



المركز الوطني للدراسات والبحوث الاجتماعية
National Center for Social Studies (NCSS)

Women's participation in physical activity in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) - findings from a rapid review

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Qualitative research in changing times

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Background - the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

- KSA is undergoing a rapid transformation, and has an ambitious blueprint for change - “Vision 2030”
- Focus on a thriving economy, an ambitious nation and a vibrant society
 - A healthier lifestyle among citizens
- Vision 2030 targets include increasing the number of regular practitioners of sports and exercise to over 40% exercising at least once a week by 2030



<https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>



Context

Concerns about low levels of physical activity and rising levels of obesity in the Kingdom

- 2019 World Health Survey - 81% of Saudi respondents were insufficiently active

Levels of physical activity are lower among females

- 2015: 16% (15+) exercise at least 150 minutes a week - 7% of females (GSTAT 2015)
- 2019: 22% exercising at least 150 minutes a week - 12% of females (GSTAT 2019)
- 2021: 31% exercising at least 150 minutes a week - 21% of females (GSTAT 2021)
- Women - predominantly walking

Progress made already.....

- Saudi women represented in the 2012 Olympics for the first time
- Introduction of physical education programs in public schools from 2017
- Licensing of women's fitness centers from 2017
- Access to sports stadiums for females from 2018
- Establishment of the Sports for All Federation to promote physical activity
- Female golf clubs, women's football leagues, self-defense etc.

Method - Rapid Review

Also referred to
as a **Rapid
Evidence
Assessment** or
**Rapid Evidence
Review**

Approach taken
from the more
systematic
Evidence Review

Uses a
predefined set of
search criteria,
documented in a
review protocol

Conducted
rapidly - useful
for policy makers

How do Rapid Reviews differ from Systematic Reviews?

‘... systematically search for, appraise and synthesis research evidence... adhering to the guidelines on the conduct of a review provided by the Cochrane Collaboration’ (Grant & Booth, 2022)

Systematic Reviews



‘... critical evaluations of material that has already been published regardless of the type of study design’ (Palmatier et al, 2018)

Rapid Reviews



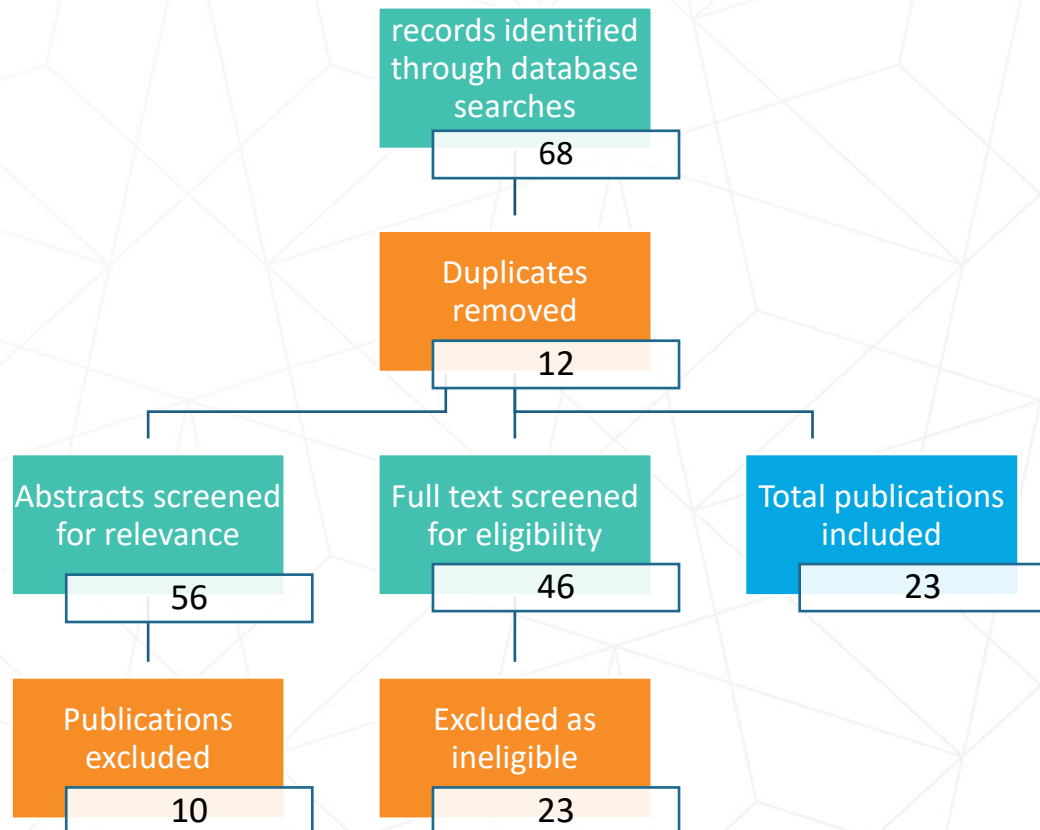
Summary of the Rapid Review stages

1. Define the research question
2. Set up search parameters
3. Agree search tools, run searches
4. Review results (summaries/abstracts); refine inclusion/exclusion criteria
5. Finalize review protocol
6. Retrieve/review full documents
7. Synthesize evidence, write report

Example Rapid Review protocol

| | |
|---|--|
| The research question | <p><i>Use SMART or PICO objectives to write a clearly defined research question or topic</i></p> <p>Adult female participation in physical activity and recreational sports in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – barriers and enablers to increasing weekly participation in physical activity and sports</p> |
| The client | <p><i>Who is the research being done for?</i></p> <p>NCSS Internal Research project</p> |
| Years in scope | <p><i>What years are we including and excluding in our search?</i></p> <p>From 2016 to current 2021</p> |
| Countries | <p><i>What countries are we including or excluding and why</i></p> <p>Include other middle eastern countries for comparison/review of other successful initiatives</p> |
| Languages | <p><i>What languages are we including?</i></p> <p>English only</p> |
| Search tools and databases | <p><i>What databases or search tools are we proposing to use?</i></p> <p>Google scholar</p> |
| Type of literature (eg published only? Peer reviewed? Including grey literature?) | <p><i>Are we only looking for articles that are published in journals, or other types of output (eg non peer reviewed research reports)?</i></p> <p>Published articles only, but including PhD and similar thesis</p> |
| Types of research to include (quant, qual, all) | <p><i>Are we only interested in random control trials, or non random studies, or qualitative research?</i></p> <p>Any</p> |
| Population groups | <p><i>What is are target group (eg how are we defining children, or young people, or adults)? Are we only interested in the community, or also in professional views/experiences/voices?</i></p> <p>Female adults aged 18+, include views of sports teachers too</p> |
| Search terms and definitions | <p><i>Agree the different search terms and search phrases to be used</i></p> <p>Female, women Sports, exercise, fitness, physical activity Participation, involvement Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Middle East, Saudi</p> |

Rapid Review search results



- Very limited primary research in the Kingdom on this topic
- Most were university-based
- Small non-random samples, unrepresentative
- Some only available in Arabic

Ergo....

- Results highlight the barriers and enablers, but do not provide prevalence
- Results are thus limited, but identify the need for additional primary research

Findings: barriers identified

Individual

Socio-economic & cultural

Environmental

Policy

Barriers to physical activity for females - key themes



Individual barriers

Confidence, self-esteem and a desire to maintain modesty

Low priority - Household Sports Practice Survey (2019) indicated 43% of females had a general unwillingness or lack of desire to exercise (plus family priorities)

- Second most common reason was lack of time - 24% of females

Legacy of Covid restrictions

Low awareness of benefits of exercise/risk of not exercising

Low awareness of exercise opportunities available for women

But, Fitness Time (largest gym chain the Kingdom) recently reported rise in profits, suggesting attendance on the increase

Socio-economic and cultural barriers

Cost may be a factor - cost of gym membership can be prohibitive for some (estimated barrier for 40% of females)

Some evidence to suggest a few have beliefs that disallow women do physical exercise (although no evidence in the Qur'an)

Preserving female modesty (abaya, hijab) - limited availability of suitable clothing for Muslim women

Limited social networks (but preference to exercise with friends)

Lack of family support or encouragement

Few female role models in the Kingdom

Environmental barriers

Childcare - limited availability and high cost

Transport - many Saudi women still do not drive, public transport non-existent

- Survey indicates 22% cited location of facilities a barrier (10% for males)

Insufficient or unsuitable facilities

- Aesthetics unsuitable (eg gym at university seen as not private enough)

Shortage of female trainers

Weather!

Policy issues

Education

- Insufficient emphasis on sport/physical activity (for example at schools and in universities)
- Public schools' lack of facilities/activities for females

Urban Planning

- Research shows physical environment is very important for Saudi women - privacy, male only areas, shade, restrooms
- Some urban planning has Western design principles

Summary and implications

Complex and inter-related factors

- Environmental, socio-cultural, family, societal norms
- ‘whole of government’ approach needed to barriers and enabling factors

Raising awareness

- Targeted social media campaigns, role models
- Mapping of available services, raising awareness of options
- Awareness of importance of exercise for physical and mental health
- Health and education professionals as educators

Improving availability and access

- Transport, childcare, locations (workplaces, urban spaces)
- Affordability - parity in costs with male gyms

Use of Rapid Review method

- Useful as very limited research evidence available for KSA, but
- Hard to apply quality criteria to sources
- Studies published in Arabic only were not accessed

Next steps - further research

- Greater understanding of interplay of determinants of health for Saudi women
- Cultural norms - attitudes, beliefs, family dynamics
- Rapid Reviews as a method are underused in KSA - but useful for policy makers in areas of rapid development

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Thank You

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