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Saudi Arabia's New Sports Law and the Emerging Global Standards for Sport

Governance, safeguarding and women's participation in the Kingdom, read against the UNESCO Global Policy Standards and United Kingdom practice

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Executive Summary

In June 2026 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia brought into force its first unified Sports Law in almost four decades, replacing a dispersed body of decrees and federation rules with a single framework covering the licensing, governance, welfare and dispute resolution of the sector.[1, 2] This reform has arrived at an interesting moment, as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is preparing the first Global Policy Standards for sport, formally the Global Policy Standards for Inclusive, Equitable and Safe Sport and Physical Education and referred to throughout this report as the UNESCO Global Policy Standards. This will be a framework of twelve standards arranged across four policy areas and expressed at both a minimum and an aspirational level, which is due to be placed before member states and ministers for endorsement in 2027.[3, 4] This report compares the new Saudi Sports Law against the UNESCO Global Policy Standards across three key themes: the governance of sport, the safeguarding of athletes and the growth of women's participation. This paper uses the United Kingdom as the principal point of comparison throughout and looks at how far the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is from meeting the UNESCO Global Policy Standards, where the Kingdom has already succeeded, and what the pace of change has looked like in Saudi sport.

The progress recorded in the Kingdom is substantial but in places remains uneven, in that political commitment, the scale of investment and the development of infrastructure are all well advanced, while the new law draws these together into a coherent legal foundation. It also creates new mechanisms in the form of a national sport organisation register, a sport organisation licensing pathway and an independent anti-doping committee - capable of carrying further governance obligations without requiring new primary legislation. Reform is under way but not yet embedded in the diversity of sporting leadership, in workforce development and in the consistent collection of participation data. Upon publication of this paper, the clearest shortfalls remain in the safeguarding of athletes of all ages (including those most vulnerable as young athletes), in participatory policymaking, and in independent reporting on outcomes and data.

British practice is of direct relevance to each of these current shortfalls, since the United Kingdom operates a published safeguarding benchmark assessed annually by an independent partner, an independent safeguarding disclosure and investigation service made mandatory across publicly funded sport, and a governance code attaching diversity targets, published action plans and a board-level welfare director to the receipt of public money.[5, 6, 7] None of that architecture rests on primary legislation, and is instead rested on conditions attached to funding, which is an instrument similar to the licensing conditions now available to the Saudi Ministry of Sport. This report accordingly identifies six practical recommendations that would close some of the remaining distance, of which the most immediate concerns the implementing regulations, unissued at the time of publication, through which safeguarding conditions could be attached to the licensing of academies, schools and coaching roles.

1. Sport, Vision 2030 and the Case for Reform

Sport occupies a prominent place within Vision 2030, the programme of economic and social change the Kingdom has pursued since 2016. The Quality of Life Programme, one of the Vision Realisation Programmes through which Vision 2030 is delivered, was launched in 2018 to widen participation in sport, culture, entertainment and tourism, and carries forward the targets set in the Vision document itself.[50] The key target is raising the share of the population engaging in physical activity or sport at least once a week from 13% to 40% by 2030, placing physical activity alongside entertainment and culture as an instrument of national development.[8, 9] Participation has risen since that point, with a household survey conducted in 2018 finding that 17.4% of individuals aged fifteen years and over undertook sporting activity of more than 150 minutes each week.[10] The 2025 physical activity bulletin published by the General Authority for Statistics found that 59.1% of the population aged eighteen and over reached 150 minutes or more each week, with male participation at 66.5% and female participation at 43.1%. However, among children and adolescents aged five to seventeen only 19.0% reached sixty minutes or more each day.[11] Despite some progress, the shifting definitions of activity and ages of participation between surveys make comparisons across the period difficult. This difficulty recurs later in this report as the collection of consistent and disaggregated data is one of the UNESCO Global Policy Standards proposed.

Alongside this expansion of community sport, the Kingdom has hosted a growing calendar of international events, acquired a leading English football club, Newcastle United, drawn a series of elite players to the Saudi Pro League, and has secured the hosting rights to the AFC Asian Cup in 2027 and to the FIFA World Cup in 2034.[12, 13] Consultancy analysis places the domestic sports market at approximately US$8 billion in 2023, with a projected value of US$22.4 billion by 2030, within a regional sector growing at a projected 8.7% against a global average of 7.3%.[13] The Kingdom aims to raise the contribution of sport to gross domestic product from 2.4 billion Saudi riyals in 2016 to an estimated 18 billion Saudi riyals by 2030.[13, 14]

The pace of this growth has in parts exceeded the legal foundations on which the sector rested: the licensing of activities such as event staging, facility operation, academies, coaching and agency was handled through separate federation-level processes that varied from one federation to another; disciplinary and governance mechanisms were applied inconsistently; and no single instrument set out the rights of athletes and participants or the obligations of the bodies governing them.[2] The new Sports Law was designed to close that gap, and having been approved under Council of Ministers Decision No. 414 and Royal Decree No. M/121, and published in the Official Gazette on 12 December 2025, it took effect 180 days later in June 2026, with a transition period of one year during which existing entities are expected to bring themselves into compliance.[2, 15]

The Sports Law reform carries interest beyond the Kingdom's borders, since sport has become a recognised strand of the relationship between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia. Under the GREAT FUTURES campaign the two governments set a target of raising bilateral trade to £30 billion by 2030, from a figure exceeding £16 billion in 2024, and the campaign has included sport as one of its programme strands.[16, 17] The campaign convened a Saudi and British sport symposium in London in May 2025 under the title *Kingdoms of Champions,* and its closing conference in London in September 2025 was accompanied by a new strategic partnership aligning the United Kingdom's industrial strategy with Vision 2030.[16, 17] That the Saudi Sports Law should arrive in the same period

as the UNESCO Global Policy Standards, the first international policy standards for sport, provides an opportunity for the bilateral relationship in sport to further continue.

2. The UNESCO Global Policy Standards

In 2023, more than 110 governments attending the seventh International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport (MINEPS VII) in Baku, Azerbaijan, called upon UNESCO to develop global policy standards for safer, more inclusive and more equitable sport. This work has since been carried forward under UNESCO's Fit for Life Sport Alliance and through consultations with governments, researchers, athletes, and those affected by violence in sport.[18, 19] The resulting draft, the Global Policy Standards for Inclusive, Equitable and Safe Sport and Physical Education, is undergoing member state consultation during 2026 and is expected to be presented for endorsement at the eighth MINEPS conference (MINEPS VIII), scheduled for 2027 and hosted by Guatemala, at which point it would constitute the first suite of international policy standards for sport.[3, 4]

The intergovernmental committee steering the process, CIGEPS, comprises expert representatives of eighteen member states and is chaired for the 2026 to 2027 period by the Egyptian Minister of Youth and Sports, elected at the ordinary session held in Paris in June 2026.[20, 21] The United Kingdom is among the eighteen members of CIGEPS and holds a seat on the committee's Bureau, which gives British officials a formal position in advising on the drafting of a framework that Saudi Arabia will subsequently be measured against.[20]

The draft framework sets out twelve policy standards across four key policy areas, each aligned to a provision of UNESCO's International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport. Each policy standard is designed to range from a minimum standard level to an aspirational level of implementation and realisation.[4] The first policy area - the policy environment - covers political commitment, diversity in leadership, and inter-ministerial cooperation. The second - policy development - covers evidence-based policymaking, a participatory approach to the making of policy, and the content of policy itself. The third policy area - policy implementation - covers investment in its three aspects of budget, infrastructure and impact-based approaches, human capital in its two aspects of professional education and workforce diversity, and collective action in terms of partnerships, public awareness and the governance of major sporting events. The fourth and final policy area - policy evaluation - considers monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, data and knowledge, and reporting and follow-up.[4]

As previously mentioned, and to underscore the importance for global implementation, each policy standard has a minimum and an aspirational implementation requirement. At the minimum level member states are asked to undertake measures so that a policy, a strategy or a programme in the relevant area will satisfy base criteria of the standard. At the aspirational level member states are asked to systematise those measures and criteria through formal mechanisms, fully costed plans, quotas where appropriate, sustained monitoring, and independent review.[4] A country with strong political direction and substantial spending will therefore find most of the minimum standard requirements within reach. The aspirational standard requirements ask for formalised rules, regulations and legislation that are appropriately funded, and that their effectiveness is independently measured, evaluated and reported on.

3. A New Legal Architecture for Saudi Sport

The central achievement of the new Sports Law is the replacement of a fragmented set of decrees with a single legal architecture, applying to all sports entities (a defined term that captures the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, the federations, the sports clubs and leagues, and extends to facilities, centres, institutes, academies and schools, and to natural persons in the sport sector including players, coaches, referees, administrators, agents and media personnel).[22] Sport is broadly defined to cover recreational and competitive activity, and amateur as well as professional practice. As will be seen later in this paper, the Sports Law framework may apply unevenly to various levels of sport. [22]

Many sport entities in the Kingdom are not registered commercial companies but rather operate as either non-profit organisations or civil associations. Within the new Sports Law framework, each such entity must have a general assembly, a board of directors and an executive management function or secretariat. The framework also prescribes minimum contents of the articles of association, the composition and operation of boards, and the conduct of general assembly meetings - which must be held at least once each financial year. [22] Board members, together with the secretary-general or chief executive, may be liable to compensate the entity for losses caused by breaches of the law or the articles, or by error, negligence or default. Where more than one member is responsible, liability may be joint, although a member who recorded an objection to the relevant decision may avoid it.[22] Clubs and leagues may operate as non-profit institutions, or convert into commercial companies, with the approval of the Minister of Sport - a provision that opens the sector to structured private investment and brings the legal form of Saudi clubs closer to models common elsewhere.[1, 2] German football offers an example: since 1998, clubs there have been able to place their professional teams in limited or joint-stock companies, provided the members' association retains a majority of the voting rights.[51]

Alongside these governance requirements, the law establishes a detailed administrative system, starting with a unified licensing process that assigns each activity, including league administration, event organisation, facility operation, academies, coaching and sports agency, to the relevant authority. This replaces federation-level procedures with published templates, clear timelines and standardised requirements covering insurance, safety and accessibility.[2] Sport entity licences are recorded in a national register of entities, facilities and programmes maintained by the Ministry of Sport. The law provides for tiered public access to the register's data, intended to give organisers and investors an objective view of the market. The published commentary does not yet describe how such access will be tiered - a matter likely in the upcoming implementing regulations of the Sports Law. The register also carries a defined channel for appealing decisions taken through it.[2]

Sports disputes are directed to the Saudi Sports Arbitration Centre (SSAC), established in 2016, whose jurisdiction covers contractual disputes between clubs, athletes, coaches and agents, doping cases, commercial disputes over sponsorship and broadcasting, and appeals against the final decisions of federations and other sports bodies once their internal procedures have been exhausted.[23, 52] An athlete contesting a federation decision, such as a disciplinary sanction, would therefore use the federation's own appeal process before taking the case to the Centre. Selection disputes are not specified in the published material on the Sports Law, but since they would be appeals against the final decision of a sports body, it is assumed they would follow the same route. This mirrors the role of national sports tribunals elsewhere, with the Centre's decisions being final unless an international federation's statutes provide for appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.[52]

The law also treats an arbitration clause in a sports entity's articles of association as a written arbitration agreement in its own right, so that the members and officers of a club or federation whose articles contain such a clause are bound to take the disputes it covers to arbitration without each needing to sign a separate agreement.[22] Administrative violations of the law and its implementing regulations are handled separately, by a committee of inquiry within the Ministry of Sport, which can impose penalties and hear grievances against certain penalties imposed directly by the Ministry. The committee decides within published timelines, and its decisions can then be challenged in the courts.[2, 22] Ministry inspectors may visit entities and facilities to ensure compliance and gather evidence. Penalties for non-compliance with the law and its implementing regulations can reach 5 million Saudi riyals, and federations are given disciplinary powers over their members and licensees.[2, 22]

Two features of this legal architecture warrant particular notice, since both are relevant to the UNESCO Global Policy Standards requirements. The first is that anti-doping has been centralised under the Saudi Committee for Doping Control, an independent body authorised to issue rules, conduct testing and impose sanctions. This demonstrates that the Kingdom has already accepted, within its own sports system, the principle that certain functions are better discharged by an independent body or entity.[2] The second is that the Sports Law leaves much of its operational detail to the implementing regulations, which the Minister of Sport is still to issue.[53] These regulations will determine how the law's provisions on matters such as licensing, welfare and enforcement operate in practice, and at the time of writing in October 2026 they had not been issued.[2, 22] They are therefore the most immediate instrument through which the Sports Law framework could be extended, and their eventual content will determine how far the ambitions of the law are realised.

4. Athlete Welfare and the Safeguarding Question

Among the most notable features of the Sports Law is its treatment of athlete welfare, which is placed on a statutory footing for the first time through minimum standards. These standards cover medical care, injury management, insurance, and safe training and competition environments.[23] However, the obligations vary across the sector: The detailed duties on medical provision and insurance attach principally to clubs in respect of the players they engage (to standards the Ministry will prescribe), while every sports entity carries a general duty to take preventive measures to protect the health and safety of athletes and to provide a safe environment.[1, 23] The law also obliges the Ministry and sports entities to support persons with disabilities in practising sport and taking part in competitions, and to adapt facilities for full accessibility.[1] The Ministry is further required to coordinate with the General Organization for Social Insurance and the Insurance Authority in developing appropriate insurance products for players and coaches, distinguishing professional players engaged under paid contracts from amateurs. The Ministry must also prepare a draft regulation governing the contractual relationship between clubs and federations on one side and players and coaches on the other.[2] These provisions represent a considerable advance on the position preceding them, and they place the Kingdom within the broader international movement towards the codification of athlete welfare.

In the field of safeguarding in sport, the law is considerably more limited. Although it regulates sports academies and schools, and although the licensing regime includes coaching and academy operation, it does not set out explicit safeguarding provisions for

athletes or participants. The gap is sharpest for young athletes, since the law does not require background checks for personnel working with minors, reporting obligations for abuse, or welfare protections aligned with the frameworks of the leading international bodies.[2] This gap is not limited to minors: The research on interpersonal violence in sport is clear that safeguarding is needed for all participants, including adult elite and professional athletes, and the absence of any general safeguarding duty leaves adult athletes without statutory protection as well.[24] This review notes a parallel absence of provisions on match-fixing and the manipulation of competition results, an area addressed internationally through the Council of Europe Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions, known as the Macolin Convention.[2]

These gaps are key because the international understanding of safeguarding has moved beyond reacting to individual cases of abuse towards a holistic view of athlete welfare and the sport environment, as the consensus statement issued by the International Olympic Committee in 2024 makes clear. The IOC consensus statement was prepared by a fifteen-member expert panel drawing on a review of more than twenty-four thousand citations in nine languages. It sets out a socioecological model of interpersonal violence in sport and concludes that a whole-of-system approach is required, integrating the perspectives of athletes and of groups historically at greater risk.[24, 25] Football operates a comparable programme through FIFA Guardians, which sets minimum requirements on child safeguarding for all 211 member associations, provides for safe recruitment and screening procedures including criminal record declarations, and requires a designated safeguarding officer - obligations reinforced through the FIFA Forward development regulations.[26] Since the Saudi Arabian Football Federation is bound by those requirements as a member association, a safeguarding duty already reaches one Saudi sport, while the domestic statute leaves the remaining sport entities in the Kingdom to their own devices.

In comparison, the related field of doping is governed by a binding intergovernmental instrument, the International Convention against Doping in Sport, developed with UNESCO and adopted by its General Conference in 2005, in force since 2007 and now carrying 192 states parties (making it the second most widely ratified of all UNESCO treaties).[27] No comparable binding instrument exists for the safeguarding of athletes, where national responses remain uneven. The UNESCO Global Policy Standards now in preparation represent the first sustained attempt to establish a common benchmark in this field at the country level. The accompanying consultation with survivors and others affected by violence in sport, published jointly with the Sport and Rights Alliance, indicates the direction the standards and requirements of safe sport are likely to take.[19]

5. Women's Participation and Leadership

The development of women's sport in the Kingdom over recent years illustrates the clear pace of change but also the gap that remains. A decade ago, the formal structures of Saudi sport were effectively closed to women, with no officially sanctioned women's clubs and no national competitions, a position documented at the time by international observers and critics.[28] The subsequent change has been rapid, in that physical education was introduced into girls' state schools in 2017, stadiums were opened to women and families in 2018, and a series of women's competitions followed in short order:[29] A community football league was launched in 2020; the Saudi Arabian Football Federation established a Women's Premier League in the 2022 to 2023 season; and a women's national football team, first assembled in 2021, played its opening international in early 2022 and entered the FIFA world ranking for the first time in 2023.[30]

Alongside these elite structures participation has broadened at the grassroots and schools levels, with the first nationwide Schools League drawing almost fifty thousand girls in its 2019 inaugural season, and the figure now exceeding seventy thousand girls, supported by a workforce of more than one thousand coaches and trainers.[29, 30, 31] The proportion of women competing in the Riyadh Marathon rose from 18.7% in 2022 to 25.8% in 2026.[29, 31] The gap in general sport and physical activity participation nonetheless remains wide, with the 2025 statistical bulletin recording 43.1% of women reaching the minimum weekly activity threshold vs 66.5% of men.[11]

Positions of authority within the sport sector have also begun to be occupied by women, among them Adwa Al-Arifi, Assistant Minister for Sport Affairs at the Ministry of Sport. She co-founded the Kingdom's first women's football club, contributed to the establishment of the first women's national team and became the first Saudi woman appointed to the board of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation. Adwa Al-Arifi is also among five Saudi women named in the 2026 edition of an international list recognising those who shape women's sport through governance, investment and innovation.[32]

A mixed-methods study of Saudi women's participation in sport by Alsharif et al. (2026) drew on 138 survey responses and five semi-structured interviews to examine the structural and cultural obstacles that women face in sport. The study found health, fitness and self-fulfilment to be the principal motivations for taking part in sport, while identifying economic, institutional and moral constraints that continue to shape and limit women's access to it.[33] High membership fees, limited availability of enclosed facilities, and persistent gendered norms emerged as the main barriers, and a substantial proportion of respondents reported difficulty in finding qualified female trainers and coaches, which the study identifies as important to sustaining participation over time.[33] These findings indicate that the constraint on further growth lies in the supply of suitable and adequate facilities and qualified workforce rather than in formal permission, which is a different policy issue from the one the Kingdom faced a decade ago.

Regardless of progress, two structural issues remain. The first is that the Sports Law sets no requirement for the representation of women on the boards of sporting bodies and establishes no quota or comparable mechanism for such representation. The second is that the reach of reform into grassroots and regional sport is not documented in a form that allows progress to be assessed and monitored. The aspirational UNESCO Global Policy Standards on leadership diversity look for formal mechanisms, programmes or quotas subject to periodic update, and the aspirational standard on workforce diversity asks for costed mechanisms addressing recruitment, retention and professional engagement.[4] These are the areas in which the Kingdom's progress in women's sport will be tested.

6. Investment, Scale and the Value Question

The scale of Saudi investment in sport is not in question. What merits closer attention is where that investment is directed. Through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the Kingdom acquired the English Premier League club Newcastle United for a reported purchase price of £305 million and bought stakes in four domestic football clubs. The most conservative published estimate of the PIF’s spending on sport exceeds £2 billion, including the hosting of major events across golf, tennis, boxing and motorsport.[34] Domestic sport ownership has broadened further: Saudi Aramco, the state-controlled oil company, acquired the football club Al Qadsiah, while the Diriyah Gate Development Authority, the government body developing the historic district of Diriyah on the edge of Riyadh, acquired Diriyah

Club, a sports club founded there in 1976.[54, 55] Both transfers formed part of a wider privatisation of clubs intended to make them financially independent.[14]

Academic analysis of the effect on the domestic game requires a degree of caution. A study published in 2025 measured competitive balance in the Saudi Pro League across the ten seasons from 2014/2015 to 2023/2024, using an index of how concentrated league points are among clubs. It found that as the league has grown, points have become concentrated in fewer clubs, making results more predictable and potentially reducing the number of spectators or fans. The authors attribute this less to the inflow of capital and foreign players as such than to its concentration in a small number of teams.[35] Concentration of resources in a small number of state-backed clubs is a recognised risk of the model, and one the UNESCO Global Policy Standards touch upon indirectly through their treatment of investment and equity.

A notable shift has occurred recently with the PIF's investment in sport for the period from 2026 to 2030, approved by its board in April 2026. The PIF is moving from a phase of rapid growth and acceleration to what it describes as sustained value creation, with a declared emphasis on maximising impact, raising the efficiency of investments and applying the highest standards of governance, transparency and institutional excellence.[36] That reframing connects investment to governance, one of the three themes this report examines, since the UNESCO Global Policy Standards do not measure the volume of expenditure but instead its transparent allocation towards inclusive, equitable and safe sport, supported at the minimum level by costed implementation plans and at the aspirational level by monitored governance and accountability mechanisms, and requiring in addition that impact measurement methodologies inform investment decisions.[4] To date, there is no publicly disaggregated figure that identifies what the Kingdom spends on grassroots participation, women's sport, and safe sport compared to spends on elite sport and commercial sport assets. This will need to be remedied to come into alignment with the UNESCO Global Policy Standards.

7. Where the Kingdom Stands Against the Standards

Compared against the UNESCO Global Policy Standards area by area, the Kingdom's current system of sport governance misses a number of key opportunities for alignment and reaching the standards required. Within the policy environment, political commitment is strong, expressed through Vision 2030 and now through a law placing welfare, accessibility and anti-doping within statute. However, the minimum standard names alignment with UNESCO's International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport and the ratification of relevant international and regional human rights treaties as its reference point, an area on which the Kingdom's position is less settled.[4] Diversity in leadership falls at the minimum rather than the aspirational level, since measures and visible appointments exist, but formal mechanisms and quotas do not. Inter-ministerial cooperation is similarly placed, because the introduction of physical education in girls' state schools demonstrates the ad-hoc cooperation between the sport and education portfolios the minimum standard describes, while the standing centralised coordination mechanism sought at the aspirational level is not established by the law.

Within the area of policy development, the position is more mixed. Evidence-based policy-making is supported by the statistical bulletins of the General Authority for Statistics and by a growing domestic research base, of which the study by Alsharif et al. (discussed in section 5) is one instance, while the formal mechanism engaging academic institutions

and research bodies described at the aspirational level is not yet in place.[11, 33] The participatory approach is the weakest of the twelve standards, since it calls for the meaningful engagement of survivors of violence, of women, of persons with disabilities and of other under-represented groups in the making of policy, and the limited space available to independent civil society makes this the most difficult standard for the Kingdom to meet in the form it is presently drafted.[4] Policy content is closer to alignment, in that inclusion and safety appear as components of the new Sports Law through its welfare and accessibility provisions, while the concept of equity is less explicit.

Within the area of policy implementation, the Kingdom performs most strongly. Infrastructure and accessibility meet the minimum standards directly, since the law now requires entities to adapt facilities for physical and non-physical accessibility. Human capital is advancing with the licensing of coaches, referees and agents now standardised, and a women's coaching workforce is growing from a low base, but the workforce-diversity mechanisms sought at the aspirational level are absent.[2] Given the depth of the Kingdom's partnerships, the public awareness work undertaken through the Sports for All Federation and the hosting of the 2034 World Cup and the 2027 Asian Cup, collective action appears to be a relative strength. However, the policy standards judge major events by overall inclusion and the social legacy secured from the bidding stage onward - which still needs strengthening in the Kingdom.[4, 9, 12]

Within the area of policy evaluation, the Kingdom has the most distance to make up to come into alignment with the policy standards. Rather than focus on the impact of policy on inclusion, equity and safety, the Kingdom’s new Sports Law has focused on inspection powers and the committee of inquiry. While this is a genuine mechanism directed at compliance of sport entities with the law, it does not operationalise the systematic collection of nation-wide participation data disaggregated by sex, age and disability. The existing published baseline participation data varies in units of measurement and has been seemingly ad hoc. In addition to systematically collecting and publishing such data, the minimum standards will ask for independent reviews and multi-stakeholder working groups on policy evaluation - processes the Kingdom does not yet have in place. [4]

Table 1 illustrates this assessment and sets it alongside a comparable assessment of the United Kingdom, based on the evidence discussed in Section 8. Each standard is rated green where the minimum level is met and elements of the aspirational level are in place, amber where the minimum level is met but the formal mechanisms of the aspirational level are absent, and red where the evidence does not demonstrate that the minimum level is met and no mechanism for meeting it has been identified. Safeguarding is not a standalone standard in the current draft, but runs through policy content, monitoring and reporting, and is reflected in those rows. This may change with the eventual publishing of the finalised standards.

Table 1. Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom against the UNESCO Global Policy Standards

Policy area	Standard	Saudi Arabia	United Kingdom
Policy environment	Political commitment	**Amber.** Strong commitment through Vision 2030 and a law placing welfare, accessibility and anti-doping in statute. The minimum standard also references the ratification of human rights treaties, where the Kingdom's position is less settled.[4]	**Green.** National strategy, Get Active (2023), sets participation targets for adults and children to 2030.[62]
	Diversity in leadership	**Amber.** Visible appointments of women to senior roles, but no quota, target or formal mechanism for board representation.[32]	**Green.** Funding condition of at least 30% of each gender on funded boards since 2016, and published diversity and inclusion action plans required of Tier 3 bodies since 2021.[5, 42, 43]
	Inter-ministerial cooperation	**Amber.** Ad hoc cooperation between sport and education, shown by physical education in girls' state schools, but no standing coordination mechanism.[29]	**Amber.** A joint School Sport and Activity Action Plan agreed by the education, health and sport departments, updated in 2023, though coordination rests on a joint plan rather than a statutory coordinating body.[63]
Policy development	Evidence-based policymaking	**Amber.** Statistical bulletins from the General Authority for Statistics and a growing research base, without a formal mechanism engaging research institutions.[11, 33]	**Green.** The Active Lives survey has provided a consistent annual evidence base since 2015, and national strategy commits to evidence-based measures of success.[62, 64]
	Participatory approach	**Red.** Limited space for independent civil society, and no mechanism engaging survivors, women or persons with disabilities in the making of policy.[4]	**Amber.** An Athlete Advisory Forum shapes high-performance policy, and the 2025 Safe Sport consultation included people with lived experience of harm, but engagement is not yet systematic across policy.[7, 59]

Policy area	Standard	Saudi Arabia	United Kingdom
	Policy content	**Amber.** Inclusion and safety appear through welfare and accessibility provisions, while equity is less explicit and safeguarding provisions are absent.[1, 2]	**Amber.** Inclusion and inequality are central to national strategy, but the Safe Sport report found safeguarding regarded as fragmented and inconsistent, with adult safeguarding on a separate track from child protection.[58, 60, 64]
Policy implementation	Investment	**Amber.** Large-scale investment and accessible infrastructure required by law, but no costed plan or disaggregated figure for grassroots participation, women's sport and safeguarding.[2, 34]	**Green.** Public funding tied to governance conditions, and targeted funds addressing inequality, such as the £160 million Movement Fund.[5, 64]
	Human capital	**Amber.** Standardised licensing for coaches, referees and agents and a growing female coaching workforce, without costed workforce-diversity mechanisms.[2, 31]	**Amber.** Core standards for every coaching role and diversity action plan that extend to the wider workforce, though workforce-diversity mechanisms are less developed than those for boards.[38, 43]
	Collective action	**Amber.** Deep partnerships, public awareness work through the Sports for All Federation, and hosting of the 2027 Asian Cup and 2034 World Cup, but with inclusion and social legacy still to be demonstrated.[9, 12]	**Green.** A national awareness campaign on women's activity since 2015, and local delivery through a funded network of sport welfare officers embedded in Active Partnerships.[38, 45]
Policy evaluation	Monitoring and evaluation	**Red.** Inspection powers and a committee of inquiry test compliance with the law, not the impact of policy on inclusion, equity and safety.[2, 22]	**Amber.** An annual independent health check of every funded governing body against children's safeguarding standards and a separate adult framework, but no single system monitoring impact across sport.[40, 41, 58]

Policy area	Standard	Saudi Arabia	United Kingdom
	Data and knowledge	**Amber.** Baseline participation data published, but on definitions that have changed between surveys and without consistent disaggregation or actual informing of policy.[10, 11]	**Green.** Annual data on a stable measure since 2015, analysed by age, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic group, disability and place.[44, 64]
	Reporting and follow-up	**Red.** No independent review or multi-stakeholder working group, both of which the minimum standard names.[4]	**Amber.** Independent reviews and an independent disclosure and investigation service for safe sport, although the major reviews were commissioned after harm had occurred and no concrete evidence that these investigations have led to an effective policy change or improvement on lived experience.[7, 37, 38, 39]

Source: SBJBC assessment against the UNESCO draft of 7 July 2025.[4] Green: minimum level met, with elements of the aspirational level in place. Amber: minimum level met or within reach, aspirational mechanisms absent. Red: minimum level not met, with no mechanism yet in train.

8. The United Kingdom as the Principal Reference Point

Of the international jurisdictions available for comparison, the United Kingdom is one of the most useful for Saudi Arabia. The United Kingdom's own sporting system is far from perfect, although in safeguarding, governance and the reporting of outcomes it is considerably more developed than the current Saudi system. British practice in these areas reached its present form largely in response to failure, through a sequence of independent reviews commissioned after harm had already occurred. The Sheldon review of non-recent child sexual abuse in football, commissioned by the Football Association and published in March 2021, ran to more than seven hundred pages and found institutional failings for which it identified no excuse.[37] The Whyte review of British Gymnastics reported in 2022 after examining a body of complaints running into the thousands over the period from 2008 to 2020, and the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket reported in June 2023, drawing on more than four thousand responses and recommending, among forty-four measures, the establishment of a regulatory body separate from the organisation responsible for promoting the game.[38, 39] The British experience therefore offers Saudi two things at once: a detailed account of the mechanisms a mature system requires, and evidence of the cost of building those mechanisms retrospectively.

On safeguarding, the central institution is the Child Protection in Sport Unit (herein "Unit"), founded in 2001 as a partnership led by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children with the sports councils of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with a parallel arrangement in Scotland.[6] The organisation, which now operates as NSPCC Sport,

maintains a framework of national standards first published in 2002 and revised in 2018. The framework applies across all sports and at every level of participation and derives its force from the UK Government funding relationship, since the Code for Sports Governance requires funded governing bodies to adhere to those standards and the Unit conducts an annual health check of every national governing body, reporting the result back to UK Sport and Sport England.[40, 41] The standards of the Unit concern children only. The safeguarding of adults runs through the Ann Craft Trust's Safeguarding Adults in Sport Framework, which bodies funded by Sport England and UK Sport in England have been required to complete since April 2022.[58] The current distinction between child and adult safeguarding is of particular relevance as the Safe Sport report published by the five UK sports councils in June 2025 found the safeguarding in sport landscape across the UK to be fragmented and inconsistent. This finding led to a recommendation to create a single UK-wide framework led by a new independent body, with a feasibility phase due to have concluded in spring 2026 (yet still ongoing at time of publication). [59, 60]

The architecture built after the Whyte review is of more immediate relevance still, because it provides the independent element the UNESCO Global Policy Standards ask for. Sport England and UK Sport adopted nineteen policy commitments in January 2023 from the Whyte review spanning coaching, athlete support, governance, dispute resolution and safer environments.[38] Among those commitments, Sport Integrity, an independent disclosure and investigation service, has become mandatory for every governing body funded by UK Sport. Moreover, the Safeguarding Case Management Programme operating with Sport Resolutions has since 2019 provided expert support to close to fifty governing bodies, a national network of sixty-three sport welfare officers has been funded to support practice at local level, and every governing body in receipt of significant UK Government investment is now required to have a board lead for welfare and safety.[7] Significant investment in this context means Tier 3 funding under the Code for Sports Governance - generally multi-year funding for a continuing activity with a total value above £1 million.[56, 57] These arrangements provide, in operational form, the independent review that the reporting standard of the UNESCO Global Policy Standards names at its minimum level, together with the case management capacity a safeguarding duty requires in order to function.[4]

On governance and the diversity of leadership, the key policy document is the Code for Sports Governance, published by UK Sport and Sport England in 2016 and revised in 2021, which applies in three tiers calibrated to the scale of public funding an organisation receives.[5] The 2016 edition required funded organisations to adopt a target of a minimum of 30% of each gender on their boards, a benchmark met by around three-quarters of funded bodies within two years, with the average board of a surveyed organisation comprising 40% women. The 2021 revision went further, requiring organisations in the highest tier (tier 3) to produce a detailed diversity and inclusion action plan covering boards, senior leadership and the wider organisation, to agree that plan and its progress with the funder, to review it at least annually and to publish it.[42, 43] Read against the UNESCO Global Policy Standards, this arrangement corresponds closely to the aspirational level of the leadership diversity standard requirements, which look for formal mechanisms, programmes or quotas subject to periodic update, and to reporting of workforce diversity and standards.[4] The Code operates through conditions attached to public funding rather than through primary legislation, similar to the sport entity licensing conditions available to the Saudi Ministry of Sport.

When it comes to women's participation in sport and physical activity, the British and Saudi systems have had to address similar problems, albeit Britain has had a head start. The Active Lives survey for the year ending November 2025 reported that 64.4% of adults in England (67% for men, 62% for women) met the Chief Medical Officer's guideline of 150 minutes of moderate activity each week. While this was the highest figure yet recorded, 24.7% of adults were still classified as inactive. [44] Despite these figures, Sport England's own research identifies a persistent gender gap in activity levels, finding fewer women to be regularly active than men, and have run a national public awareness campaign on this issue since 2015. [45] For Saudi, the British example is most useful as evidence of interventions that have positively addressed the gender participation gap rather than as a standard already achieved.

For a bilateral organisation such as the Saudi British Joint Business Council (SBJBC), the comparisons and conclusions drawn from the evidence set out in this paper demonstrate an opportunity for continued collaboration and partnership between the Kingdom and Britain on sport policy and related frameworks. Three elements of the current British sports governance model transfer readily to the gaps identified in that of the Kingdom's: published benchmarks on sport and physical activity participation (disaggregated by sex, age and disability), an independent body receiving disclosures of harm and conducting assessments and investigations, and a funding system which holds sport bodies accountable to upholding the Code for Sports Governance (including decisions about cases of harm in sport). Each of these three elements has a potential counterpart available within the Saudi framework and new Sports Law regulations - which have not yet been published. The Saudi and British sport symposium held in London in May 2025 under the GREAT FUTURES campaign established a forum through which an exchange of this kind could be pursued.[16]

9. Regional Reference Points

As regional comparisons, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have undergone similar modernisation of their sports governance systems in the past few years. Federal Law No. 4 of 2023 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sets out principles of governance and integrity, provides for participation of all without discrimination, and makes specific provisions for people of determination (the term used in the UAE for persons with disabilities). The law operates alongside a national sports strategy running to 2031, and a sports arbitration centre established in 2016.[46, 47, 61] Qatar built considerable event and legacy capacity around its hosting of the 2022 World Cup, including programmes designed to bring girls between the ages of twelve and sixteen into structured sport, having established its first women's national football team in 2010.[48, 49] Both jurisdictions position sport within a national development vision on the Saudi model, and consultancy analysis identifies this comprehensiveness of public direction as a regional characteristic.[13] The Saudi Sports Law is more recent than the UAE's and wider in commercial scope than either neighbour's framework.

10. Recommendations

To close the gap between the UNESCO Global Policy Standards as drafted, and the current framework of sport policy in Saudi as set out by the new Sports Law and upcoming regulations of the law, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Defining and implementing regulations of the Sports Law.** The most immediate recommendation is to draft, define and implement the regulations of the new Sports Law. As the licensing pathways of the Sports Law already reach academies, schools, facilities and individual coaching and agency roles, and admission requirements cover insurance, safety and universal access, the regulations would provide a mechanism for safe sport conditions without requiring additional legislation. At the point of licensing, regulations could provide for the requirement to conduct background checks on personnel working with minors, and with adult athletes in elite and professional settings, a designated safeguarding officer at all licensed entities of a designated size, and a duty to report abuse of participants of any age. Such regulations would raise all sport entities to the level of safeguarding already required of Saudi football clubs through the FIFA Guardians programme and obligations.

2. **Establishing an independent mechanism or body for safeguarding in sport.** The UNESCO Global Policy Standards set the requirement for an independent mechanism or body to receive and deal with complaints and reports of abuse and maltreatment in sport. Saudi already has an established domestic precedent in the Saudi Committee for Doping Control, which establishes rules, conducts testing, and sanctions doping infractions and violations independent from the entities it regulates. [2, 4] Extending this model to safeguarding in sport, whether through a dedicated body or through an independently contracted partner to assess sport entities against published safe sport standards, to receive and investigate reports of abuse, and to issue appropriate sanctions, would address the single largest sport policy gap identified in this report. The British example of an assessing partner and a case management service offers a tested template, albeit one with room to advance and improve.[7, 41]

3. **Board-level requirements and quotas on female representation for leadership and workforce.** Regulations to the new Sports Law on board-level requirements or published targets and quotas for the representation of women in sport entities, together with recruitment and retention measures for the coaching officiating workforce would move Saudi from the minimal to aspirational level of standards as set by the UNESCO Global Policy Standards framework. The British experience indicates that a numerical target attached to mandatory funding conditions produce measurable progress within a few years, especially when paired with published and public action plans. [5, 42] Research on the barriers facing Saudi women points to the same conclusion, since participants themselves have identified a shortage of qualified female coaches as one of the constraints on their participation in sport and physical activity. [33]

4. **Systematic collection and publication of disaggregated participation data.** The UNESCO Global Policy Standards as drafted require formalised processes and mechanisms for the systematic collection and reporting of sex, age, disability and regionally disaggregated data on participation in sport and physical activity. Establishing such defined parameters to data collection would allow for consistent comparison across time, removing the ambiguity that is currently present in the public record, and provides a baseline on which all other standards could be assessed. The national register created by the new Sports Law offers a foundation for such an exercise as it already requires the collection of sport entity, facility and programme data with tiered public access. [2] The regulations to the Sports Law could build upon these established requirements, allowing for proper policy evaluation, and paving the

way for increased inter-ministerial collaboration on sport policy within related policy areas.

5. **Published and transparent budget allocation to inclusive, equitable and safe sport.** The UNESCO Global Policy Standards require the published and transparent budget allocations and costed implementation plans demonstrating allocation of funds and resources to inclusive, equitable and safe sport at the national level, as a minimum standard. Publicly transparent expenditure on grassroots participation, women's sport and safeguarding implementation separate from elite and commercial investment in sport would meet the minimum standard in Saudi if these were included in the Sports Law regulations. This would then align with the PIF's own stated emphasis on governance and transparency for the period to 2030. [4, 36]

6. **Saudi's involvement in consultation and piloting of UNESCO Global Policy Standards.** As the UNESCO Global Policy Standards remain in draft, member states will be asked to provide feedback and consultations that shape the framework. This work is currently underway as the Standards will be presented to Sports Ministers at MINEPS VIII scheduled for the second half of 2027. [3, 4] Early and substantive engagement, including consideration of whether Saudi Arabia could or would volunteer to pilot one or more of the standards, would allow it to influence the drafting of the Global Policy Standards rather than be held to a finished text. This would not only demonstrate the substantial growth and maturity of Saudi's sport sector but allow for a new voice and geographic jurisdiction in modernising and promoting a fair and equitable global sport environment, taking the lead from more traditional jurisdictions like the United Kingdom.

11. Conclusion

The new Sports Law establishes a foundation of considerable substance, consolidating the governance of the sport sector, placing athlete welfare and accessibility within statute, creating a sport entity licensing pathway and national register of considerable detail, and giving Saudi sport a single legal architecture for the first time in almost forty years. Measured against the UNESCO Global Policy Standards, the new Sports Law advances considerably in political commitment, investment and infrastructure, reaching the minimum threshold in several areas. Unfortunately, the Kingdom still falls short in the safeguarding of athletes, children and adults alike, in participatory policymaking and in consistent and independent reporting on outcomes. The immediate test is the development and implementation of regulations that will give the law a practical effect, and alignment with the UNESCO Global Policy Standards themselves, which are expected to be presented to ministers at MINEPS VIII in 2027.[3]

For the relationship between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, the interval between now and MINEPS VIII in 2027 represents a unique opportunity, in that the area in which the Saudi framework is least developed (safe sport) is one in which British practice is more established and currently undergoing systemic revisions and improvements. Since the United Kingdom's most developed benchmark concerns children, the UK sports councils are now working towards a single framework for all participants following the Safe Sport report of 2025.[40, 58, 59] However, the British example lies in the mechanism carrying its standards, combining an independent assessing partner, a published benchmark, and a mandatory funding condition giving the assessment force. Collaboration between Saudi and Britain on safeguarding systems, on the education of coaches and officials, and on

independent case management would address the clearest gaps identified in this report, would draw on a symposium and a partnership already established between the two countries, and would align the Kingdom more closely with the upcoming UNESCO Global Policy Standards.

About Global Sports Policy

Global Sports Policy Ltd is a UK-based consultancy providing sport policy advice, research and advocacy to governments, national and international governing bodies of sport, private organisations, and international sport and human rights organisations. Its work covers safe sport and safeguarding, gender equality and equity, governance and accountability, anti-doping and wider sport integrity, team selection and eligibility, athlete agreements and the benchmarking of best practice. Global Sports Policy Ltd is guided by the principle that athlete wellbeing should sit at the centre of policy development. The company also developed and runs the Global Sport Policy Tracker, whose first datasets record the gender participation policies of the International Sport Federations, and gender-based violence policies and legislation related to sport.

The company was founded by its Director, Emily Cameron-Blake, a former member of the Canadian National Rowing Team who holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of Oxford and is a doctoral candidate at the University of Edinburgh, where her research examines the duty of care owed to elite and professional athletes. She has advised UNESCO, UN Women, the UK and Canadian governments and governing bodies of sport in the Middle East, is a member of UNESCO’s Global Safe Sport Taskforce, and sits on the board of WomenSport International, where she leads its policy and advocacy work with UNESCO and other UN agencies.

Glossary

Active Lives. Sport England's survey of sport and physical activity among adults aged sixteen and over in England, established in November 2015 and now reported annually.

Ann Craft Trust. The organisation that provides specialist safeguarding support for adults to the sport and physical activity sector in the UK and operates the Safeguarding Adults in Sport Framework bodies funded by Sport England and UK Sport must complete.

CIGEPS. The Intergovernmental Committee for Physical Education and Sport, a UNESCO committee of eighteen member states that is supporting the development of the UNESCO Global Policy Standards.

Code for Sports Governance. The governance code launched by UK Sport and Sport England in 2016 and revised in 2021, compliance with which is a receiving relevant UK Government and National Lottery funding, and which applies in three tiers according to the scale of that funding.

FIFA Guardians. The child safeguarding programme of FIFA, the world governing body of football, which provides safeguarding standards and toolkits for its 211 member associations.

Fit for Life Sport Alliance. UNESCO's global partnership initiative using sport to advance inclusive, equitable and safe sport and physical education, under whose framework the UNESCO Global Policy Standards are being developed.

General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT). The Saudi national statistics body, which publishes the Kingdom's participation data, including the physical activity bulletin cited in this report.

GREAT FUTURES. The UK government campaign, launched in Riyadh in 2024, that promotes partnership between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia across sectors including trade, investment and sport.

International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport. UNESCO's charter recognising the practice of physical education, physical activity and sport as a fundamental right for all and providing a key normative foundation for the UNESCO Global Policy Standards.

Macolin Convention. The Council of Europe Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions, the principal international treaty on match-fixing.

MINEPS. The International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport, convened by UNESCO. MINEPS VII was held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2023, and MINEPS VIII is scheduled for 2027.

Minimum and aspirational levels. The two levels at which the draft UNESCO Global Policy Standards are expressed. The minimum level identifies the basic policy, strategy or programme expected in each area, while the aspirational level sets out more developed arrangements, including formal, costed, monitored and independently reviewed mechanisms.

NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU). The current name of the Child Protection in Sport Unit, founded in 2001 by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children with the sports councils, which maintains the national standards for safeguarding children in sport.

People of determination. The term used by the United Arab Emirates Government for people with disabilities.

Public Investment Fund (PIF). The sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia.

Quality of Life Programme. One of the Vision Realisation Programmes through which Vision 2030 is delivered, launched in 2018 to widen participation in sport, culture, entertainment and tourism.

RAG rating. The red, amber and green classification used in Table 1 to show how far each standard is met.

Safe Sport report. The 2025 report produced through a UK-wide sports sector project involving the five Sports Councils, UK Sport and national governing bodies, which set out five recommendations for a comprehensive and integrated approach to safeguarding in sport across the United Kingdom.

Safeguarding. The policies, procedures and practices used by sports organisations to protect participants of all ages from harm, abuse and neglect, covering prevention, reporting and the management of cases.

Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF). The national governing body for football in Saudi Arabia and a member association of FIFA.

Saudi Arabian Anti-Doping Committee (SAADC). A non-governmental body with legal personality that, under the Sports Law, acts independently to set anti-doping rules, conduct testing and, through its Hearing Panel, impose sanctions.

Saudi Sports Arbitration Centre (SSAC). The specialist body, established in 2016, that resolves sports disputes in Saudi Arabia by arbitration and mediation, including appeals against the final decisions of sports bodies.

Sport England and UK Sport. The public bodies responsible for investing in sport and physical activity in England and for supporting high-performance sport across the United Kingdom, respectively.

Sport Integrity. The independent and confidential reporting and investigation service supporting athletes, coaches and other personnel within the UK Olympic and Paralympic high-performance system, including UK Sport-funded programmes.

Sport Resolutions. The independent dispute-resolution service for sport in the United Kingdom, which provides arbitration, mediation, investigation and safeguarding services, including the Safeguarding Case Management Programme for participating National Governing Bodies.

Sports entity. The defined term in the Sports Law covering the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, federations, clubs, leagues, facilities, centres, institutes, academies and schools.

Tier 3. The highest tier of the Code for Sports Governance, generally applied to multi-year public funding for a continuing activity with a total value above £1 million.

UNESCO Global Policy Standards. The Global Policy Standards for Inclusive, Equitable and Safe Sport and Physical Education, a framework currently being developed by UNESCO to guide national governments in preventing harm, promoting accountability and ensuring dignity, inclusion and safety in sport and physical education. The final draft is expected to be presented for endorsement at MINEPS VIII in 2027

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