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A Drive Toward the Goal Of Greater Freedom; Basketball Team Resists Saudi Restrictions on Female Athletes

BYLINE: Faiza Saleh Ambah; Washington Post Foreign Service

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The Jeddah United women's basketball team trickled onto the court, each player wrapped in a black abaya and head scarf. Within minutes, the women had shed their cloaks and were in uniform -- white pants and jerseys with their names in red -- practicing layups, passes and foul shots until they were wet with sweat.

The team, made up mostly of Saudi students and housewives, is preparing for a local tournament this month. But what the women would really love to do, many said, is compete internationally and represent their country abroad, something Saudi Arabia does not permit.

"We want to reach Olympic levels," said Shatha Bakhsh, 21, a law student. "We have a lot of potential, but not the chance to show it."

Saudi Arabia follows a strict version of Islam that bans men and women from mingling and does not allow women to drive or travel without a male guardian's permission. Powerful religious clerics also ban sports for girls in public schools, deeming it un-Islamic, and recently canceled two rare all-women's events, a soccer match and a marathon. Gyms for women were closed in the early 1990s and have been allowed to reopen, but only when affiliated with hospitals.

Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries competing in the Olympics without a female delegation. Though the kingdom has come under increasing pressure from the International Olympic Committee to include women on its team, many in this deeply patriarchal and traditional society agree with the restrictions, believing that allowing female athletes could lead to Western-style independence for women and an erosion of established culture.

But Lina al-Maeena, Jeddah United's founder and team captain, said women's sports are a positive force and should be an integral part of every young woman's life.

"When parents say that sports is sinful for girls, it really upsets me, because they're depriving their daughters of something that's very good for them," said Maeena, who has two young daughters.

There are more than a dozen women's basketball teams in this Red Sea city, the country's most liberal, involving several hundred players. Some operate legally but quietly under the umbrella of women's charitable societies or as part of private high schools and colleges, but others operate without a government permit, as in the case of Jeddah United.

Many of the teams maintain a low profile, refusing photos and interviews for fear of drawing attention to themselves and being forced to shut down. But some, like Jeddah United, are seeking to make public appearances and are pushing for change.

The phenomenon has prompted sharp words from the conservative clergy. In a recent posting on the Web site <http://www.islamlight.net>, prominent Saudi sheiks Abdul-Rahman al-Barrak, Abdullah al-Jibreen and Abdul-Aziz al-Rajhi issued a fatwa, or religious decree, banning women's sports centers in the kingdom.

"Opening these centers is one of the main reasons and the biggest doors leading to the spread of decadence," the decree states. "And it is known that the only women who will frequent these centers are those with little or no manners."

It concludes: "Banning the opening of these sports centers is not a ban on sports. A woman can practice sports at home, and there are many ways to do that, or she can race her husband in a deserted area, like the prophet Muhammad -- peace be upon him -- who raced with his wife Aisha twice."

In March, the women of Jeddah United were angling for a chance to play in a regional tournament in Kuwait. But Kuwaiti officials said they needed approval from the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee. Maeena said that she asked Saudi officials for a permit but that they refused to issue one, saying only that the women did not have clearance.

Maeena said she is convinced the government is not against the idea, pointing out that the teams have been allowed to organize tournaments and that articles and photos about the proliferating women's teams have started appearing in the local press.

But without permits or official sanction, teams have little chance of receiving funding and sponsorship, she said. Televising games and allowing women's teams to represent the kingdom abroad would give women's sports a big boost, she said, and would help pay for training and accreditation for female coaches and referees, of whom there are only a handful.

"The idea of Saudi women playing sports is socially unacceptable to some people," Maeena said. "That's the barrier we're trying to break."

Maeena's club has grown from six members to more than 100 since it started in 2006 with divisions for children, teenagers and adults. The club has won four local tournaments in the past two years.

One of the most gratifying experiences for Maeena has been seeing young girls blossom after they take up basketball, she said. "You see them developing self-confidence, attitude, personality. It gives them a sense of empowerment," she said. "They arrive shy, and in a very short period they are outgoing, energetic, motivated."

The team's co-captain, Maha bin Laden, remembers yearning to be an Olympic athlete after watching the 1988 Seoul Games with her father when she was 10. The niece of Osama bin Laden -- she has never met him -- shared her Olympic aspirations with her father, who told her, "In Saudi Arabia, women can't become athletes."

"Sports is my life, my passion," said bin Laden, 29, who wears jersey No. 3 like her favorite player, the Miami Heat's Dwyane Wade. "But many people here think sports is just for boys."

Rawabi Zahed, 23, said basketball rescues her from the stresses of daily life. After she drops her children off at school, she practices for two hours before going to her college. "I'm married, with kids, and I study," she said. "But after a game, all the heaviness goes away. I feel happy inside."

Zahed, who prays regularly and wears a head scarf even when outside Saudi Arabia, said that nothing in Islam bans women from sports. "Our society just has to get used to it," she said. "It's not yet normal for them to see women playing sports. But times are changing, and they have to start accepting it."

Because of the country's strict social codes, Zahed said, her husband is not comfortable with the idea of her being photographed, appearing on television or traveling without him. "But if people get used to it, he will, too," she said.

After a recent game against a local high school, which Jeddah United won, French coach Pat Saddik made the team run laps.

"A lot of my team is not physically fit," said Saddik, who is married to a Saudi and whose daughter Tamara, 15, plays

on the team. "A lot of these girls have not had proper physical education since they were young."

Saddik said she hopes the game will be accepted soon so the team can get funding for an indoor basketball court. "We played and practiced outdoors in the heat and humidity in August," when temperatures can top 100 degrees, she said.

After the postgame workout, Zahed, Tamara Saddik, several other Jeddah United players and the referee started a friendly half-court game.

Maeena, who is eight months pregnant, sat on the sidelines, watching wistfully. "I love basketball because it makes me feel 17," she said. "Even married, with children, when I play basketball I feel like I'm in high school again."

Tamara Saddik, a ninth-grader with long braids, said she'd love to make it to the next Olympics with the Saudi team. For now, though, her dream "is just to learn how to dunk."

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GRAPHIC: IMAGE; Photos By Faiza Saleh Ambah -- The Washington Post; Sarah Murad, 20, practices with her Jeddah United teammates. The team would like to compete abroad, something Saudi Arabia doesn't allow women to do.

IMAGE; Marwa Ashrour, a special-education teacher, attempts a layup during a Jeddah United practice. "We have a lot of potential, but not the chance to show it," said one team member.

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