

CHALLENGES FACING KUWAITI FEMALE ATHLETES



Danah Al-Nasrallah. — Photo courtesy Dalia Al-Nasrallah

By Athoob Al-Shuaibi

Women athletes in the Gulf face a range of discrimination. This year during the Olympics in Rio, one female athlete was branded a 'loser' in an Arabic newspaper after she failed to bring home a medal. Others were derided on social media, insulted or simply excluded from the news altogether. Arab female athletes also receive less funding and less attention from sponsors, government and society for their sports.

The situation is changing, albeit at a snail's pace. This year 31 women from the region competed at the 2016 Rio Olympic games, including weightlifters from the United Arab Emirates, runners from Saudi Arabia and a swimmer from Kuwait. Now as more female athletes challenge traditionally male-dominated sports, earning more attention through their hard work, they also challenge society and governments to alter their views about their achievements and women athletes in general.

Sexism in the media and society

But the change is far from complete. Still many female athletes faced humiliating comments on social media as well as backlash from society. The absence of objectivity in local society's perception of female athletes is similar to the discrimination their counterparts face all across the globe. During the 2016 Rio Olympics, activists and feminists pointed out normalized instances of sexism and gender discrimination in coverage of the games. For example, when US trap shooter Corey Cogdell-Unrein won a bronze medal in the women's trap shooting, the US newspaper, the Chicago Tribune announced the win by noting that the 'wife of a Bears lineman' had won a medal.

Similarly, Arab media describe female players who have chosen wrestling or bodybuilding, for instance, as rebellious or daring, but these women have simply taken physi-

cal and mental development more seriously than others.

Government discrimination

Kuwaiti track and field runner Danah Al-Nasrallah and swimmer Faye Sultan were the first female athletes to represent Kuwait at the Olympics in their respective domains. (Sultan competed as an independent athlete due to Kuwait's ban from participating. Still like all the Kuwaiti athletes there, she wore a Kuwait flag on her clothing and was vocal in support of standing as a representative for Kuwait, albeit unofficially.)

Both women believe that discrimination extends to governmental backing and funding. There are no female-friendly facilities in Kuwait for women athletes, as they are designed to only serve men. "The facilities in Kuwait are mostly geared towards men and their participation in sports. I would love to see more facilities that are available to women to give them a chance to pursue their dreams. I envision more female participation with unrestricted access to facilities and greater support networks," Sultan told Kuwait Times.

For a while, Nasrallah had to train with the boys, and eventually, she was told not to do so. "Our society is concentrated on the male. Where the male is elevated to the public sphere and praised for his achievements, women are typically relegated to the domestic domain and are often discouraged from public participation, particularly in sports," said Nasrallah.

Growing support for sports and athleticism

But Sultan believes all athletes are beginning to get more recognition in Kuwait. "I have witnessed a growing admiration for sports and overall fitness, and this is probably due to a general awareness of the benefits of sports and the discipline that comes from it," she reasoned.

There are innumerable health benefits of practicing



Faye Sultan at the Rio 2016 Olympics

sports. Despite awareness of these benefits, Kuwait has one of the highest rates of obesity in the world, and the highest among women, according to the 2016 global food security index. So how to encourage women in Kuwait to make sport or exercising part of their daily life?

"People who exercise enjoy quite a few advantages over those who don't, including but not limited to the prevention of many conditions like heart disease, diabetes, cancer, etc. It helps gain strength, balance, better coordination and improved mental health. It has always been my dream to increase the participation of Kuwaiti females in sports on the world platform," Nasrallah told Kuwait Times.

"Although I'm not working on a motivational project for Kuwaiti women in particular, I currently coach a high school team of female runners in Ann Arbor, Michigan. But at this point in time, the best way to encourage Kuwaiti women to participate in competitive sports is through private sponsorship. This already occurs in many countries where companies offer merchandise and/or money in exchange for an athlete to endorse their product. I am actually seeking sponsorship to fund my own running endeavors," Nasrallah added.

Notwithstanding that statistics do not bode well for Kuwaiti women, Sultan is optimistic. "There is a mass of untapped potential in Kuwait. We have a lot of raw talent, and it is going completely unchecked. I personally know many great Kuwaiti female athletes, but I imagine a lot of women shy away from pursuing sports seriously. Something needs to be done to give girls and women the option to pursue sports if they choose to do so," she said.

The best piece of advice Nasrallah gives to those beginning their journey in sport is to be focused on the positives. "Lock out the negativity and don't lose sight of your goal. If you're patient and consistent, results will follow," she said, as Sultan interjected: "Work hard, play hard!"