

## Football Femininities: Lessons from the Gulf

CHARLOTTE LYSA

Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; e-mail: [charlotte.lysa@ikos.uio.nod](mailto:charlotte.lysa@ikos.uio.nod)  
doi:10.1017/S0020743819000436

Scholarly interest in sport, particularly football, in the Middle East has been on the rise in recent years. Much of this attention is due to Qatar being selected as the host of FIFA World Cup 2022, and the role played by organized football supporters in the 2011 uprisings, particularly in Egypt. During the recent uprisings in Algeria, organized football supporters again played a pivotal role. This emerging body of scholarship has shown how the football field is a space where taboos are broken and how sport functions as both a lens for understanding political and societal change and a driving force of such change. To varying degrees, many states in the Middle East lack democratic institutions, such as political parties, labor unions, and nongovernmental organizations, and research on the social and political role of football in such environments highlights the need to examine alternative arenas for political participation.

There is, however, a striking gender bias in this body of scholarship, for it almost exclusively focuses on men. This can be explained in part by the gendered organization of social space predominant in many Middle Eastern countries and the challenges faced by male researchers in trying to access female-only spaces. Yet, the absence of female supporters in coffee shops and stadiums and issues related to access should not lead to the assumption that women are irrelevant in the study of football, or sports in general, in the region. On the contrary, this makes gender a particularly important area to explore.

With the United States perhaps the only, or at least the most pronounced, exception, football is still an activity associated with masculinity despite a growing interest in women's football. This leaves women as “the other” in relation to men. Jayne Caudwell criticizes what she describes as a “footballing binary” that treats men's and women's football as separate categories.<sup>1</sup> Pointing to prior head of FIFA Sepp Blatter's remark that “the future of football is feminine,” Caudwell argues that such attitudes highlight the underlying assumption that women's football has to be just that—feminine. Instead of deconstructing gendered assumptions about football, a parallel structure of *feminine* football is proposed.

In most Middle Eastern contexts, and in particular in the Gulf, segregation can serve as a prerequisite for participation. Participating in sports is a departure from the local customary ideas of femininity, and challenges cultural assumptions about what is acceptable behavior for women. Female football players in Qatar explain how they are labeled as *būya*, which can be translated roughly as “tomboy.”<sup>2</sup> *Būya* is a neologism that combines the English word “boy” with the Arabic feminine suffix—i.e., the feminization of “boy.”<sup>3</sup> The implication is that if women play football, and in particular competitive football, they are by definition no longer fully feminine.

The assumption that football is masculine and in opposition to hegemonic femininities is a major barrier to women's participation in football in both the Gulf and the broader Middle East. Still, the secluded football field can provide a space that is not structurally dominated by men, and from which gendered stereotypes affecting women's opportunities can be challenged and renegotiated. From the gender-segregated football field, female players in Saudi Arabia and Qatar seek to deconstruct gendered notions of football, without breaking strict moral codes in society, such as inappropriate exposure. They treat football as neither feminine nor masculine, as exemplified by the case of the Saudi female football club AIYamamah FC.

Founded in 2007 by a group of female students at AIYamamah University, AIYamamah FC is one of Saudi Arabia's oldest female football clubs. When the team first started playing, the players borrowed their university's indoor facilities, usually reserved for male students. In 2008 AIYamamah played what would go into the history books as the Saudi kingdom's first women's football game, against a team from the Eastern Province. The event did not pass without controversy. On various online forums reports circulated that the governor of the Eastern Province received several letters from religious conservatives opposing the women's football match. Following the backlash, the team cut ties with the university and kept a lower profile but continued to develop into what became one of the strongest female football teams in the country.

Away from the spotlight the group continued to seek acceptance of women's football while respecting customary gender norms. One of the steps the club took was to establish a youth academy, which first opened its doors in 2014. The football academy is run and coached by the players on the club's all-female first team, motivated by the idea of giving back to society. Although the first team welcomes only women, the academy admits boys up to the age of twelve, in accordance with Saudi customary gender segregation. The choice to admit boys is a strategic one—the organizers state that they want the boys to grow up with the idea that girls playing football is perfectly normal. By setting up the voluntary children's program and seeking to normalize girls playing football among the next generation, AIYamamah seeks not only to provide opportunities that the players did not have growing up, but also to influence the hearts and minds of their communities.

Across the Middle East, women have at different times and places proven to be important symbols for leaders of states and political movements, whether the image these leaders have sought to promote is one of modernity, religion, tradition, or authenticity.<sup>4</sup> In contemporary Gulf nationalisms, the image of the pious and modern women plays an important role, and sport is an ideal realm to promote it. State-driven narratives, as when Saudi Arabia finally opened football stadiums to female supporters in January 2018, run the risk of obscuring the achievements of women in sports on the community and grassroots levels. This highlights the importance of including female perspectives in discussions of sport in the Middle East.

Sport, and especially football, incorporates a number of factors that give it the potential to be a vigorous social and political force. The football field is a space where groups of women can gather over time on a regular basis, cultivating a shared identity and working towards shared goals. As a segregated space, it is not systematically controlled by men, and therefore provides an opening for young women to find autonomy. The gendered notion of football adds a subversive element as women's participation itself breaks with the gender norms that serve as the basis for social organization, particularly in

societies where the female body is highly politicized. Women are slowly breaking down the notion that football is by definition masculine, and that the perceived masculinity of the game reflects the player, whether a woman or a man.

By creating a space, such as the secluded football field, where their activities are not sanctioned, women redefine women's football; they are rejecting the idea that one cannot simultaneously be a woman and play football. The female footballers play a game both on and off the pitch. An increased focus on gender within sports studies would help scholars broaden the horizon to include in particular exploration of how marginalized groups are contributing to shaping the societies in which they live.

Football can, in other words, contribute to social and political change on multiple levels. Although the most apparent examples of this, such as football supporters taking part in protests, rightly receive academic attention, this attention should not come at the expense of other, less visible social and political consequences of football. While football may help us understand and itself contribute to political opposition, it can also be part of a struggle against patriarchal structures. In the Middle East region, the two are often intertwined. In short, including the gender aspect in studies of sport can provide important insights into political and social dynamics in the Middle East.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jayne Caudwell, "Gender, Feminism and Football Studies," *Soccer & Society* 12 (2011): 300–44.

<sup>2</sup>Charlotte Lysa, "Qatari Female Footballers: Negotiating Gendered Expectations," in *Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East*, ed. Danyel Reiche and Tamir Sorek (London: Hurst, 2019).

<sup>3</sup>Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014), 146.

<sup>4</sup>Suad Joseph, ed., *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).