

Ahead of 2022 World Cup, Qatar Takes More Progressive Stand on Women's Football



Qatar women's national team in 2012. Photo Wikipedia

The Qatari women's football league was **created** in 2012 and already had seven clubs by 2014. Although football is still considered an **unusual choice** for girls and women, Qatar has been committed to portraying a more progressive image of the country in terms of women and sports.

Qatar Women's Sport Committee organized a [four-day training course](#) for football coaches in March 2019. In cooperation with the Dutch embassy and the Royal Netherlands Football Association, the course combined theory and practice and aimed at 'qualifying Qatari female coaches in various sports and raising the level of training to meet the aspirations of the Committee in developing women's sport'. The initiative shows not only that women are already playing football in Qatar but also that more are taking on other roles such as coach and referee.

"Qatar appears to be adopting a somewhat more progressive stance on gender issues than several of its neighbours, including in the way it is promoting women's football," Simon Chadwick, professor of sports enterprise at Salford University in the United Kingdom, told Fanack. "Whilst there remain some not insignificant differences between Qatar and other countries elsewhere in the world, there are encouraging signs of the country seeking to afford women's football parity with men's football."

For example, goalkeeper [Shaima Abdullah](#) has become the standard bearer for women's football in Qatar. In addition to guarding the net for the national team, she is also a member of [Generation Amazing](#), a social development program helping young people through football. Now 26, Abdullah told Diario AS, "I started playing football in school when I was six years old. I loved playing basketball, handball and football, but later on, I decided to stick with football. I was selected for the school team and that led me to represent Qatar at international level as the team's goalkeeper."

Women's football is an emerging sport in Qatar and not without challenges, as several players [participating](#) in the 2015 Ramadan Futsal Festival detailed to the [Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy](#). "I began playing football at school in 2003," said Sheikha Bourshid, a graduate of Qatar University. "I also played with my university team and in regional tournaments before performing at national level. It's not been an easy path to take because our society thinks that football is only reserved for men."

Nosra Abdullah al-Sayabi, a student at the Community College, added, "Parents often refuse to let their daughters train and travel regularly. Players' sudden departures can have a really negative impact on team unity."

Nevertheless, Qatar is pushing forward a larger plan to present a more progressive image regarding women's rights in general and women in sports in particular. "Notwithstanding some of the criticisms levelled at Qatar, especially in terms of links the country has to groups with less than progressive attitudes towards women, one senses that Qatar is seeking to position itself as something of a Middle East trailblazer for women's rights," Chadwick said. "This might be a challenging notion to some, but there is clear evidence from sports organizations in Qatar that women are ascending to positions of power and are being supported in their sports participation. In terms of 'brand Qatar', this is significant and really marks the country out as being rather different from its near neighbours."

As an example, he mentioned [Afraa al-Noami](#), who is the CEO of the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, and [Noora al-Mannai](#), who headed Qatar's 2020 Summer Olympics bid.

Chadwick sees these developments as a way for Qatar to exert soft power in the region. "At one level, it's a branding and brand positioning strategy, especially in terms of engaging with more liberal nations across the world," he said. "This is classic Qatari hedging and soft power projection; it's a way for the country to appeal to nations that it needs in order to ensure legitimacy and security. At another level, one senses that a younger generation of Qatari decision-makers, many of whom have been educated elsewhere, are now beginning to challenge old, conservative attitudes towards issues such as gender."

Qatar has been using [football](#) and [other sports](#) as a way to raise its profile internationally, especially

at a time of regional isolation. Saudi Arabia and its allies in the so-called Anti-terror Quartet have been blockading Qatar since June 2017. They accuse Qatar of supporting terrorism and have demanded that Doha cut its ties with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood as well as close the media channels it funds, notably al-Jazeera. Sports, like gender, can be political tools on the global stage.

Chadwick predicts that Qatar will pursue this trend, especially with the FIFA World Cup approaching in 2022, although conservative beliefs could limit women's involvement as fans. On the Soccer Politics website, Samantha Shapiro wrote, 'Residents of Doha, where the cup will actually be held, are already warning that the upcoming tournament in their home city will be different than World Cups in years past. One local man explains: "Football fans like to drink, raise hell, party in the streets and take their clothes off and whatever. They won't be able to do that here." Similarly, female fans should not expect to be treated any differently than they normally would be in Qatar just because of the World Cup. In other words, gender inequalities will be in full force in 2022.'

Maybe change will come from within, through having more women in sports, rather than from international expectations of how Qatar should treat women.

"Ahead of the World Cup in 2022, I do expect the current trajectory to continue," Chadwick said. "One wonders also whether Qatar will bid to host a future edition of the Women's World Cup. This would play to the emerging brand narrative but also enable post-event utilization of the facilities that Qatar has expensively constructed. And with continuing numbers of younger Qataris having been subject to overseas influence, one suspects that the appetite for social change will continue."