

# Saudi Women in Sport: *From the Sidelines to the Arena*

Dr. Hanaa Almoaibed



2026

A quarterly report by the  
Arab Institute for Women's Leadership

  
nusf

# Saudi Women in Sport: *From the Sidelines to the Arena*

Dr. Hanaa Almoaibed

On 6 April each year, the world marks the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. Declared by the UN General Assembly in 2013, the day exists to recognise what the evidence consistently shows: that sport is not merely recreation. It is a vehicle for social inclusion, a mechanism for cross-cultural understanding, and one of the most powerful tools available for building the conditions in which enduring peace becomes possible. The 2026 theme, “Sport: Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers,” puts it plainly. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres has stated, sport has a unique and transformative power: it transcends borders, unites people, fosters resilience, and promotes inclusion. Each of these values, he has argued, is essential to the work of building a more peaceful world.

|



Saudi Arabia's investment in women's sport is, seen through this lens, a contribution to that global project. When women compete across borders, lead international federations, and govern the institutions that shape how sport develops in their countries, they are doing something that matters well beyond the podium. They are demonstrating that inclusion works, that barriers come down through sustained institutional commitment, and that a country's sporting culture can be a genuine expression of its values to the world. This report is published to mark that day, and to document what Saudi women in sport have built.



in 2016, 13% of Saudi people engaged in sport regularly. Today that figure is 48%. Women account for a significant part of that growth: from approximately 200 registered female athletes across the entire Kingdom at the launch of Vision 2030 to more than 7,000 today, with 330,000 girls registered across sports disciplines and 37 national women's teams competing internationally. These are not projections. They are the results of a decade of sustained institutional investment, and they are changing what sport means in Saudi Arabia.

This piece examines what that investment has produced: in participation, in elite competition, in governance, and in the individual careers of women who have built Saudi sport from the inside. The picture is one of acceleration across every level of the system simultaneously, from girls' school leagues to international federation leadership, from community football to Olympic qualifying rounds.



# The Numbers:

## *A Transformation in a Decade*

Before Vision 2030's launch in 2016, approximately 13% of Saudi people engaged in regular physical activity. By 2025, that figure reached 48%, surpassing the Vision's own target of 40% ahead of schedule (AlFozan, 2025; Vision 2030). The numbers for women tell a particularly striking story. Lama AlFozan, now Vice President of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, recalls a Kingdom in which there were approximately 200 registered female athletes in total when she began competing. Today, that figure exceeds 7,000 (AlFozan, 2025).

Saudi women's participation in sport has risen by over 150% since the launch of Vision 2030 (Saudi Press Agency, 2025). More than 330,000 girls are now registered across various disciplines. Over 70,000 compete in school leagues, a direct consequence of girls' physical education being introduced into public schools in 2017, one of the foundational structural decisions since the launch of Vision 2030. The country now has 37 national women's teams, 97 certified female coaches, and more than 400 women's sports clubs active across the Kingdom (Saudi Press Agency, 2025; Sports Investment Forum, 2025).



# The Numbers:

## *A Transformation in a Decade (cont.)*

Registered female athletes (pre-2016): ~200

Registered female athletes today: 7,000+

Girls registered across sports disciplines: 330,000+

Girls competing in school leagues: 70,000+

National women's teams: 37

Women's sports clubs: 400+

Growth in women's participation since Vision 2030: 150%+

Overall sports participation rate (2025): 48%, up from 13% in 2016

Women's boxing alone grew by 460% between 2021 and 2024, with women now registered and competing across 84 government clubs (Alkhamis, Fortune, 2025).

The Saudi Women's Premier League, the top tier of women's football, has ten clubs competing in its current season, with matches broadcast domestically and internationally for the first time, through MBC Group's MENA-wide agreement signed in 2025 (Saudi Women's Premier League, 2025). A dedicated 24-hour women's sports television channel launched alongside the new broadcast season: the first of its kind in the Kingdom (The Week, 2025).



# Governance:

## *Women Leading the Institutions*

The most consequential dimension of Saudi women's entry into sport may be the least visible: governance. A sport's culture is shaped by who decides, who sets the rules, selects the coaches, manages the federations, and sits on the boards that determine strategic direction. In this dimension, the changes in Saudi sport over the past decade are as significant as anything happening on the field of play.

Saudi Arabia now requires every sporting federation to have a female board member, a structural mandate that builds women's institutional presence into the governance architecture of sport rather than leaving it to individual initiative ([AlArifi, Fortune, 2025](#)). Adwa AlArifi, Assistant Minister for Sport Affairs, who in 2019 became the first female board member of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation and played a central role in establishing its women's football department, has described this shift directly: Saudi Arabia is now 'one of the few countries in the world that applied equal pay for our athletes' regardless of gender for national teams, with men and women using the same quality of facilities ([AlArifi, Fortune, 2025](#)).



# Governance:

## *Women Leading the Institutions (cont.)*

This governance shift is visible at club level too. Al Qadsiah, one of Saudi Arabia's oldest and most storied clubs now owned by Saudi Aramco, launched women's programmes across football, volleyball, karate, taekwondo, wrestling, judo, basketball, and more in 2023, with women represented on its board as part of the broader mandate for gender inclusion in club governance ([Saudipedia, 2025](#)). The club's women's football team now competes in the Saudi Women's Premier League. In March 2024, Hiba Al-Qwaidi became the league's first female referee, officiating a match between Al Qadsiah and Al Riyadh. The moment marks the depth of women's integration into the sport's institutional fabric, extending well beyond its playing side ([Saudi Women's Premier League, 2025](#)).

The mandate for female board representation has produced a generation of women now building careers in sports administration. The Women's Clubs Development Fund Programme provided SAR 60 million (\$16 million) to support women's football clubs in the 2024-25 season, a figure that has increased year on year, reflecting the sustained seriousness of institutional investment in women's sport ([Two Birds, 2025](#)).



# On the World Stage:

## *Saudi Women Competing Internationally*

The domestic numbers matter. What amplifies them is what is now happening internationally. Saudi women are competing at continental and global level, achieving results that would have been unimaginable fifteen years ago, across a remarkably wide range of disciplines.

In boxing, Yara Alamri won Saudi Arabia's first-ever women's Asian medal at the 2024 ASBC Asian Elite Boxing Championship in Bangkok, a bronze in the flyweight category, having accumulated ten medals including eight golds in just two years of international competition ([Saudi Press Agency, 2025](#)).

Ragad Al-Naimi became the first Saudi female professional boxer to compete in a world tournament in 2023, winning on the undercard of a major event in Diriyah.

In fencing, Lama AlFozan herself founded the Kingdom's first female fencing team, a journey that began when she was one of a handful of women in the entire country with access to the sport.



# On the World Stage:

## *Saudi Women Competing Internationally (cont.)*

In motorsport, Reema Juffali became Saudi Arabia's first professional female racing driver and has recorded leading finishes in international competitions.

Mashaal Al-Obaidan became the first Saudi woman to obtain a rally license and has competed internationally, demonstrating that women are entering even the most traditionally male-dominated sporting spaces ([Fortune, 2025](#)).

In football, Aalia Al-Rasheed, Head of the Women's Football Department at the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, has described the transformation in direct terms: 'When I first started at the age of 14, back in 2011, we used to find some obstacles, challenges, finding fields to play at. But today, we're very proud that every young girl in the country has the ability and has the platform she deserves to play football' ([Al-Rasheed, Fortune, 2025](#)).

In November 2025, Ghizlane Chebbak from Al Hilal, playing in the Saudi Women's Premier League, became the first player from the league to be included in the FIFPRO world shortlist for 2025, marking the international recognition of the league's competitive standard ([Saudi Women's Premier League, 2025](#)).

In MMA and combat sports, Hattan AlSaif won a gold medal at the International Federation of Muay Thai Associations World Championships and is the first Saudi woman to sign a global MMA contract, representing the Kingdom globally (Arab News, 2025).

# Women Building Saudi Sport: *Three Careers*

Behind the statistics and the headlines are the careers of individual women who have built Saudi women's sport through practice, persistence, and institutional leadership over years and decades. Three in particular illuminate what this transformation looks like from the inside.

## **Mona Shahab: Climbing for a Cause, Tagging the Seven Summits**

Mona Shahab is a clinical child psychologist by profession, an adventurer by birth and the kindest human anyone will ever meet. On the 27th of February 2026, she completed the Seven Summits, standing atop Carstensz Pyramid in Papua, the highest peak in Oceania, to become one of a select group of climbers worldwide to have stood on the highest point of every continent. The feat was over a decade in the making as Mona tagged different summits along the way. It began in 2012 with Kilimanjaro, scaled for the Saudi Cancer Foundation, and has run through Aconcagua, Denali, Elbrus, Vinson, and Everest, which she summited in May 2019, becoming only the second Saudi woman to do so. Every peak has been climbed for a cause: cancer patients, refugee children, orphans, and world peace. To date, she has raised more than \$350,000 for charitable causes through her climbs (Arab News, 2019). [Climbs for a Cause 2019](#)

10

Mona Shahab



# Women Building Saudi Sport: *Three Careers (cont.)*

What makes Shahab's achievement particularly resonant in the context of this report is the argument she has consistently made through it. She does not frame her mountaineering as personal ambition alone. Each summit is dedicated outward, to a cause, to a community, to a message. That message has been consistent across fifteen years of climbing: 'Saudi women can, Saudi women will, reach whatever heights they set their mind and heart to' (Arab News, 2019). ). [Climbs for a Cause 2019](#)



Mona Shahab

Carstensz Pyramid is the proof. Standing on the highest point of every continent, she has done something fewer than five hundred people in the world have ever done, and she has done it while raising money for others and flying a Saudi flag on each summit.

Her career also illustrates the connection between sport, character development, and the values the UN identifies as central to the peace and development agenda. Climbing, she has said, teaches discipline, humility, tolerance, perseverance, and resilience. It demands the kind of sustained commitment that is transferable to every other domain of life. As a psychologist who works with teenagers and adults, Shahab brings a particular understanding of what it means to build those capacities from the ground up. Her next goal is the Explorers Grand Slam, which adds the North and South Poles to the Seven Summits. If she completes it, she will be the first Saudi to do so (Arab News, 2019; The Tourism Times, 226).

# Women Building Saudi Sport: *Three Careers (cont.)*

## Rasha Alkhamis: Governance as a Competitive Sport

Rasha Alkhamis has spent her career in combat sports, and her most significant victories have come in the boardroom rather than the ring. In 2022, she became the first Saudi woman to join the Asian Boxing Committee board and the first woman to lead the Arab Boxing Federation's women's committee, roles that placed her at the governance centre of the sport across the region. She holds a Guinness World Record and has served as Vice President of the Saudi Boxing Federation ([IMMAF, 2025](#)).

In May 2025, she was elected Chairwoman of the Saudi Mixed Martial Arts Federation, becoming IMMAF's official representative in the Kingdom and the first woman to lead the federation. The IMMAF President described the appointment as 'a fantastic reflection of the growing diversity in sport within Saudi Arabia' ([IMMAF, 2025](#)).

For Alkhamis, the case for women in combat sports is both practical and personal. Women's boxing grew by 460% between 2021 and 2024, a figure she has cited in describing the scale of transformation she has witnessed and helped drive. Women, she argues, compete in boxing for discipline, determination, and goal-setting skills as much as for fitness. The governance roles she holds are the institutional expression of exactly those qualities (Alkhamis, Fortune, 2025).



Rasha Alkhamis

# Women Building Saudi Sport: *Three Careers (cont.)*

## Lama AlFozan: First on the Piste

Lama AlFozan's career in Saudi sport spans the entire arc of the transformation she helped produce. As one of the earliest female athletes in the Kingdom, she founded Saudi Arabia's first female fencing team at a time when the infrastructure, coaching, and institutional support for women in sport simply did not exist in any formal sense. Today, as Vice President of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, she helps oversee a system that bears little resemblance to the one she entered ([AlFozan, SAFE, 2025](#)).

Her focus now is elite development: building the training centres, coaching expertise, and international competition exposure that will take Saudi athletes to the highest levels globally. Benchmarking against INSEP in France, UK sports institutes, and the US collegiate system, she is working on the architecture of excellence, combining strength and conditioning, specialist coaching, and strategic competition calendars that convert raw talent into podium performance. 'I don't know when to stop,' she has said of her passion for Saudi sport ([AlFozan, SAFE, 2025](#)). The record of what she has built suggests she has not come close to stopping yet.



Lama AlFozan

# Sport as a Space for Saudi Identity

What distinguishes Saudi women's sport from a simple story of numbers catching up is the way women athletes and leaders are shaping its cultural character as well as its scale. The women who are building Saudi sport are creating something recognisably Saudi in its approach to community, its integration of cultural values, and its understanding of what sport is for.

Research published in 2026 in the *Journal of Global South Sport Studies* found that for Saudi women, participation in sport reflects an intersectional range of motivations and experiences, shaped by age, socioeconomic background, and geography, that resist simple characterisation (Bamuhair et al., 2026). Younger women are benefitting from increased structural access and navigating sport in ways that connect it to self-expression, community, and ambition. The Saudi Sports for All Federation's community leagues have created participatory structures that bring women of all ages and backgrounds into physical activity, with recreational participation building a sports culture from the base upward alongside elite competition pathways.



## Sport as a Space for Saudi Identity (cont.)

Vision 2030's Quality of Life Programme, which frames sport as essential to personal wellbeing and national development, has provided the ideological scaffolding for this expansion. Sport is positioned as a right and as a sector with economic and social returns that make investment in women's participation a strategic priority rather than a symbolic gesture.

The result is a sporting culture in the making, one that combines world-class facilities and international-level competition with a distinctly Saudi approach to community, hospitality, and identity. Saudi women's football matches now broadcast across MENA for the first time. Saudi women compete in boxing, fencing, motorsport, MMA, and athletics on international stages. Girls in public schools have physical education as a normal part of their schooling. The landscape has changed in ways that go beyond any individual statistic.



# Conclusion

Saudi women in sport have moved from the margins of a system that largely excluded them to the centre of one that is actively investing in their participation, their development, and their leadership. The pipeline runs from primary school physical education through school leagues, club football, national teams, and elite development programmes to international competition, and increasingly to the boardrooms and federation offices where the decisions are made.

The careers of Lama AlFozan, Rasha Alkhamis, and Mona Shahab represent different registers of this transformation: elite development, federation leadership, and the kind of individual achievement that speaks across borders. What unites them is a commitment to building something durable, and to doing so in a way that is open to the world.



# Conclusion (Continued)

The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development formally recognised sport as an "important enabler" of sustainable development, and in 2024 all 193 UN Member States approved by consensus a resolution entitled "Sport as an Enabler of Sustainable Development" ([IOC, 2025](#)). Saudi Arabia's investment in women's sport sits squarely within that framework.

When Hattan Alsaif steps into the ring as a professional fighter, when Rasha Alkhamis chairs an international federation, when Yara Alamri wins a medal that has never been won before, when Mona Shahab stands on the highest point of every continent, they are building bridges of understanding between Saudi Arabia and the world. They are demonstrating, through the universal language of sport, that inclusion and ambition coexist, that cultural identity and international participation are not in tension, and that the space for women to lead has expanded in ways that are visible, measurable, and real.

As the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace reminds us each year, this is precisely what sport, at its best, is for.



# Bibliography

- AlFozan, Lama. Exclusive interview: 'Saudi sport has changed like night and day'. [SAFE Saudi Arabia for Elites](#). 2025.
- Arab News: "Hattan Alsaif ready to become Saudi Arabia's first female MMA professional. 26 November [Hattan AlSaif](#)
- IMMAF. 'IMMAF Welcomes Rasha Mohammed Alkhamis as Chairwoman of the Saudi Mixed Martial Arts Federation'. 28 May 2025. [immaf.org](#).
- Saudi Press Agency. 'Saudi Women's Sports: From Vision to Victory'. 2025. [spa.gov.sa](#).
- Quiroz-Gutierrez, Marco. 'Women's sports are thriving in Saudi Arabia'. [Fortune](#). 7 June 2025.
- Abutaleb. 'The transformation of women's sports in Saudi Arabia is no mirage'. [Fortune](#). 2 June 2025.
- Bamuhair, N. et al. 'A Critical Analysis of Women's Experiences of Sport Participation in Saudi Arabia'. [Journal of Global South Sport Studies](#). Vol. 1, Iss. 1. 2026.
- Badr, S., Murray, M. and Sharief, O. 'Levelling the Playing Field: Saudi Arabia's Regulatory Transformation of Women's Football'. [Two Birds Media](#). 2025.
- Al-Saud, Princess Reema bint Bandar. 'Harnessing the power of sports for diversity and inclusion'. [Vision 2030](#). 2024.
- [Saudi Women's Premier League](#). Wikipedia. 2025.
- Al Qadsiah FC. [Saudipedia](#). 2025.
- Saudi Arabia's New Sports Law: Key Changes for the Sector. [Greenberg Traurig LLP](#). January 2026.
- The Week. 'Saudi Arabia: the laws on what women can and can't do in 2025'. [theweek.com](#). 2025.
- Vision 2030. [Quality of Life Programme Annual Report](#). 2023.
- [Women's sport in Saudi Arabia](#). Wikipedia.
- Digital Cooperation Organisation. [dco.org](#).
- WomenSpark. [get-playbook.com/women-spark](#).
- Nusf. From Boardrooms to Biennales: The Rise of Saudi Women in Work and the Arts. Arab Institute for Women's Empowerment. 2025.
- Al-Moaibed, Hanaa. 'Can Do, Will Do, Don't Have To: How Saudi Women Navigate TVET'. In: [Women in the GCC: Negotiating Power, Leadership and Change](#). Springer Nature. 2026.
- United Nations. [International Day of Sport for Development and Peace](#). 2025.
- International Olympic Committee. [International Day of Sport for Development and Peace](#). 2025.
- United Nations Postal Administration. International Day of Sport for Development and Peace stamps. April 6, 2025. [unstamps.org](#).
- United Nations Division for Inclusive Social Development. [IDSDP 2025: Social Inclusion](#).
- Shahab, Mona. 'Mona Shahab raises awareness and funds while aiming to complete the prestigious Explorers Grand Slam challenge'. Arab News. 24 May 2019. [<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1500926/saudi-arabia>]
- 'Saudi climber Mona Shahab completes Seven Summits challenge'. The Tourism Times. 3 March 2026.
- Dr. Hanaa Almoaibed is a Saudi academic, policy researcher and consultant. She is VP for Research at the Arab Institute for Women's Empowerment (Nusf), Consulting Fellow at Chatham House, Research Fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and Visiting Research Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre. She is co-editor of *Women in the GCC: Negotiating Power, Leadership and Change* (Springer Nature, 2026).



The Arab Institute for Women's Leadership-Nusf

*...Investing in half the population*