting policies on women's issues have had a massive impact on women's lives and opportunities. Acknowledging the status of women as influenced by their role as a symbol for the state, however, should not result in an orientalist understanding of Saudi women as submissive or bystanders in their societies. Rather they are – as this paper argues – active participants in shaping their own lives and their surroundings. Further, Saudi women's lived experiences are influenced by a number of factors,

including socio-economic background. Hence, the reality of the situation for Saudi women is multifaceted, sometimes even contradictory.

Physical activity is one of the spheres where women still lag far behind their male counterparts and women's opportunities to participate in organized sport have historically been limited in the Kingdom.¹⁷ The prevalence of physical education in girls' schools has been uneven at best, ranging from many government schools with no physical education, to some international schools with programs of varying quality.¹⁸ Until 2017, there were no opportunities for female gyms to be officially licensed, and those who operated did so licensed as a spa or a cafe, or with no license at all.¹⁹ The few gyms that existed were expensive, catering to a specific segment of the population. The lack of official support is noticeable all the way from professional sports down to grassroots physical activity and leisure. In 2012, Saudi Arabia became the last nation to send female athletes to the Summer Olympics as part of its official delegation, along with Qatar and Brunei. Back home, support for female athletes was still lacking, even four years later, when Saudi Arabia sent a new delegation of women to participate under the Saudi flag.²⁰ In the last few years, a number of steps have been taken, starting with the appointment of Reema bint Bandar Al Saud as head of women's sports in August 2016.²¹ Since then, the government has slowly started licensing gyms, introducing Physical Education in governmental girl's schools, and licensing sports venues for female spectators.²² Whereas such factors, including strict gender norms and laws, a harsh climate and a lack of suitable spaces are placing barriers to any physical activity for women. This development has been particularly noticeable for organized competitive sports and particularly football, which serves as the main case in this paper.

Theoretical framework: The family, the state and rightful resistance

The late King Abdullah would refer to women as his "mothers, daughters and wives", establishing his position as the patriarch.²³ Similar cases of states or rulers taking on the role as the "father" who provides and protects the citizens are found across the Middle East²⁴ and elsewhere. Fatherhood, Inhorn argues, is a masculine ideal in the Middle East²⁵, and Roald has observed that the persistent ideal of the "good" Muslim man, "being responsible for taking care of his family in a gallant, loving and self-sacrificing manner" has influenced laws in Muslim-majority countries.²⁶ Notions of the logic of a masculine role as protector are hence prevalent not only in private relations, but also transmissible to that between the state and citizens. The state then assumes the role of the "benevolent patriarch" - a loving protector who ensures protection and (appropriate) rights.

Young argues that this patriarchal logic, putting those protected in a "subordinate position of dependence and obedience", is appealing to a security state that "wages war abroad and expects obedience and loyalty at home".²⁷ Such a description is fitting for Saudi Arabia; Doaiji points out that Saudi Arabia's religious nationalism has since 2014 taken a more militaristic turn marked by *hazm* or 'decisiveness'.²⁸ At the expense of religiosity, the rulers have taken on a more militaristic masculine role.²⁹

When discussing how women navigate such contexts, it is useful to adopt the concept of *rightful resistance*.³⁰ O'Brien and Li defines rightful resistance as "a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, locates and exploits divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public".³¹ The regime-supporting rightful resisters are deploying the language of the rulers to express their perspectives and aims, and are engaged in a three party-game with the rulers and elites, where divisions within the state and elite allies matter greatly.³² They argue that by

using the language of power, the aggrieved can act effectively without taking intolerable risk. While O'Brien and Li developed this framework working on rural China, it facilitates a debate on civilian political participation going beyond a dichotomy of resistance and quietism also in Saudi Arabia.

This paper argues that the tactics applied by the women football players contrasts that of other groups, like the driving movement, which is taking a more confrontational, activist approach such as petitions, internet campaigns and public defiance of the driving-ban. The risks of such activities were highlighted when a number of activists were arrested in 2018, and labelled traitors in Saudi media. The women of the Riyadh Women Football League (RWFL), on the other hand, has actively avoided confrontation. Instead, they have focused on developing their activities, creating awareness about women's sports, and gaining acceptance for women's football. As rightful resisters, adopting the language of the rulers and not criticizing the regime, they can act efficiently without risking serious consequences.

With this in mind, this paper examines *how* female football players cope with political and societal barriers to their activities; do they bargain with, accept or reject such barriers? For the purpose of answering this question and further contribute to greater understanding of the role Saudi women play in their societies, it discusses the development of the status of women in Saudi Arabia through the fight for the right to play football. Conclusively, I argue for including a broader set of Saudi female subjectivities in order to fully understand the dynamics of social change in the country.

Methodological reflections

This paper draws on information gathered through nine months in Saudi Arabia in 2014 and 2017. Some challenges emerge when being an "outsider" doing qualitative research: my typification both as a woman and as a westerner affects how I was assessed by interviewees and my own experience in Saudi Arabia, as subject to a completely different set of expectations.³³ As a western woman, it was important to acknowledge certain inherent biases, both in me and towards me by my interlocutors. However, most of my interviewees were bilingual, and used to interacting with people with various backgrounds. The female footballers are all from a specific segment of society, most in their mid-twenties, from a middle- or upper class background, with higher education, and most described their social background as "open". Most of the women are from Riyadh as this study has been limited to this specific socioeconomic segment of the capital.

The interviews were mainly conducted in Riyadh during a three-month period in 2017. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 interlocutors, each interview lasting one hour. The interviews were mainly conducted at football pitches, before, after, or during practice. Most interviews were conducted in English,³⁴ and semi-structured, consisting of a number of previously defined questions while leaving the option for the interviewee to raise other relevant topics. All but two of the interviews were recorded, and most were conducted in a one-to-one setting, although on a few occasions two people were interviewed at the same time.

In addition, I conducted participant observation, primarily at women's football matches and practices, and other sport-related events where I both observed and carried out informal conversations with participants. These observations and informal discussions allowed me to understand concepts and contexts that were relevant for my research on multiple layers, for example, in examining the different social layers of society and how expectations differ for different nationalities and genders. This again informed the study, both directly and indirectly, as through forming questions later asked in interview settings.

Finally, I have included material relevant documents, including governmental reports, laws, and discussions in conventional and social media. I reviewed the complete content of the profiles of the teams of the RWFL on Twitter (a total of 1,534 tweets). Triangulation, combining sources, provides me with an effective tool for minimizing challenges discussed above, primarily related to bias, both my own and that of my interlocutors.³⁵ It further helps in avoiding misunderstandings, verifying observations and statements, and not least complementing a contextual understanding.

Everyone I spoke to were informed that I was in the country as a researcher. Although the topic is not explicitly political, it is implicitly political in several ways, and deals with issues such as policies and reforms. I handled such topics carefully, and made sure to formulate my questions with care. I have chosen not to include the full name of the participants, except for individuals who were interviewed because of their position. Most of the interviewees are referred to by their first names, in line with the preferences of the interviewees themselves.

The empirical data will be outlined in the following section through an in-depth examination of the RWFL, and in particular four teams participating in it: AlYamamah, Challenge FC, Riyadh Team and Kingdom Stars. All teams have been observed at either training sessions, games or both, and participants with each team have been interviewed for this study. These interviews and observations form the basis for the discussions below.

Findings: Women's football in a conservative society, a balancing act

Football is immensely popular in Saudi Arabia. As several interlocutors pointed out - "if you mention sports, most Saudis will immediately think of football".³⁶ An unpublished survey shows that 21 percent of Saudi males over the age of 15 had played football within the last 7 days, making it the most popular sport.³⁷ 34 percent of Saudis follow football on a regular basis, making it the most popular spectator-sport by far.³⁸ However, football is in most cultures considered a particularly masculine sport,¹³⁹ perhaps even more so in a society like Saudi Arabia, where the gender roles are particularly strict. Such ideas are reinforced by policies preventing women to take part in football activities as fans, like the ban on women in stadiums, and as players, like the absence of any official club or team open for female players, and the unwillingness to issue licenses to venues for women to play. Even though female football is officially non-existent, and that both rulers and substantial conservative forces in society have discouraged it, there are indeed women pushing for the right to play, organized through unofficial groups facilitating women's competitive football.

When the first season started in 2008, eight teams announced their participation.⁴⁰ The driving force was their passion for the sport, and their qualifications were hours of watching football – and playing for fun growing up.⁴¹ Yet, even what seemed at the time to be minor issues would prove a challenge for the women wanting to play.⁴² Finding qualified female coaches proved impossible inside the Kingdom. In some cases teams resorted to male coaches, something that had to be kept secret.⁴³ The women educated themselves through watching YouTube videos on how to train and coach, and all of the players had to bring back reading material for the team if travelling abroad.⁴⁴ Some women eventually travelled abroad to do coaching courses.⁴⁵

The lack of football pitches was another pressing issue. It was close to impossible to find managers willing to rent their facilities to female football teams, especially for competitions.⁴⁶ Women's football is considered a controversial matter, and most were reluctant to facilitate such activities, and fields could be overly expensive or in poor condition.⁴⁷ As women's sports formally did not exist in Saudi

Arabia at this time, the women had no other options in terms of financing than to pay for team kits, fields and equipment themselves, or rely on donations.⁴⁸ Sponsorship was hard to obtain as sponsors would demand visibility – although some of the teams managed to get agreements with some of the gyms operating without a proper license to train fitness for free in their facilities.

The challenges confronting the first Saudi women's football teams explain why most teams only remain active a year or two before being dissolved. Every year between six and eight teams have participated in the league, and the most active clubs have been important driving forces in keeping the activity up, and expanding their respective clubs adding new activities every year. Only two teams have survived the whole period. In the season of 2017/2018, eight teams participated in the league.⁴⁹ Some teams travel for tournaments, and occasionally for friendly games outside of Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰

One of those teams is AlYamamah, the oldest women's football team in Riyadh and the team that played the first game in 2008. AlYamamah was started in 2007 by a group of students using the indoor gym at their university, usually reserved for male students. In the aftermath of the game, the players experienced a backlash that resulted in the team's separation from the University and their being told to stop playing.⁵¹ An opinion piece in Saudi daily *Okaz* in January 2008, suggested that the game was a popular topic in many gatherings following the events, with most commentators opposing the event. Saudi news agency Alarabiya noted that a female football match caught the attention of the press, but that the legitimacy of women participating in sports was not discussed in the reports. On online forums, reports circulated that the governor of the Eastern Province received letters from religious conservatives opposing the women's football match. Despite assurance that the match was held in a private environment, the reports suggested that the "religious police", formally the Committee for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), had found young men gathering in connection with the event.⁵² In March the same year, Alarabiya reported that the Mufti had demanded the cancellation of a women's run at King Saud University in Riyadh, referring to the football match that took place in the Eastern Province less than two months prior. On a later occasion, the women's league has faced confrontation with the CPVPV, making them scale down their weekend matches.⁵³ In addition, at least one team has faced difficulties when renting pitches for their practices and games, after a landlord was warned against facilitating women's football.⁵⁴ The following section will discuss how four different teams in RWFL have navigated negative attitudes in their society and applied tactics in order to promote female football without taking on excessive risk.

AlYamamah: Shaping hearts and minds

Adwa, founder of AlYamamah, explains how the players trained themselves to get better, using DVDs brought from overseas, before starting to search for other teams to compete against.⁵⁵ Speaking in 2017, Adwa says that "if you go back to ten years ago, maybe 98 percent of the society didn't accept [women's football]", adding that some of the players had to throw the bags with their football kits from their window, and tell their parents they were going to their friend's house to study, when in reality going to practice.

In January 2008, the young women travelled from Riyadh to the Eastern Province to meet their opponents. Despite that the incident led the team to discontinue their affiliations with the university they continued their activities in private – preparing guidelines for other women who wanted to start up a team.⁵⁶ Ten years after starting to play with friends in the university, Adwa and her team mates has extended the scope of the club, resulting in a broad and strong organization. In addition to the original first women's team, the club offers football practices for children down to the age of 4 through

the AlYamamah Academy.

The evolution started in 2014 with the opening of a youth team for girls ages 12 through 18, after several requests. A year after, parents started asking for opportunities for even younger children, explains Nadine, former player and assistant coach, and the team manager since 2014.⁵⁷ Wanting to give back to the community, the team decided to set up a football academy for children of both sexes, despite the work load that comes with it. This resulted in collaboration with a non-profit organization that offers after school programs for kids – and AlYamamah has since run its football program. As there were no coaching classes available in Saudi Arabia, the young women are self-taught and have used their experience in building the curriculum for the kids' academy.

In the fall of 2017, AlYamamah constantly had to turn down parents as the Academy was completely full, with over 70 kids participating. Although for females AlYamamah offers football throughout life, their oldest player being 45, boys are only accepted until the age of 12. According to local Saudi customs, unrelated girls and boys should not engage in activities, including playing football together after reaching this age, and AlYamamah, with an exclusively female management and coaching staff, prioritized offering football to girls and young women - providing opportunities they did not have themselves growing up.

Engaging the kids in playing football is the primary activity of the training session, but the goal of the activities is to build their personality, rather than just their talent.⁵⁸ In addition, the club has an explicit goal of normalizing women's football. "How can we make sure that those kids would love the sport itself and would continue, and would influence their community and they would support girls in their families or in their societies, [that] they would support them to play?" Adwa asks rhetorically, before explaining that this is the reason why they wanted to include boys under the age of 12 in the program: "Because we want those boys in the future to allow their sisters and their daughters to play football, and to play sports." Segregation is, as Annemarie van Geel has explained, the norm in Saudi society.⁵⁹ By bringing boys and girls together, in conflict with this norm, AlYamamah seeks to demystify interaction between kids of different sexes, thus teaching the boys that it is normal for girls to play football.

"Years and years of facing a lot of obstacles, of facing a lot of issues and constraints we realized we feel since we were pioneers in girls football in Riyadh, or in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, that we are to pave the way for the next generation and to give back to [the] community," Adwa explains, adding they got aware that "there's a bigger mission". By setting up the voluntary kids' program and seeking to normalize girls playing football among the next generation, AlYamamah take their perceived social responsibility and seek not only to provide opportunities that they did not have growing up, but to influence the hearts and minds of their communities.

Challenge FC: Building organization away from the spotlight

The women behind Challenge FC – the second female football team in Riyadh, found "a bigger mission" as well. Rawh, a former teacher and the manager of the team, recalls that although the group had been gathering to play football for fun since 2005, it was in 2007, after being contacted by AlYamamah, that they decided to establish the team. "Most of us didn't know each other, we weren't friends, but we loved football", she explains.⁶⁰ Challenge soon got serious about their practices but kept room for girls who just want to be active or playing football for leisure – something there are still few opportunities to do for the women of Riyadh. In order to provide opportunities both for serious,

ambitious players, and those who want to play for leisure, Challenge FC have organized their players in an A, B, and C team. Challenge FC has also lately expanded to include a basketball team – and Rawh explains she is looking into possibilities of setting up even more accessible activities for women.⁶¹ Challenge, like AlYamamah, found themselves being pioneers in women's football in Saudi Arabia. Rawh says "things got really serious" when she quit her job to focus on sports. "I travelled to attend conferences; I travelled to attend workshops, international countries, Gulf countries, lot of things that helped me to improve my experience, so you can say that I built my CV on my own," she recalls. Today both Rawh and her co-manager are licensed C coaches with the Asian Football Federation,⁶² after completing the requirements in a neighbouring country. After obtaining the license in early 2018, Rawh was celebrated as the first female Saudi football coach in local media.⁶³

Globalization and technological developments have made it easier for women to obtain the necessary equipment for playing, information on how to train or coach, and to create and manage local and international networks. With the government's change of attitude towards women in sport, highlighted by the appointment of Reema bint Bandar, the existing teams have increased their social media presence, taking the opportunity to advertise games, or provide contact information for curious women wanting to join a team. The signal from the top is also what has made it easier for the footballers to appear in local media. Rawh explains how the policy change, and especially that the General Sports Authority (GSA) started licensing women's sports establishments - allowing for her team to register as a community sports group after being unlicensed for ten years, has made recruitment easier: "This gave us some kind of, not really freedom, but, a bit of freedom that I can open the Instagram account, I can put a number for people to contact me, so everyone is doing [it] now. The number of my players, adult, it has increased a lot".⁶⁴

Although both Challenge FC, as their colleagues in AlYamamah, wanted to see changes in the field of women's football in Saudi Arabia, they have focused on awareness and building strong organizations rather than confrontational campaigning, in order not to provoke any backlash from society that might do more harm than good for their cause. They have focused on steady growth and creating opportunities for an increasing number of people and constantly working on taking advantage of expanding opportunities. For Challenge FC, it has indeed been an outspoken goal to build a strong organization with talented females prepared to take the lead when the socio-political situation would allow it.

Riyadh Team: Spreading the word

In addition to developing the organizations, the teams of the league are spreading awareness of their activities, in a culturally acceptable way. Riyadh Team, established in 2014, is arguably the team of RWFL with the most active outreach. Marwah, a player, says that it has not become easier to find a way to play than it was when the team first started, but that they learned and found their ways to overcome the obstacles. One measure the team has taken was to open accounts in social media. "Actually, social media was my idea", Marwah explains, adding that some were sceptical, fearing that people would oppose women playing football.⁶⁵ Although Marwah estimates that the feedback is split 50/50 between supporters and opponents, the team has continued their active presence. Since publishing the first tweet under the handle @RiyadhTeam February 26, 2017 (an announcement of that night's game against Challenge FC), Riyadh Team has published 639 tweets, which constitutes a much higher activity than any of the other teams. The teams' tweets are exclusively devoted to promoting women's football in a direct manner, such as advertising their activities, the league, encouraging women to take part or promoting media appearances.

While the reach of organizations' messages on social media might not extend beyond their established network, and with only 1230⁶⁶ followers this is probably the case with Riyadh Team, appearances in traditional media do. As noted above, reports on female football might not go well in conservative circles, which was certainly the case when AlYamamah experienced a backlash following a number of media reports in 2008. Careful negotiations are thus necessary when promoting possibly controversial activities to a broader audience. In making choices on how to present their message about women's football towards a broader audience the women are not only considering their choice of words, but the visual images presented.

While Challenge FC make sure to wear appropriate outfits while being pictured, and some players choose to not be pictured at all as they wish to not be identified as football players, AlYamamah does not publicly appear on pictures. Riyadh Team, described as conservative by some players of rival teams, has chosen a different tactic: although posting a large number of pictures (and videos) on their social media accounts, and appearing in the traditional media – the pictures of players are usually either taken from far away, or depicting only the bodies up to the neck, leaving their heads out of the image. If being interviewed in media – though not all of the players agree to appear – the players of Riyadh Team always cover their faces.⁶⁷ There are three primary reasons for such choices. For some women this is of course a personal choice reflecting their religious and moral beliefs – while for others it might be a strategic choice in order to avoid scrutiny or harm the cause. For the third group, it might be out of respect for their immediate or extended family. As Amelie Le Renard has argued, it is not uncommon for Saudi women to be juggling the norms, adapting their self-presentation to different situations requiring different norms.⁶⁸ Tahani, a player who has participated in the TV-reports, elaborates on the negotiations taking place in such a situation: “Some of them, they don't cover their face when they are outside but in the TV show they cover it because they don't want other people seeing them”.⁶⁹ They are thus delivering a norm breaking message while emphasizing their respect for other cultural norms through their appearances.

In an interview with Saudi Akhbar24 on October 6 2018, Riyadh Team's manager Rihab said that the team suffer from a lack of pitches and coaches with sufficient experience with women's football, adding that “In the future we aspire to have a league for Saudi women like the men have, with our reservations about television broadcasting, but we need support and interest in women's teams.” She continued to say that the team were engaged with institutions working on health and social issues and mentioned how women's health was in accordance with the Saudi Vision 2030 – thus ensuring the reader that the team's efforts were in line with the government's political goals. Tahani said they received some negative feedback after the team appeared on national television and made sure to add that in her view, they are doing nothing wrong: “We are respecting our culture, for sure, and we respect our religion and we didn't do anything that miss our culture or our religion, we stay in the safe side.”⁷⁰ Her account reflects the view of many of the players. They do not see a conflict between being a Saudi pious Muslim female and a football player – and this is the message they seek to deliver to the public through their social media and appearances in newspapers and TV shows. Although most of the players have supportive families, with some restrictions regarding issues like TV-appearances and traveling, they still see a need for greater support. The same attitude is expressed when discussing relations to the government, and recent initiatives to improve women's sports. Tahani says she believes the 90s kids are changing the world: “We don't make the same mistakes as our parents and grandparents did, we're trying to make things right and make sense of things you know, not to just take information as it is, and never change anything,” she explains.⁷¹ Noura, another player, adds that they are “reforming the traditions”.⁷² The players' statements are telling for how the women view the challenges meeting female footballers. “It's about exposure and we need to work on that, we have to

approach people, we are not pushing anything were not trying to attack you, we're just trying to play and have our rights, we are trying to build a community that accepts us, because we're not doing anything wrong we are doing what we love," Tahani adds.⁷³ In other words, the players do not see a conflict between being a Saudi pious Muslim female and a football player – and this is the message they seek to deliver to the public through negotiated appearances in social media, newspapers and TV shows.

Kingdom Stars: Pushing from below

A fourth team of RWFL meets challenges of negotiating the legitimacy of their football activities on a different basis – as the team consist exclusively women from an orphanage. Women in Saudi Arabia at the time of writing are still subject to the guardianship system, which makes their male guardian – usually the father, husband or even brother – judicially responsible.⁷⁴ In practice this leaves male guardians in power over women in many situations, either formally or informally.⁷⁵ As orphan women before marriage do not have any guardian through family ties, such authority is left with the state. The other teams of RWFL normally do not accept players that hide their activities from the families. Their public representation as football players, or participation at all, is thus negotiated with families, often with not only reactions from authorities, employer or the general society but also with those of the extended family in mind. The orphanage team have to negotiate directly with government representatives.

Kingdom Stars was initiated in 2014 by Entisar, a woman volunteering with the orphanage, after she observed that many of the women enjoyed playing football for fun. She asked for permission to start a team for the women from the manager of the orphanage, and finally got the acceptance of the management on the fourth attempt.⁷⁶ They have no official funding or support. For their home games, Kingdom Stars have to rely on borrowing playing fields from other teams. While players of the other teams have to get their guardian to sign off on permissions to travel, including inside Saudi Arabia, Kingdom Stars have to apply for permission with the ministry, a process which, according to Entisar, is slow and complicated: "I hope, maybe, they are allowed, but maybe it [will take] one month", she explains, adding that it makes it difficult to attend tournaments outside Riyadh.⁷⁷ A women's football tournament that took place in Dammam in the fall of 2017 for example, gave the team one week's notice.

Entisar explains that the girls don't have to worry about being seen, as they have no family, but that there is a concern that the government might react if they were to go on TV, or if she would put pictures on Instagram, and that they might demand she shut down the football team as a consequence.⁷⁸ This ambiguity – where the team has to negotiate different expectations by answering directly to government institution and not to relatives - is apparent also in their social media usage. While the team has no pictures at all of the players in any of their social media accounts, they were also the first among the teams of RWFL to open a Twitter account and an Instagram account (the Twitter-account was opened already in 2013, while the Instagram-account followed in 2014). In fact, Kingdom Stars was the only team to open the accounts prior to the appointment of Princess Reema as head of women's sports. The twitter account has also been far more unequivocal in its form than any of the others – taking on the issue of women's football already in the fall of 2013 when they tweeted approximately 150 tweets over the course of two days directed at various Saudi profiles varying from well-known preachers to women's rights activists. The tweets were asking "#Saudi_Womens_Football are you a supporter or an opponent? It is under legal cover and out of sight".⁷⁹ The team continue to use their social media presence to actively reach out to society and

government. In early 2018, for instance, when a government official announced that the president of the GSA, Turki Al al-Sheikh, would start seeing athletes in his office to discuss matters relating to sports, Kingdom Stars responded by asking if this would also be available for women, to discuss the needs and plans of the team.⁸⁰ On January 25 the same year the team tweeted directly at Turki Al al-Sheikh, asking for his recognition of women's football.⁸¹

While Kingdom Stars does not face the same need to negotiate their public appearances with families, as the other players, they have to take on a cumbersome bureaucracy to be able to play football. They bargain as a team, rather than individually, and seek alliances in a more direct manner, with officials and with the public.

Discussion: Subverting norms, respecting laws

On 16 February 2019, the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) announced that a first women's football tournament would take place in Dammam later that year, with the support of GSA. More than ten years after the establishment of the unofficial Riyadh Women's Football League, the bulletin included no reference to the women who had devoted their lives to introduce women's football to the Saudi population. It did, however, stress that the event would be held in a "decent manner that reflects the Kingdom's interest in women's sport and the exercise of its rights in all its privacy without prejudice to the Islamic traditions and traditions that characterize Saudi women."⁸²

While working on improving societal acceptance and opportunities to play, female footballers in Saudi Arabia have seen it as crucial to avoid serious confrontation with officials or conservative parts of the society, in order to avoid having to shut down. If they were to provoke reactions from people opposing their activities, the women feared that players might quit due to security concerns, and that it would be even more difficult to find venues and other forms of support. The women do not, however, see the royal family and the state as their primary opponents; rather they see them as allies.

As noted above, the teams adopt different tactics in gaining support for their cause while ensuring their respect for local rules and customs. They adapt their appearances and arguments, both visually and verbally. By doing this, they seek to frame their activities as being in line with Saudi laws and norms. As Le Renard notes in the case of female mobility, Saudi women constantly have to negotiate their public presence with their families.⁸³ For the football players, however, the negotiation does not only take part within the family, but is extended to the society, lawmakers and law enforcers. When Kingdom Stars ask for support while ensuring that the activities are legal, Riyadh Team argue that their goals are in line with Saudi Vision 2030, or Challenge FC make sure to dress modest on any visual material, they are engaging in what Asef Bayat has called *accommodating innovation*.⁸⁴ Bayat describes how youth in Egypt redefine norms, and negotiate dominant systems to work in their interest rather than departing from it.⁸⁵ Similarly, the norm breaking activities of the Riyadh female footballers are being redefined as in accordance with hegemonic religious and traditional ideas, and even laws and government objective.

Several team members expressed that they had contact with governmental institutions. Kingdom Stars approach high ranking officials through social media. Rihab, the manager of the Riyadh Team, has brought up the need for facilities in newspaper interviews, while players Tahani and Nora recalled attending a meeting with governmental institutions in order to explain the needs of female footballers in terms of playing fields, equipment and other facilities. Top government officials did indeed confirm that they are working with female grassroots initiatives in order to ensure that their needs are heard. It should also be noted that two of the founders of the league have gained positions where they work

closely with the government in the field of sports – and that Adwa in early 2018 was appointed as the first female representative in the Saudi Football Federation.

In the new “decisive” era of Saudi Arabia, King Salman and his son are acting as the benevolent patriarchs granting women (appropriate) rights. This decisiveness characterizes both an aggressive foreign policy as well as seemingly precipitous domestic policy changes, including the right for women to drive, and to access football stadiums.⁸⁶ Within this era of “decisiveness” the footballers have found an opportunity to make their claim even more explicitly and direct than before. This does not mean, however, that they are simply reactive. Rather, as this paper argues, they have worked for a decade, within and around their circumstances, in order to achieve their goals, always seeking to expand their arena of influence in accordance with the political and societal situation.

Their actions resemble what O’Brien and Li has termed rightful resistance.⁸⁷ Rather than criticizing the regime female football teams of Riyadh celebrate new policies giving more freedom to women, in the field of sports and outside. The state becomes the protector and the enabler. As Al-Rasheed observed in the case of outspoken women in the post 9/11-era, who blamed radical religious preaching that previously dominated both the educational institutions and the media on the marginalization of women ‘they willingly seek state patriarchy as a refugee from what they regard as restrictive and social tradition’.⁸⁸

Other women’s rights networks have developed a different stance that goes beyond the ‘benevolent patriarch’ approach and adopt a more confrontational approach, namely activist networks affiliated to campaigns demanding the right to drive and abolishment of the guardianship-system.⁸⁹ The risk of such approach, however, are high, and in May 2018, the month before women would be allowed to drive, several prominent activists affiliated with this network was arrested and accused of treason. Several women’s right activists were arrested in the following months, which suggest that the new era of decisiveness leaves no room for voices promoting other narratives than the official.

Conclusion

While women, their bodies and their behaviour are subject to groups and governments changing agendas and utilized as tools to promoting political messages, I have in this study sought to illuminate the role that the women themselves are playing in shaping their societies. The women of Riyadh’s Female Football League are rightful resisters loyal to the rulers, adapting their logic in order to protest what they perceive as limiting attitudes from conservative parts of the state and society in Saudi Arabia. They are thus working within a system, rather than resisting it. In this, they see the state as a benevolent patriarch who provides protection and opportunities. As such, they stand in contrast to the more confrontational, general rights-oriented networks that have faced brutal oppression in the era of decisiveness.

The example of RWFL shows the need for a history of Saudi women that goes beyond both the state narratives and the dichotomy of submissiveness and explicit resistance, but rather one that acknowledges agency, including for those not acting in a confronting manner. Rather than viewing Saudi women as objects to political and societal processes, qualitative studies of the everyday lives of Saudi women can help shed light on the complex and dynamic situation affecting them, and, more importantly, the role they play in shaping it.

¹ Adwa, author interview, Riyadh September 12 2014

² Tuastad, "From football riot to revolution. The political role of football in the Arab world."

³ Brannagan and Giulianotti, "Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals."

⁴ Harkness, "Spring forward: female Muslim soccer players in Iraqi Kurdistan." Knez et al., "World Cup Football as a Catalyst for Change: Exploring the Lives of Women in Qatar's First National Football Team – A Case Study." Stewart, "A hobby or hobbling? Playing Palestinian women's soccer in Israel.", Fozooni, "Iranian women and football." Lysa, "Qatari Female Footballers: Negotiating Gendered Expectations."

⁵ Some noteworthy studies include Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: violence and pan-Islamism since 1979*, on violent Islamist groups in Saudi Arabia, Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*., on the Islamist *sahwa* movement and Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: oil, urbanism, and road revolt*, on young men.

⁶ Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and behavior among the elite*., Le Renard, *A society of young women : opportunities of place, power, and reform in Saudi Arabia*, Makboul, "Beyond Preaching Women: Saudi Dā'iyāt and Their Engagement in the Public Sphere.", Alfarran et al., "Institutional barriers to women's employment in Saudi Arabia."

⁷ Al-Asfour and Khan, "Workforce localization in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: issues and challenges." Alfarran et al., "Institutional barriers to women's employment in Saudi Arabia.", Fawzi and Almarshed, "HRM context: Saudi culture, "wasta" and employee recruitment post-positivist methodological approach, the case of Saudi Arabia."

⁸ Lysa and Leber, "Women's Sports Programs Are Challenging Saudi Arabia's Gender Divide."

⁹ Messner, "Sports and male domination: The female athlete as contested ideological terrain.", Hargreaves, *Sporting females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sport*., Birrell, "Discourses on the gender/sport relationship: from women in sport to gender relations."

¹⁰ Al-Rasheed, *A most masculine state: Gender, politics and religion in Saudi Arabia*., 14

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 13

¹³ Uqn.gov.sa, "قرارات مجلس الوزراء الموافقة على تعديل نظام وثائق السفر والأحوال المدنية ونظام العمل والتأمينات الاجتماعية" (The Council of ministers decides to approve of amendments to the system of travel documents,

civil status, work status and social insurance), 1 August 2019,
<https://www.uqn.gov.sa/articles/1564686389678699500/> (Accessed 1 August 2019)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For a discussion on how women in the Middle East has functioned as symbol for political leaders and state, regardless of the desired image to put forward, often with the result that women's behaviour is controlled in one way or another, see Joseph, *Gender and citizenship in the Middle East*.

¹⁷ HRW, *Steps of the Devil: Denial of Women's and Girls' Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia*.

¹⁸ Gym-owner, author interview, October 24 2017

¹⁹ Gym-owner, author interview, October 24 2017

²⁰ Personal communication, Riyadh, December 11 2017

²¹ ArabNews, *Saudi princess appointed to oversee women's sports sector*.

²² For a discussion on these developments see Lysa and Leber, "Women's Sports Programs Are Challenging Saudi Arabia's Gender Divide."

²³ Al-Rasheed, *A most masculine state: Gender, politics and religion in Saudi Arabia*., p. 28-29

²⁴ Delaney, "Father state, motherland, and the birth of modern Turkey."

²⁵ Inhorn, *The new Arab man: Emergent masculinities, technologies, and Islam in the Middle East*.

²⁶ Roald, "Benevolent Patriarchy": Palestinian Women between "Ideal" and "Reality."

²⁷ Young, "The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state."

²⁸ After the name of the Saudi led invasion of Yemen, "Operation Decisive Storm" "Amaliyyat 'Āṣifat al-Ḥazm", see Nora Doaji in Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*.

²⁹ Nora Doaji, «From Hasm to Hazm» in *ibid*.

³⁰ O'Brien and Li, *Rightful resistance in rural China*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³² O'Brien, "Rightful resistance revisited."

³³ See Le Renard, *A society of young women : opportunities of place, power, and reform in Saudi Arabia*, 19.

³⁴ English was the preferred language of most of my interlocutors. As is typical for this globalized segment of society, many were fluent in English, well-travelled, and had studied in English-speaking countries. Occasionally, they would use English among themselves, and for one team

English was the preferred language although all players but one were Saudi nationals .For the situations where Arabic was needed, my own knowledge of Arabic was more than adequate.

³⁵ See Thies, "A pragmatic guide to qualitative historical analysis in the study of international relations."

³⁶ Personal communication, Riyadh, October 6 2017

³⁷ The survey included all physical activities, and exercising in a gym was more popular at 32%, however among sports football stood out as the most practiced, with swimming coming at 12% and basketball at 9%. A 2016 report by SMGYouGov, that did not include activities as walking and gym exercising found that 23% of native Saudis had participated in football within the last 2 weeks making it the most popular sport, by far. Source: General Sports Authority

³⁸ Respondents were asked: Which, if any, of the following sports do you watch / follow? By watch / follow, we mean that you either actively read about sport on a regular basis, watch live broadcasts or highlights of matches / events online or TV, or attend matches / events in person.

³⁹ The USA serves as the opposite case, however several studies has discussed masculine assumptions in football, see Caudwell, "Women's football in the United Kingdom: Theorizing gender and unpacking the butch lesbian image.", Pfister et al., "The beginnings of women's football in four European countries.", Dunning, "Sport as a male preserve: Notes on the social sources of masculine identity and its transformations."

⁴⁰ Adwa, author interview, October 24 2017, Riyadh

⁴¹ Interviews with Rawh, Adwa, Nadine, and personal communication with several players.

⁴² Rawh, author interview, September 19 2014, Riyadh

⁴³ Personal communication, 2014, Riyadh

⁴⁴ Rawh, author interview, November 14 2017, Riyadh

⁴⁵ Rawh, author interview, November 14 2017, Riyadh

⁴⁶ Rawh, author interview, September 19 2014, Riyadh

⁴⁷ Rawh, author interview, September 19 2014, Riyadh

⁴⁸ Female football has never been formally banned, but was difficult to practice in a legal manner outside of the private sphere. Saudi laws are not codified leaving room for interpretation that often led to insecurity regarding what would be accepted and not by authorities.

⁴⁹ Nadine, author interview, November 8, 2017

⁵⁰ Rawh, author interview, November 14 2017, Riyadh; Nadine, author interview, November 8, 2017

⁵¹ Personal communication, 2014, Riyadh

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- ⁵² See for example <http://hajrnet.net/hajrvb/showthread.php?t=402944176> and <http://www.rahimh.net/vb/showthread.php?t=20433> (accessed February 20, 2018)
- ⁵³ Author interview with player, Riyadh 13.11.2014
- ⁵⁴ Author interview with player, Riyadh 13.11.2014
- ⁵⁵ Adwa, author interview, October 24 2017, Riyadh
- ⁵⁶ Author interview, Riyadh, 12.09.2014
- ⁵⁷ Nadine, author interview, November 8, 2017
- ⁵⁸ Adwa, author interview, October 24 2017, Riyadh
- ⁵⁹ van Geel, "Separate or together? Women-only public spaces and participation of Saudi women in the public domain in Saudi Arabia."
- ⁶⁰ Rawh, author interview, November 14 2017, Riyadh
- ⁶¹ Rawh, author interview, November 14 2017, Riyadh
- ⁶² The Asian Football Federation (AFC) is the governing body of associate football in Asia, and is one of FIFA's (the international football federation, Fédération Internationale de Football Association) six continental confederations.
- ⁶³ Rawh, author interview, November 14 2017, Riyadh
- ⁶⁴ Rawh, author interview, November 14 2017, Riyadh
- ⁶⁵ Marwah, author interview, November 12 2017, Riyadh
- ⁶⁶ As of April 2018
- ⁶⁷ Author interview, Tahani, November 19 2017, Riyadh
- ⁶⁸ Le Renard, *A society of young women : opportunities of place, power, and reform in Saudi Arabia*.125
- ⁶⁹ Author interview, Tahani, November 19 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷⁰ Author interview, Tahani, November 19 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷¹ Author interview, Tahani, November 19 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷² Author interview, Noura, November 19 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷³ Author interview, Tahani, November 19 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Boxed In. Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System*.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Author interview, Entisar, December 13 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷⁷ Author interview, Entisar, December 13 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷⁸ Author interview, Entisar, December 13 2017, Riyadh
- ⁷⁹ @Kingdomstars1, <https://twitter.com/kingdomstars1>. The account published more than 100 identical tweets on the 10-11 September 2013
- ⁸⁰ @Kingdomstars1, 1 April 2018 <https://twitter.com/kingdomstars1/status/980464260374462464>

⁸¹ @Kingdomstars1, 25 January 2018 <https://twitter.com/kingdomstars1/status/956600575810048000>

⁸² Spa.gov.sa, "اللجنة الإعلامية لفعاليات كرة القدم النسائية الخليجية الأولى تعقد اجتماعها" (The information committee for the first Gulf women's football event held holds meeting), 16 February 2019 <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?newsid=1886343> Visited 16 February 2019

⁸³ Le Renard, *A society of young women : opportunities of place, power, and reform in Saudi Arabia*.

⁸⁴ Bayat, *Life as politics : how ordinary people change the Middle East*. p 112

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ It should be noted, despite not being the topic for this paper, there are a number of external and internal factors at work, as with previous political and societal changes, including the need for economic growth.

⁸⁷ O'Brien and Li, *Rightful resistance in rural China*.

⁸⁸ Al-Rasheed, *A most masculine state: Gender, politics and religion in Saudi Arabia*. p 141-142

⁸⁹ For an in-depth discussion of Saudi women's' rights activists see Nora Doaiji, "From Hasmi to Hazmi" in ---, *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*.

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