

Saudi Arabia To Send Women Athletes To London Olympic Games



Across the world, word that Saudi Arabia would send women athletes to the Olympics for the first time immediately rocketed to the top of websites and broadcasts. In Saudi Arabia's official media: Not even a hint.

The state-sponsored silent treatment was a lesson into the deep intricacies and sensitivities inside the kingdom as it took another measured step away from its ultraconservative traditions.

While Saudi rulers found room to accommodate the demands of the International Olympic Committee to include women athletes, they also clearly acknowledged that – in their view at least – this did not merit billing as a pivotal moment of reform in a nation that still bans women from driving or traveling without the approval of a male guardian.

"It does not change the fact that Saudi women are not free to move and to choose," said political analyst Mona Abass in neighboring Bahrain. "The Saudis may use it to boost their image, but it changes little."

Even the two athletes selected to compete under the Saudi flag – 800-meter runner Sarah Attar from Pepperdine University in California and Wodjan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahrkhani in judo – live outside the kingdom and carry almost no influence as sports figures. There is no other choice: Women sports remain nearly an underground activity in Saudi Arabia.

Ahmed al-Marzooqi, editor of a website that aims to cover women and men's sporting events in Saudi Arabia, viewed Thursday's announcement as mostly an attempt to quiet international pressure on the lone nation trying to stick with an all-male Olympic team. The other former holdouts, Brunei and Qatar, had already added women Olympic athletes – with Qatar even planning to have a woman carry its flag in London later this month.

"We are still disappointed here," al-Marzooqi said from the Saudi city of Jiddah. "I should be happy for them, but this will do nothing for women who want to be in sport in Saudi Arabia."

Still, the opening is not without significance.

The Saudi decision must have received at least some nod from the nation's Islamic religious establishment, which hold de facto veto power over nearly all key moves by the Western-allied monarchy and gives the royal court its legitimacy to rule over a nation with Islam's holiest sites.

As recently as April, a Saudi newspaper quoted the head of the Saudi Olympic Committee as saying he

did not approve of sending women to the Olympics – suggesting instead they could compete on their own under a neutral flag.

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