

Pacific Island Women and Contested Sporting Spaces

This book focuses on the variety of strategies developed by women athletes in the Pacific Islands to claim contested sporting spaces – in particular, rugby union, soccer, beach volleyball, recreational sports and exercise – as a prism to explore grassroots women’s engagement with heavily entrenched postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy.

Based on primary research conducted in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, the book investigates contested sporting spaces as sites of infrapolitics intersected primarily by gender and also by other markers of inequality, including ethnicity, sexuality, class and geopolitics. Contrary to historical and contemporary representations of Pacific Island women as victims of gender injustice, it explores how these athletes and those who support them actively carve out space for their transformative agency.

Pacific Island Women and Contested Sporting Spaces: Staking Their Claim focuses on a region underexamined by sport or gender studies researchers and will be of key interest to scholars and students in Gender Studies, Sport Studies, Sociology and Pacific Studies as well as sport practitioners and policymakers.

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To all Pacific Island women claiming their spaces in sport and beyond

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BNPL	Basic Needs Poverty Line
COVID-19	Corona virus disease
CSO	Civil society organisation
DIVA for Equality	Diverse Voices and Action for Equality
FBS	Fiji Bureau of Statistics
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
FIVB	Fédération Internationale de Volleyball
FRU	Fiji Rugby Union
FWCC	Fiji Women's Crisis Centre
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LBT	Lesbian, bisexual and transgender
MHMS	Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Solomon Islands
MWCSD	Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development
NCD	Non-communicative disease
OFC	Oceania Football Confederation
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights
PE	Physical education
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RFMF	Republic of Fiji Military Forces
RWC	Rugby World Cup
SNHRI	Samoa National Human Rights Institution
SOO	Samoa Office of the Ombudsman
SBS	Samoa Bureau of Statistics
SIFF	Solomon Islands Football Federation
SINSO	Solomon Islands National Statistics Office
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
UN	United Nations

x *Acronyms and Abbreviations*

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VNCW	Vanuatu National Council of Women
VNSO	Vanuatu National Statistics Office
VVF	Vanuatu Volleyball Federation
VWC	Vanuatu Women's Centre

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1 Introduction

We love the game; we love the sport. Love who we are when we are in that space.

Sport research and Pacific Island women

This book is about sporting women of the Pacific Islands. Their intersecting stories of struggle, hope and triumph emerge from their native lands across a vast ocean, home to over 25,000 islands (Hall, 2017). An estimated 11 million people live in the sublime Pacific Islands region of 22 countries and territories,¹ where more than a thousand languages are spoken and extraordinary socio-cultural and geographical diversity is found (Firth, 2018; J. Lynch, 1998; Pacific Community, 2020). The island communities are uniquely and deeply embedded in voyaging heritage and cultures of reciprocity, interconnectedness, kinship, spirituality, performance and storytelling, among other things, which weave them together as a region termed a ‘sea of islands’ by renowned Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa (1993). The contemporary Pacific is also profoundly shaped by histories of colonisation (most explicitly between the 19th century and the second half of the 20th century) and ongoing decolonisation, as well as rapid social change, transnationalism and global capitalism. The complex dynamics of the socio-cultural and politico-economic lives of the island peoples have attracted the attention of a great many anthropologists, geographers, historians, Pacific studies and development studies scholars and other social scientists (D’Arcy, 2011; Firth, 2003; Hviding, 2003; Wesley-Smith, 2016).

Despite the vast scholarship about the region, Pacific peoples’ relationship with sport is a relatively recent area of research inquiry and policy focus. It emerged partly in response to the remarkable reputation that Fijian, Samoan and Tongan men, including those in the diaspora, have earned in professional rugby union and rugby league (and in American football in the case of Samoans and Tongans). Pacific Islanders are ‘ubiquitous’ in international rugby today (Chatham House, 2022). According to a sports commentator: ‘If you can think of a professional rugby team that hasn’t benefited from a Pacific Islands player, then you’ll be in a minority’ (Williams, 2021). Fiji, Samoa and Tonga reportedly account for nearly a quarter of all professional

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rugby union players (McMorran, 2020). Over 45% of National Rugby League players in Australia and New Zealand are of Pacific Island descent (Anderson, 2020). In the United States, Samoans have become the most disproportionately overrepresented ethnic group in the National Football League (Ruck, 2018). Pursuit of success in these global sports² has come to assume many meanings for Pacific peoples ‘as a counterrepresentation to persistent stereotypes, as a proud representation of a nation, as an alternative pathway toward a promised future, and as a site of cultural resurgence’ (Uperesa and Mountjoy, 2014, p. 265), even if it is indelibly conditioned by geopolitical disparity and neoliberal precarity (Besnier, 2014a,b; Guinness, 2018; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2014; Mackay and Guinness, 2019).

Sport has also become a public policy matter in the region. The socio-economic potential of sport demonstrated by rugby, combined with widely recognised health and wellbeing benefits of sport and physical activity, has heightened policymakers’ interest in ‘sport for development’ as island nations tackle youth unemployment, endemic non-communicable diseases and other development challenges. The 2019 Pacific Islands Sports Ministers Meeting promoted the role of sport in ‘all SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], particularly in relation to healthy lifestyle choices; gender equality; job creation; empowerment of individuals; promotion of national unity and identity; and traditional knowledge’ (Government of Samoa, 2019). Among donor countries, Australia, in particular, has actively sought soft power in the region through ‘sports diplomacy’ entailing considerable investment in sport-for-development programmes (Australia Government, 2019; Henne and Pape, 2018).

Pacific sport research literature emerged over the past decade against the backdrop of these developments. Not surprisingly, Fijian, Samoan and broader Pacific Island engagement with rugby (union and league) has attracted the greatest interest. Anthropologists and sport scholars have studied, through rugby, sporting expressions and dynamics of: masculinity and masculinism (Besnier and Brownell, 2016; Hawkes, 2018; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c; Presterudstuen, 2010; Presterudstuen and Schieder, 2016); indigeneity (Clément, 2014; Guinness, 2018; Presterudstuen, 2010; Presterudstuen and Schieder, 2016); ethnicity, identity and nation (Grainger, 2006; Guinness, 2018; Guinness and Besnier, 2016; Horton, 2014; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013ab,c, 2014; Schieder, 2012; Sugden, 2021; Sugden et al., 2020); and athlete mobility and global inequality (Besnier, 2014a,b; Guinness and Hecht, 2021; Horton, 2012, 2014; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013a,b, 2014; Lakisa, Adair and Taylor, 2014; Lakisa, et al., 2019; Mackay and Guinness, 2019; Schieder, 2014; Schieder and Presterudstuen, 2014). Overlapping themes are found in emergent research about Polynesian men in American football (Beissel, 2020; Franks, 2009; Tengan and Markham, 2009; Uperesa, 2014, 2018, 2022). Besides these conspicuous professional sports, researchers have started to explore aspects of association football (better known as soccer in the region) in Fiji (James and Nadan, 2021; Prasad, 2008; Sugden, 2021), Solomon

Islands (Mountjoy, 2014) and Vanuatu (Kobayashi, Nicholson and Hoye, 2011), reflecting the game's great popularity and social significance in the Melanesian nations. A regional body of sport-for-development literature is also growing. Researchers have begun to examine the outcomes and challenges of, and power relations underlying, Northern-funded/designed programmes in the Pacific (e.g., Devine, et al., 2017; Henne, 2017; Henne and Pape, 2018; Khoo, Schulenkorf and Adair, 2016; Kwauk, 2016; Lucas and Jeanes, 2019; Misener and Schulenkorf, 2016; Rikis et al., 2019; Schulenkorf and Siefken, 2018; Schulenkorf, Sugden and Sugden, 2016; Sherry, et al., 2017).

These studies constitute an 'important but underdeveloped body of critical scholarship on sport in the Pacific' (Uperesa and Mountjoy, 2014, p. 264). Their immense value must be emphasised, especially in the context of the geopolitics of knowledge production that has long marginalised Southern voices in sport research. Pacific peoples were seldom represented in sport research literature until recent decades, and the growing regional scholarship challenges this neglect in significant ways. At the same time, much of the current work captures the most salient characteristics, processes and dynamics of the region's most salient sports. In doing so, it is overwhelmingly concerned with, and thereby inadvertently reproduces, the hegemonic configuration of Pacific Island sports: the primacy of men's professional sports. This is reflected in the composition of the two relevant anthologies published to date. The great majority of the contributions to *The Contemporary Pacific* journal's special issue 'Global Sport in the Pacific' (Uperesa and Mountjoy, 2014) focus implicitly or explicitly on male athletes in rugby union, rugby league, American football and soccer. The edited volume *Sport in the Pacific* (King, 2014) centres on Polynesian and Aboriginal male athletes in rugby union, American football, Australian rules football and other sports in metropolitan locations. Gendered gaps are also found in the regional sport-for-development literature. While the 'empowerment' of girls and women is cited as a primary goal of many sport-for-development programmes, few Pacific-based studies offer in-depth analysis of this dimension or take account of the voices of the girls and women targeted by such programmes (see, for notable exceptions, Henne, 2017; Henne and Pape, 2018; Rikis, et al., 2019).

Thus, Pacific women, along with Pacific Islanders with disabilities, of minority ethnicities and in less prominent sports and 'traditional' sports,³ have so far largely escaped the attention of sport researchers. As the following chapters show (see also Underhill-Sem, et al., 2016), broader questions of gender relations in the region, and in particular, women's political agency in neo-traditional patriarchal settings, have been studied widely by anthropologists and other researchers. Yet, within the domain of sport discourses, women are peculiarly absent, which illustrates how heavily gendered the dominant understandings of Pacific physicality and physical cultures have been. In reality, Pacific Island women have always contested their place in sport as they do in other social domains. This has only recently begun to be documented. We are starting to hear, through emergent research, the voices of

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women rugby union players in Fiji (Kanemasu, 2022; Kanemasu and Johnson, 2019; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2017, 2019, 2020; Kanemasu, Johnson and Molnar, 2019; Senibua, 2017; Vuli, 2022). There is also exploratory research that sheds light on Indo-Fijian women's (Balrum, 2022, Balrum, Pang and Knijnik, 2022; Kanemasu, 2019; Sugden, Kanemasu and Adair, 2019) and Samoan women's (Schuster and Schoeffel, 2019; Thorp, 2014) engagement with sport and physical activity. The recent edited volume *Women, sport and exercise in the Asia-Pacific region* (Molnar, Amin and Kanemasu, 2019) is the first sport-themed anthology to include Pacific Island women in its scope, with case studies from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Solomon Islands. The forthcoming monograph *Women's soccer in Oceania* (McGowan, Symons and Kanemasu, 2023) offers the first scholarly documentation of women's soccer histories in Pacific Island countries as well as Australia and New Zealand.

This book adds to the nascent body of literature on Pacific Island women and sport by presenting primary research into women's experience of rugby union, other sports and exercise in Fiji, rugby union in Samoa, soccer in Solomon Islands and beach volleyball in Vanuatu. The book is also intended to contribute to the broader feminist and critical sociology of sport. Women and gender are today among the most noticeable subject areas in the sociology of sport. According to Elling (2015), 25% of all *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* articles published in the 2000s dealt with women's sport and/or gender. Notable in this literature is an increasing interest in the intersectionality of gender, 'race'/ethnicity and other matrices of power in sport, as well as repeated calls for greater attention to the experiences of athletes in the Global South (e.g., Hargreaves, 2000; Harkness and Hongsermeier, 2015; Ratna, 2018; Samie, et al., 2015; Scraton and Flintoff, 2013; Toffoletti, Palmer and Samie, 2018). Despite this growing emphasis, much of the published work in the English-speaking world remains dominated by Northern voices (Kanemasu and Dutt, 2022). Ratna's (2018) review of gender, 'race' and sport literature shows that a third of relevant publications concern African American women, another third South Asian and/or Muslim women in diasporic and other locations and a final third women of colour from across the Global North and South. A recent special issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* dedicated to sport, feminism and the Global South (Toffoletti, Palmer and Samie, 2018) focuses predominantly on the North's engagement with the South; that is, its marginalisation of, and power over, the South, especially through sport-for-development programmes. Without diminishing the value of these critical contributions, one may observe that the persisting Northern orientation of the existing literature considerably limits 'who speaks, whose voices are heard, which perspectives are validated, and on whose terms' (Toffoletti, Palmer and Samie, 2018, p. 193).

Noting the broader epistemic marginalisation of Pacific peoples, Teresia Teaiwa (2006, p. 83) once stated: 'the world marketplace of knowledge does not value this region as we do'. That the Pacific is 'not brought to the table as

an equal partner in any conversation about the nature of humanity or society' (Teaiwa, 2006, p. 73) is visible in Northern constructions of the region as a global periphery – small, remote and poor – that does not warrant focused attention other than as a victim of colonialism, neo-colonialism and lack of 'development' (Hau'ofa, 1993, 1998; Jolly, 2007). Pacific women, especially in policy domains, tend to be cast as victims of entrenched patriarchy and 'tradition', afflicted by numerous adversities – some of the world's highest prevalence of gender-based violence (UN Women, n.d.), relentless barriers to socio-economic participation (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Pacific Community, 2017), restricted access to essential services like education and health (World Health Organisation, 2011) and particularly low political representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Such concerns cannot be discounted, and undoubtedly, these are very real and urgent challenges Pacific women contend with, as discussed in the following chapters. At the same time, anthropologists, historians and Pacific studies scholars have built a rich body of work that reveals Pacific women to be anything but helpless victims and as actively navigating and engaging with the complex relations of power that intersect their lives (see Chapters 2–6, this volume). The emerging literature about Pacific women in sport may play a similar decolonising role. While sport-for-development policies may position Pacific Island girls and women as a physically inactive and/or socially excluded group that requires 'intervention', primary research foregrounding their sporting experiences can tell us a great deal about how power operates, and importantly, how it is contested, in and through sports in the Pacific.

Pacific Island women actively committed to sports, and especially sports that are regarded as contentious for women – those conventionally dominated by men or otherwise deemed to be in breach of gender norms – are up against multiple and severe constraints. Staking a claim on these sports runs counter to postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy that has been consolidated through cultural and religious traditionalism in much of the region. As explained by Margaret Jolly (2016, p. 360), one of the colonial/postcolonial experiences of Melanesia is that 'introduced Christian forms of gender hierarchy have creolised with indigenous gender hierarchies to produce recalcitrant and militant forms of male domination which are staunchly defended as traditional ... God's divine ordination of male authority is thereby powerfully proclaimed as indigenous'. Here, women must frequently battle family and/or community opposition, heavy family workloads and punitive violence of various forms, and in some cases (Chapter 2, this volume) literally battle for survival in order to compete in or simply play a sport of their passion. Their daily realities may form a contrast to those of women athletes in the Global North, where legislative protection (most prominently Title IX in the United States) and policy frameworks for equal rights have made some progress towards destabilising masculine privilege (Dworkin and Messner, 2002). In the Pacific Islands, sport, as a cultural

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expression of social and physical power, constitutes an intensely gendered space with direct and even perilous consequences for nonconformity. Yet, the same space also allows for women's creative, resistive, physical agency. For some women, their unwavering quest has materialised in remarkable performance outcomes, such as an Olympic medal in rugby sevens (Chapter 2) and exceptional international competition successes in beach volleyball (Chapter 4). Beyond measurable performance outcomes, as the following chapters show, athletic pursuits serve as a critical medium for these women to define themselves as active and transformative agents in their social world. As a Fijian woman rugby player once said to me with enthusiasm: 'We love the game; we love the sport. Love who we are when we are in that space'. In claiming this space, Pacific women employ varied, localised strategies, which may differ substantially from the activism documented in the North and offer insights into what resistance means and consists of under differential social conditions. This book is an attempt to capture both such struggles and victories, pains and joys of sporting women in the Pacific and calls for further work to address the masculine focus in the Pacific sport literature and the continuing Northern focus in the sociology of sport.

This is not simply a matter of 'inclusion' or 'giving voice' to hitherto-excluded peoples and communities in remote corners of the world. Feminist and critical sport scholarship demands fuller understanding of the multiplicity of relations of power that shape and are shaped by sports, and the myriad oppositional strategies employed by women living diverse geopolitical and socio-cultural realities. Noting that the act of speaking out has long been the hallmark of feminist agency in the North, Jane Parpart (2020, p. 323) asks pertinent questions:

While keenly aware that speaking out and naming oppressions and oppressors is critical for challenging injustice, the naturalised link between voice and agency privileges the ability to speak out against tyranny and injustice. Yet, this assumption is difficult to sustain in a volatile and insecure world where conflicts have often enabled gender-based violence against women, many men, and LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer] communities. In such a world, can we assume that masculinist privilege can be openly challenged only through voice? Do we need to consider other forms of voice/agency/empowerment?

Consideration of these questions may be aided by Gwen Hunnicutt's (2009, p. 554) discussion of 'varieties of patriarchy', which stresses the need for feminist scholarship to account for 'a range of different patriarchal manifestations among cultures and clans' overlapping with hierarchies of 'race'/ethnicity, class, age and other axes of power. Related to this is Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'patriarchal bargain,' which highlights how women's responses to male dominance vary widely according to opportunities available under each variant of patriarchy. Patriarchal varieties 'influence both

the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression' (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). Sport in the Pacific assumes significance as a site of particular patriarchal bargaining, that is, embodied politics under potent postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy, examination of which can help unpack resistance as it manifests itself in varied forms and locations.

Exploring contested sporting spaces in the Pacific: scope, theory and methodology

The following chapters explore women's claim on contested sporting spaces, specifically rugby union, exercise, soccer and beach volleyball in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Sport is in itself 'a "contested terrain," in which gender is being constructed in complex and often contradictory ways' (Messner, 2007, p. 4). This book focuses on the selected sporting activities because of their palpably contentious nature and the consistent claim women have made on them. Rugby is a primary embodiment of hegemonic masculine physicality in Fiji and Samoa, as is soccer in Solomon Islands. Beach volleyball, with its two-piece bikini uniform, is an unlikely sport to be associated with women in Melanesia, where gendered dressing is closely tied to dominant discourse of *kastom* ('customary ways' or 'tradition' in Bislama and Pijin). Indo-Fijian women are commonly assumed to represent the antithesis of sport and exercise in Fiji, where constructions of physical power are heavily racialised as well as gendered. Women's narratives of their contested sporting pursuits in these spaces signify the extensive forces of postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy that Pacific sports have become integrated into and the many ways in which women engage with such forces.

In exploring these narratives, I draw on theoretical insights offered in both regional and international literature. Some caveats are important to mention in relation to feminist literature. Historically, scholarship about Pacific women, as with women's organisations in the region, has had an ambiguous relationship with feminism. Ethnocentric tendencies in Western feminism and traditionalist repudiation of 'foreign' ideologies have rendered feminism a highly sensitive matter in the region (Jolly, 2003; Rowland, 2016; Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2021). However, it is equally important to acknowledge that contemporary Pacific women's quests for social change do not necessarily preclude meaningful engagement with feminist ideas and activism, evidenced by the fact that the notions of women's rights, human rights and gender equality are being increasingly appropriated and reimagined in the region, especially (but not exclusively) by urban women and women's groups and organisations (Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 2019; Jolly, 2003; Macintyre, 2017; Pollard, 2000, 2003; Spark, 2017; Spark, Cox and Corbett, 2021). In this process, Pacific women's agentic practices and visions not only challenge but also enrich and expand feminist theorising.

In my attempt to take account of Pacific women's sporting experiences and voices, I follow Jolly's (2003, p. 144) position that '[u]ltimately, the word

[feminism] is not so crucial as the processes and practices of women's collective action to improve their lives'. I therefore turn to a range of theoretical resources: those of multicultural/Western feminism such as Hunnicutt's and Kandiyoti's conceptualisations of patriarchy noted above (Chapters 2, 3, 6 and 7) and Leslie Heywood and Shari L. Dworkin's (2003) sport as 'stealth feminism' (Chapter 5); regional scholars' analyses of Pacific women's 'constrained agency' (Douglas, 1998) and 'permitted empowerment' (Dyer, 2017) (Chapters 4 and 5); and broader critical theories such as Antonio Gramsci's (1971) 'hegemony' (Chapters 2 and 7) and Michel de Certeau's (1984) 'tactics' (Chapter 4).

The methodological approach of the studies in this book is similarly situated across feminist/transformational and Pacific Island research philosophies. Despite their diversity, feminist and broader transformational (or emancipatory) research methodologies (e.g., Baker, et al., 2004; Fonow and Cook, 2005; Harding, 1991, 1993; K. Lynch, 2000; Mertens, 2007, 2016; 2017; Pringle and Falcous, 2018; Sprague, 2005; Stanley, 2013) share a primary concern with analysis of power relations 'as part of the process of bringing focus to the research, as well as throughout the entire research process' (Mertens, 2017, p. 22). In conducting qualitative interviews, which served as my primary research tool, I was guided by feminist/transformational conceptualisations of interviewing as a process of knowledge co-construction with participants that is nevertheless structured by layers of researcher-researched power inequity. In particular, feminist accounts of interviewing, which began as critiques of objectivism and masculinism in conventional research models, offer nuanced investigations into the complexities of, and tensions within, feminist pursuit of empathy, collaboration and reciprocity with participants (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Oakley, 2016). Multicultural/postcolonial feminist objections to white Western feminist biases and third-wave feminist rejection of binarism have problematised the ideals of non-hierarchical research by accentuating women's uneven social positionings (e.g., Amos and Parmar, 1984; Carby, 1994; Khan, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Oyewumi, 2000; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Patai, 1991).

The feminist/transformational research reflexivity resonates with Pacific Island scholars' work of decolonising knowledge about the region. Pacific peoples have been 'represented' through a plethora of Northern voices – precolonial missionary and navigator journals, colonial accounts, anthropological and other academic studies, consultant reports, policy papers, tourist promotional materials, etc., framed by Northern discourses ranging from romanticism, exoticism, primitivism and blatant racism to modernism, scientism and neoliberalism (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2020). Pacific Islanders have consistently resisted this epistemological imposition, such as through the work of eminent writers like Albert Wendt (1976), Haunani-Kay Trask (1991), Epele Hau'ofa (1993, 1998), Simone Durutalo (1992), Vilsoni Hereniko (2001), David Gegeo (2001), Subramani (2001), Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2004)

and Teresia Teaiwa (2006). Gegeo (2001, p. 182) spoke for many Pacific Islanders when he wrote:

What good is political independence if we remain colonised epistemologically? if we remain unable to think outside Anglo-European frameworks? So much about our Pacific cultures has been (re)presented to us by researchers and scholars from outside our region that we sometimes doubt our own cultural knowledge. We have been charged with having only our lived experience to hold up against the privileged simulations from these outside scholars.

Pacific scholars have responded by pursuing a variety of indigenous epistemologies and methodologies (e.g., Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo, 2002; Huffer and Qalo, 2004; Johansson-Fua, 2014; Meyer, 2008; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Naufahu, 2018; Sanga and Reyholds, 2021; Vaioleti, 2006). My own research has been broadly informed by one such indigenous methodology, Talanoa. The term ‘talanoa’ derives from *tala* (‘talking or telling stories’) and *noa* (‘zero or without concealment’), referring to ‘engaging in dialogue with or telling stories to each other ... [without] concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds’ (Halapua, 2008, p. 1). In research contexts, it entails emotional sharing and reciprocity between researchers and participants and mobilisation of such cultural resources as indigenous values of empathy, respect, love and humility (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012). Research facilitated by Talanoa becomes ‘an embodied, holistic, and critically reflexive process whereby researchers endeavour to enhance their empathic understanding of their participants (and, as a consequence of this process, themselves as researchers)’ (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 9).

Feminist/transformational and Pacific Island epistemologies and methodologies thus converge in rigorous interrogation of research as a relationship that is inherently constitutive of the social realities it purports to represent and thereby serves as a site for both reproducing and challenging epistemic/structural violence to those on the social margins. Guided by these insights, my research has been a journey of confronting, questioning and learning ‘what it means to do empirical inquiry in an unjust world’ (Lather, 1991, p. 109). I am Japanese by origin and arrived in Fiji in the 1990s as a young student enrolled in a master’s programme at the University of the South Pacific, a regional university owned by the governments of 12 Pacific Island countries (see Naidu, 2019). I have since lived in Fiji, except for a brief stint in the United Kingdom, and teach sociology at the same regional university. I identify as a cisgender, straight woman and occupy multiple social locations. As a university academic, I have access to privileges many Fijians do not, including significantly higher socio-economic status. As an Asian woman, I frequently encounter sexism and racism in my daily life, a witness to growing Sinophobia in Fiji and the

region (see Ratuva, 2022). Most of all, I consider Fiji and the Pacific my home, where I have developed relationships and attachments central to my personhood. My own engagement with sport consists mainly of love of fitness workouts and of supporting women's rugby in Fiji. I began studying the sport in 2012 with my colleague Gyozo Molnar (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2017, 2019, 2020), and it subsequently became my principal research/personal interest.

My positionality as an 'in-between' with partial overlapping identities in relation to the participants' (Chhabra, 2020, p. 310) variously shaped my relationships with the women and men whose stories are presented in this book. On the one hand, being situated in Fiji for most of my adulthood and engaging in an ongoing research/personal relationship with the Fijian women's rugby community provided a basis for my endeavour at knowledge co-construction, or, in Talanoa methodologists' words, 'empathic apprenticeship' (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 2) with the participants. It helped me appreciate at least part of the everyday and societal contexts in which the women cultivated their sporting practices. My friends, colleagues, students and research assistants enabled me to meet these women (some face-to-face and many virtually due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions), who, in turn, showed me great generosity and friendship by sharing their time, knowledge and experience and often going out of their way to assist me. Some of the interviews were emotional, with tears shed. Others were informal, light-hearted and punctuated by jokes and laughter. Yet others were more formal, serious and polite. All of them helped me develop an understanding of the sporting worlds the women dedicated their passion to and reflect on what I was learning from them about the dynamics of power and resistance. To borrow Ann Oakley's (2016, p. 208) words, the women 'gifted' me with their choice 'to answer researchers' questions and donate research material'.

On the other hand, '[g]ifts made by research participants take place within a context of inescapably unequal power' (Oakley, 2016, p. 208). If the social distance between us was reduced by the shared experience of living in the Pacific as our home and a common goal of advancing women's stake in sport, these by no means cancelled out our power imbalances, especially those deriving from my Global North nationality, formal education and middle-class occupation. I had final control over the interview processes, with the participants often courteously following my lead in initiating and sustaining the conversations. Moreover, by applying sociological and Northern-derived analytical lenses to their words, my researcher voice remained decidedly dominant throughout the process of analysis and writing. While drawing on the ethos of Talanoa, I nonetheless followed the mainstream qualitative research procedures of 'data transcription' and 'thematic analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Nowell, et al., 2017), privileging the methodological conventions of sociology as a modern academic discipline. The conceptual tools mentioned above conditioned the development of analytical codes and themes, if woven together with the ideas and experiences shared by the participants.

Acknowledging these and other ethical/epistemological limits and contradictions in my choices, I nevertheless see value in the multiplicity of pathways to knowledge building, for seeking to determine the most legitimate methodology or epistemological standpoint runs the risk of essentialising the vast, vibrant and dynamic Pacific communities and reproducing the age-old indigenous-modern binarism. Some Pacific scholars have cautioned against precisely such ‘reification of the indigenous’ (Teaiwa, 2006, p. 82) and ‘traditionalism and exceptionalism’ (Durutalo, 1992, p. 207). The studies in this book are presented as ‘situated knowledges’, a contribution to what Donna Haraway (1988, p. 584) called for decades ago and remains pertinent: ‘partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology’. My positionality, choices and conduct as a researcher are presented here to form part of ongoing conversations around transformative knowledge production in and about the Pacific.

Beyond these ethical and epistemological challenges, the book has a number of specific limitations. First, its scope is restricted to anglophone Melanesian and Polynesian countries, leaving out the francophone and Micronesian parts of the region⁴ (Vanuatu being a partial exception with its dual anglophone-francophone legacies). Second, English was used in communicating with the participants, except in one interview in Samoa undertaken entirely through a Samoan language interpreter. The participants may well have preferred their first language or their country’s lingua franca (Pijin in Solomon Islands and Bislama in Vanuatu). Third, the studies in this book deal primarily with women and only pay cursory attention to girls. Whereas girl children’s experiences of sport and physical activity may differ considerably from those of older girls and women in some contexts (see Chapters 4, 5, 6), this was not examined in depth. Fourth, most of the participants were urban women, with some originally from rural villages and residing in or visiting urban centres at the time of their interviews. The discussions are therefore largely specific to urban women’s sporting experiences. Fifth, only Chapter 2 treats non-heteronormativity as a key dimension of women’s sporting pursuits and the backlash against them. This is partly because overtly gender-/sexually-nonconforming athletes tend to be a minority in the sports examined in the other chapters. It is also because I generally did not bring up relevant questions during the interviews unless the participants did so themselves, conscious of the lack of a sustained reciprocal relationship to allow for discussion of socially sensitive matters. Sixth, most of the discussions are specific to competitive team sports at the club level (Chapters 2, 5, 6) and the national representative level (Chapter 4). Only Chapter 3 considers a mix of recreational and competitive sports, individual and team sports, and exercise. Finally, this book does not discuss ‘traditional’ or indigenous sports, although ‘modern’ sports are never simply foreign imports as they are variously appropriated, indigenised and localised in the region (Besnier, 2014b). In short, this volume is a collection of selected snapshots, rather than a panoramic overview, of Pacific women’s relationships with sport.

Chapter outlines

The main chapters follow similar formats for the purpose of comparison and synthesis. Each starts with a general background of the sport under study and a brief discussion of relevant literature, the research process and the participants. The sport is then situated in the broader socio-cultural settings of the country, including its specific ‘variety of patriarchy’, before I explore the participants’ engagement with the sport, the strategies they employ in doing so, what their sporting endeavours, struggles and advances mean to them and the transformative impacts and potentials of their embodied practices. Each chapter also offers theoretical reflections, where I consider the utility of existing concepts in inquiring into the women’s experiences and how their experiences may in turn extend existing theoretical discourses around women’s agency and resistance, sport feminism, sport for development, cultural tradition and other related issues.

Chapter 2 presents an ongoing study of women’s rugby in Fiji from 2012 up to 2022. It traces predominantly non-heteronormative indigenous Fijian women’s long and arduous journey of pursuing rugby, a sport deeply embedded in the country’s postcolonial socio-political order – in particular, the hegemonic articulation between militarised masculine physical power, ethno-nationalism, religious/cultural traditionalism and post-colonial nationalism. Women’s unyielding quest for their place in the game in the face of widespread and often-violent heteropatriarchal sanctions is examined here as both overt and covert acts of resistance. Further, their ongoing attempts at and recent successes in appropriating the game’s nationalist symbolism on the basis of their growing international profile, not least their hard-won bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, is noted as a key avenue for counter-hegemonic persuasion.

Chapter 3 problematises the common assumption of Indo-Fijian women’s absence in sport and exercise. It argues that their invisibility should not be taken as a simple reflection of lack of interest; that it is in fact profoundly entwined with the postcolonial corporeal hierarchies of ‘race’ and gender in Fiji. Based on primary research conducted between 2016 and 2021, the chapter outlines Fiji’s gendered/racialised sporting discourses and practices that systematically impede Indo-Fijian women from entering the mainstream sport/exercise arena. Indo-Fijian women are also shown to be actively cultivating spaces for physical agency, often ‘hidden’ from the mainstream view, in competitive team sports, individual and recreational sports, fitness exercise and recreational physical activities. Along with Chapter 2, this chapter illuminates physical power as a key dimension of Fiji’s postcolonial socio-political order.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 rely on primary research undertaken mostly via online interviews in 2021. Chapter 4 centres on the remarkable success of Vanuatu’s beach volleyball team. This small group of young women athletes have accumulated a series of regional/international competition medals in

the absence of sufficient infrastructural, material or technical resources and under postcolonial patriarchal conditions consolidated by prevailing understandings of *kastom*, where it is highly unconventional for women to pursue a full-time career in an elite sport, especially one that comes with a bikini uniform. Their success story is examined as an instance of ‘tactical agency’ facilitated by a heterogeneous, loosely organised coalition consisting of the athletes, families, expatriate sport practitioners and volunteers, local communities, international sporting bodies and other actors, whose differential resources and powers have been strategically aligned for a transformative cause. The chapter invites closer attention to the complexities of the involvement of Northern actors in sports in the South and the potentials of a subversive South-North alliance that may be overlooked in a ‘North vs. South’ binary.

Chapter 5 focuses the spotlight on a vibrant community of soccer players in Solomon Islands. Extensive socio-economic barriers and neo-traditional normative constraints may suggest to an outside observer that the prospects for women’s entry into the nation’s foremost masculine sport are bleak. But the women’s game is currently undergoing notable growth, which, the chapter argues, is a result of young players, together with older women in leadership and supportive roles, competently negotiating the barriers and actively seizing the opportunities presented by recent policy developments in soccer governing bodies. The strategies they employ in this undertaking, including an alternative framing of the game as a vehicle for community development, may appear subtle and understated, yet have fostered gradual, unsuspected change and minimised backlash in the community, presenting a Pacific style ‘stealth feminism’.

Chapter 6 turns to women’s rugby in Samoa, and combined with Chapter 2, presents the considerably different ways in which Pacific women approach the region’s most conspicuous ‘men’s sport’. This chapter also shifts the focus to the role of ‘cultural tradition’ in women’s contested sporting pursuits. Whereas customary conventions and protocol associated with *fa’asamoa* (‘Samoan way’) are often invoked by families and communities as a primary basis of their objections to women’s participation in the game, women have deployed the same conventions and protocol as a persuasive strategy for obliging families/communities to support their sporting cause. In this process, ‘culture’ serves as both an impediment to, and an agentic resource for, social change. Women’s strategic engagement with ‘culture’ also contributes to both its reproduction and subtle reconfiguration. Inasmuch as sport is under-examined as a site of cultural contestation in the region, this chapter offers preliminary insights into the dynamic nexus between gender, sport and customary heritage.

The final chapter reflects on these contested sporting spaces as a key site of embodied politics of gender (and sexuality in the case of rugby in Fiji) in the Pacific. The diversity of the ways in which women engage with this politics is examined against the specific configurations of postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy. Consideration is given to, among other things, the agentic avenues opened

up by uneasy relationships between sport, traditionalism and postcolonial nationalism. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of the studies presented here for understandings of patriarchal bargains in the Global South. The chapter closes with final thoughts on the transformative meanings, outcomes and potentials of Pacific sporting women's strategies and practices, with reference to Antonio Gramsci's conceptualisation of counter-hegemony.

Niko Besnier (2014b, pp. 438, 440) has noted that sport in the Pacific is 'embedded in a vast panoply of resources for the conduct of social relations', intersected by 'kinship obligations, moral codes, geopolitical dynamics, state and nongovernmental organisation policies, and the global marketing of athletic glory'. This volume illustrates Besnier's point by presenting women's contested relationships with sport, located at a convergence of social relations central to the gendered organisation of Pacific communities and societies. The passionate quest by the women in this book is as instructive as it is remarkable, for it offers a fruitful lens through which to investigate the multifarious and historically specific articulations between gender and sport.

Notes

- 1 The terms 'the Pacific' and 'the Pacific Islands' are used in this book to refer to the countries and territories that are sometimes also called 'the island Pacific', overlapping with 'Pacific small island developing states' in policy discourses. These may be distinguished from 'Oceania', another widely-used category, which commonly encompasses broader geographical areas including Australia and New Zealand. The fully independent Pacific Island nations are: Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. The freely associated states are: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Palau (with a compact with the United States), the Cook Islands and Niue (with associated status with New Zealand). The Pacific territories are: Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa (affiliated with the United States), French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna (with France), Tokelau (with New Zealand) and Pitcairn (with the United Kingdom).
- 2 It may be noted that, in addition to rugby union, rugby league and American football players, a small number of soccer players from Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and elsewhere in the region have been recruited by professional clubs in New Zealand, Australia and other metropolitan nations (see Soccerway, 2022).
- 3 For the few existing studies in these under-examined areas, see Sacks (2017a,b, 2019) on *kirikiti* (indigenised cricket) in Samoa, Uperesa (2021) on broader indigenous sports, Osmond and Phillips (2004) on Solomon Islander swimmer Alick Wickham and sport history, Runzheimer and Krieger (2020) on the history of athletics in the Pacific Islands and Kanemasu (2020) on Deaf rugby in Fiji.
- 4 The Pacific Islands are commonly divided into three geo-cultural groups, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, which originate from an ethnological distinction attributed to 19th-century French explorers, particularly Dumont d'Urville. Eurocentric racial biases and stereotypes underlying this typology, as well as its colonial and postcolonial consequences, have been scrutinised by contemporary scholars (Jolly, 2007; Tcherkézoff, 2003; Thomas, 1989). More recently, Lawson (2013, 2016) has pointed out that the categories have been appropriated by (especially elite) Pacific Islanders and that the notion of

'Melanesia' (meaning 'black islands' and originally a particularly racist category) has acquired affirmative meanings and relevance for south-west Pacific Islanders. I use the terms 'Melanesia' and 'Polynesia' in this book as many others do mainly 'for lack of a workable alternative' (Lawson, 2013, p. 2), while acknowledging their deeply contested nature.

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2 Fiji Women's Rugby

Resistance Against All Odds

Even though there are a lot of problems, like our bus fares and how people treat us ... we just don't care about it because we love this game. We love it. It's our talent. They can't stop us.

Introduction

On 31 July 2021, Fiji's women rugby players made history. The national team, known as the Fijiana, won a bronze medal in rugby sevens at the Tokyo Summer Olympics, their very first Olympic medal and only Fiji's third, following the men's gold in the same sport three days earlier and previously at the 2016 Games. The nation erupted with joyous celebrations of the men's and women's double medal achievement. The Olympian women, along with their male counterparts, were welcomed back to the country with great fanfare by the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU), the Fiji government, the local media, communities and families, albeit scaled down due to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kanemasu, 2022). The Fijiana have since followed up with a series of outstanding international competition successes. In 2022, the Fijiana fifteen-a-side team competed for the first time in a Super W¹ season and won the title, beating all of the better-resourced and better-known Australian competitors.² Later in the same year, the Fijiana sevens side clinched a silver medal at the 2022 Commonwealth Games, again alongside the men's team who also won a silver. Such spectacular successes may not strike international sport fans as particularly surprising, given Fiji's prominence as a rugby-playing nation. However, this is a ground-breaking, vindicating moment for a small community of Fijian women who have fought for their place in the country's 'national' sport for decades.

To fully appreciate the significance of these women's recent victories, we must begin with an understanding of the symbolic power that rugby union commands in Fiji and what international success in the game, epitomised by an Olympic medal, means to its people. According to FRU (n.d., p. 8), rugby is 'the "Heart and Soul" of this country and has the ability on any given day to unite the country or dampen the aspirations of the many'. It is by far the

most popular sport, attracting 60,000 senior players and 20,000 school-children, which, FRU (2022a) contends, is the highest player-population ratio among rugby-playing nations. The game is profoundly indigenised through, among other things, association with precolonial martial tradition, customary chiefs' historical involvement as players and administrators and Christian rituals and spirituality permeating rugby protocols (Guinness, 2018; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c; Presterudstuen, 2010). Infused with these characteristics, rugby is often seen as an embodiment of indigenous cultural ethos.

Moreover, the international acclaim accorded to the men's sevens side has elevated the game to the status of Fijians' national pride. In the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Fiji became the first Pacific Island country to win an Olympic gold medal by defeating Great Britain in the inaugural men's rugby sevens final. Aptly described by a commentator as 'the match that stopped Fiji' (Tokyo 2020, 2020), it was watched by the entire nation holding its breath in anticipation. Many businesses temporarily closed and schools allowed a break for the match's duration so that employees and students could share the historic moment. In the capital city Suva, 15,000 people filled the national stadium to watch the event on a large screen. On the final whistle confirming the 'epic 43–7 victory' (Tokyo 2020, 2020), the nation was seized with frenzied joy. As a local journalist stated: 'I think the whole country has gone crazy ... Nobody is working, now we are just waiting for the team to come home' (quoted by Roy, 2016). A police spokesperson is reported to have said: 'There is disruption on the roads, congestion on the streets, it's chaos here ... But ah – we are unconcerned' (quoted by Roy, 2016). The Fiji government declared 22 August 2016 a special public holiday, and the Reserve Bank of Fiji issued a commemorative seven-dollar banknote (Figure 2.1) and 50-cent coin. A staunch Fiji rugby fan myself, I was part of the crowd at the welcoming ceremony for the team held at the national stadium on the special public holiday. The celebrations started long before the ceremony; roads leading up to the stadium were filled with cars, trucks and buses, decorated with national flags and carrying children and adults who were also waving flags, wearing blue (the colour of the national flag) and singing and shouting in joy. The crowd then gathered at the stadium, where they watched with pride as the team and head coach were congratulated and thanked by the president and other dignitaries.

This rugby fervour is accentuated by a long-standing sense of physical and politico-economic marginality that Fijians have felt about their postcolonial nation. As Hau'ofa (1993, p. 3) stated in his seminal essay 'Our Sea of Islands', Pacific Island countries have long been confronted with an international development discourse that defines them as 'much too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated from the centres of economic growth for their inhabitants ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence on the largesse of wealthy nations'. In the face of such a Global-North-derived construction of Fiji (along with other Pacific



Figure 2.1 Olympic Gold Medal Commemorative \$7 Banknote, 2016.

Island countries) as a quintessential ‘peripheral’ nation, Fijians have embraced rugby as a primary medium of symbolic resistance, with rugby players serving as ‘our gallant heroes ... putting Fiji on the map’ (Fiji Times, 2016). In the former prime minister Voreqe Bainimarama’s words: ‘we Fijians can do anything. We can stand with people from any other nation... Our rugby history tells us that we are a small nation that believes in its greatness... rugby is... part of who we are as a nation’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). The Olympic medal commemorative banknote is a reflection of just how central rugby excellence is to Fijians’ self-definition as a post-colonial nation. Here, rugby serves more than any other sport as a vehicle for Fiji’s modern nationalism fuelled by anti-imperialist sentiments (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013a,b).

But this is also a heavily gendered and racialised nationalism. Even as rugby represents Fijians’ collective esteem, indigenous men are its central embodiment

while women and non-indigenous Fijians are designated spectators on the margins (Besnier and Brownell, 2016; Cattermole, 2008; Kanemasu, 2022; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c; Schieder, 2012). Indeed, the 'national' sport is entangled with a particular heteropatriarchy that became entrenched in post-colonial Fiji, rendering any attempt by women to claim it as their own highly problematic and sometimes downright risky. Situated in the context of their long years of onerous battle over the most prestigious and culturally-sanctioned masculine sport of the nation, the women's Olympic bronze medal and subsequent accomplishments are nothing less than historic. The dynamics of this relationship between Fijian women, rugby and heteropatriarchy is the subject of the present chapter. The following account uncovers the stories of predominantly indigenous and non-heteronormative women, whose pursuit of the game, despite severe backlash at family and community levels, is explored as both overt and covert resistance against postcolonial heteropatriarchy. The chapter also examines the women's use of rugby as a medium of oppositional gender embodiment and assesses the extent to which they have successfully appropriated the game's nationalist symbolism to disrupt the gendered rugby discourse. These discussions are aided by several conceptual tools, including 'varieties of patriarchy' (Hunnicut, 2009), 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti, 1988) and 'hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971).

The scholarly focus on women's rugby in Fiji is a relatively recent phenomenon. Women's experience of rugby as a masculinist domain has received substantial research attention in Western contexts (e.g., Adjepong, 2015; Broad, 2001; Chase, 2006; Ezzell, 2009; Gill, 2007; Hardy, 2014; Wheatley, 1994); yet relevant research in Fiji emerged only over the past decade (Johnson and Kanemasu, 2016; Kanemasu, 2022; Kanemasu and Johnson, 2019; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2017, 2019, 2020; Kanemasu, Johnson and Molnar, 2019; Senibua, 2017; Vuli, 2022). This chapter explores existing and emerging knowledge about the game in Fiji, based on semi-structured interview research conducted between 2012 and 2022, as well as part of a consultancy study undertaken in 2016. The total primary data set consists of: 27 semi-structured interviews with women rugby players, coaches and administrators; two focus group discussions with a total of 12 women rugby players; and a focus group discussion with seven community gatekeepers (largely schoolteachers). Additional information was garnered through informal conversations with athletes, coaches and administrators at rugby fields, over coffees and meals, at fundraising events and on other social occasions. The athlete/coach/administrator participants were nearly all indigenous Fijian women in their 20s and 30s, the great majority of whom resided in the capital Suva area or in Nadi, a major town. All of the athlete participants had long years of club rugby experience, and some were national representative players.

My personal involvement with this sporting community must be acknowledged. In the course of developing relationships with the players and administrators since 2012, I have found myself transition from being a researcher to becoming a supporter and friend of the community. When the

Fijiana made their first (and unsuccessful) attempt at Rugby World Cup (RWC) qualification in 2016, I followed them to the qualifier games in Hong Kong, where I was one of the few Fiji supporters, and the coaches, manager and players warmly included me in their team/prayer meetings, match breaks and shopping trips (despite my apprehensions over intrusion). Three years later, I watched them achieve the milestone of qualifying for the 2021 RWC at the Oceania Rugby Women's Championship in Lautoka, Fiji. In 2021, I was among the emotional supporters who witnessed, on local television, the sevens side take the Olympic podium to receive their bronze medal. Over the years, senior players, club administrators and the FRU Women's Rugby Development Manager have readily agreed to feature in the rugby-themed community outreach events I have organised at my university. I have been part of club fundraising gatherings like *gunu sede* (where participants pay for bowls of *kava*³ for others to drink) and shared some of my financial research rewards with them – although such gestures are a long way from reciprocating the remarkable generosity they have shown me. In short, what began for me as a research project became a journey of friendship and learning from and with these women. This chapter presents the stories of pain and joy the women have shared with me and critical insights emerging from them, which allow for consideration of the multifarious and ever-shifting dynamics of the interplay between forces of domination and resistance under specific postcolonial conditions.

It needs to be noted at the outset that my treatment of gender and sexuality in Fiji is guided by key existing studies of the categories, identities and practices of gender liminality (which often takes precedence over same-sex sexuality) in Fiji and the Pacific Islands region (e.g., Alexeyeff, 2000; Besnier, 1996; Besnier and Alexeyeff, 2014). This literature reveals, among other things, that Western categories like 'lesbian', 'homosexual' and 'transgender' are deployed (along with indigenous and local categories) by Pacific Islanders in intertwined and overlapping ways and often differently from their Western usage. I follow Alexeyeff and Besnier (2014, p. 2) in adopting the term 'non-heteronormative', which underscores such socio-cultural complexities and 'leaves open the possibility that the dynamics at play may be a matter of gender, sexuality, or yet other categories'. In the context of women's rugby in Fiji, many players are, by Western categories, 'transmasculine' or otherwise gender-nonconforming and/or with same-sex orientation. Few (explicitly) identify as transgender or nonbinary, and the players commonly refer to themselves and each other as 'women'/'girls'. There are also cisgender and heterosexual players. While acknowledging their differences,⁴ I describe them generally as non-heteronormative women.

Fiji: country overview

The Republic of Fiji is located in the south-western Pacific Ocean, composed of over 330 islands, of which 110 are inhabited. A British colony

from 1874 to 1970, the country has a multi-ethnic population of 890,000, consisting mainly of indigenous Fijians (57%) and Fijians of Indian descent, who are largely the descendants of indentured labourers brought from India between 1879 and 1920 (henceforth Indo-Fijians) (37%) (Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBS), 2017). Indigenous Fijians are Christians and predominantly Methodist, while the majority of Indo-Fijians are Hindus with minority Muslims, Christians and Sikhs (Naidu, 2013). Smaller ethnic groups include the indigenous ethnic minority Rotumans and Fijians of European, part-European, Chinese and other Pacific Island ancestry. While Fiji is a parliamentary democracy, a customary chiefly system has historically exercised significant influence over the indigenous populations. Constructions of 'tradition', centred on the unity of chiefs (*ratu*), land (*vanua*) and church (*lotu*), shape an enduring discourse of 'the Fijian way of life' or 'the way of the land' (*vakavanua*), if also challenged by the shifting dynamics of domestic politics and ongoing social change (Lawson and Lawson, 2015; Weir, 2015). As discussed in the next section (and Chapter 3, this volume), ethnicity became highly politicised in postcolonial Fiji, which resulted in recurrent periods of political instability, most significantly coups d'état in 1987, 2000 and 2006 with severe political and socio-economic consequences. Following the 2006 military coup, democratic rule was not restored until 2014.

Fiji is one of the most 'developed' economies in the Pacific Islands region and categorised by the World Bank (2021) as an upper-middle-income country. It nevertheless faces substantial development challenges. The national economy depends primarily on tourism, which accounts for 38% of the gross domestic product (International Finance Corporation, 2020). The sugar and garment industries, which once served as the backbone of the economy, are experiencing structural decline due to the loss of preferential access to export markets. Over 66% of workers are in the informal sector, such as subsistence farming, fishing, casual work and self-employment, without income security or social protection (International Labour Organisation, 2021). Fiji is also more urbanised than other countries in the region, with almost 56% of the population located in urban areas (FBS, 2018). One of the consequences of this urbanisation is an expansion of informal settlements, where an estimated fifth of the greater Suva residents live (Phillips and Keen, 2016). Nearly 30% of the total population lived below the national poverty line in 2019 (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2022). State social protection reaches just 22% of the target population, leaving most people to turn to customary, informal and non-formal social protection provided through families, kinships, communities, religious bodies and civil society organisations (CSOs) (Mohanty, 2012).

Postcolonial heteropatriarchy and physical power

To further understand the context in which Fijian women pursue rugby, it is essential to examine the type of heteropatriarchy that emerged in post-independence Fiji. Halapua (2003), Teaiwa (2005) and Naidu (2019) have

variously shown that Fiji's postcolonial socio-political landscape is shaped by a highly militarised culture, a coalescence of constructions of a pre-colonial history of tribal warfare, indigenous masculinity, spirituality and chiefly authority. Militarised indigenous masculinity, typically projected in imagery of *bati* (indigenous warrior), is predicated on physical power (Presterudstuen, 2010, 2019; Presterudstuen and Schieder, 2016). This correlation is most visibly embodied in the 99% indigenous-male Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) (Naidu, 2019; Teaiwa, 2008, 2014), whose physical and political might was spectacularly displayed in the three coups d'état that it instigated (two in 1987 and one in 2006). It is also manifest in the country's long history of military labour trade, dating back to the dispatchment of Fijian contingents to the World Wars. Since 1978, Fiji has provided more troops for United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations than any other nation on a per-capita basis (Siegel and Feast, 2014). Thousands of indigenous men (and some women) have also been recruited into the British Army since the early 1960s and as private military and security personnel in Iraq and other high-conflict areas since the early 2000s (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017b). Decades of muscle trade have earned indigenous men a 'reputation of physical strength and spirit' (BBC News, 2004) and bolstered militarism in the country, as well as serving as a critical source of employment.

Militarised indigenous masculine physical power also manifests itself in everyday cultural practices, most of all rugby. As Teaiwa (2005, p. 217) observes: 'Militarism disarticulated from indigenous warfare rearticulates itself with modern sports'. The notion of *bati* defending his chief is widely believed to resonate with the physical and 'combative' nature of the game (Guinness, 2018; Guinness and Besnier, 2016; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c; Presterudstuen, 2010; Presterudstuen and Schieder, 2016). Metaphors of war figure prominently in the indigenous-male-dominated sport – most evidently in *cibi*, the war dance performed by the national team prior to international matches, and the naming of the Fiji Warriors, the second-tier side to the national team (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c; Presterudstuen, 2010; Schieder, 2012; Teaiwa, 2005). Beyond symbolic connections, rugby has close historical ties with the military and police forces, through which it was introduced to colonial Fiji (Robinson, 1973). Today, the Sukuna Bowl, an annual match between the army and the police, is a highly publicised and prestigious national event. High-ranking military officials have conventionally occupied several FRU Board positions. As of March 2023, the FRU president is the former prime minister Voreqe Bainimarama, who is the 2006 military coup leader and former RFMF commodore and commander. In addition, like Fijian soldiers, rugby players have been a part of the nation's muscle trade since the professionalisation of the game (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013a,b, 2014; Mackay and Guinness, 2019; Schieder and Presterudstuen, 2014). The 'rugby dream' (Guinness, 2018, p. 324) attained by (a small number of) indigenous men playing for overseas professional clubs adds to the privileged status of the

game as not only a national pride and a bastion of indigenous masculine prowess but also a potential pathway for transnational mobility and associated socio-economic gains.

Such pre-eminence of indigenous masculine physical power – typically expressed in the military and rugby – is integral to the country's ethno-racial and gender relations, both of which have often rested on the exercise/threat of physical force. Fiji's postcolonial history has been marked by the politicisation of ethnicity, which has its origins in the colonial government's ethnically segregating development policy and escalated in the post-independence era, despite intra-ethnic, class-based and regional disparities/conflicts (Akram-Lodhi, 2016; Durutalo, 1986; Naidu, 2007, 2008, 2013, 2019). It culminated in three ethno-nationalist coups – two military takeovers in 1987 and one civilian putsch in 2000 – which entailed violence targeting Indo-Fijians, their homes, businesses and properties (most visibly in 2000) as well as their long-term socio-political marginalisation (Naidu, 2007, 2008; Trnka, 2008; see also Chapter 3, this volume). In the most recent coup of 2006, the military, led by Bainimarama, dramatically shifted its position from championing ethno-nationalism to advocating multi-ethnic nationhood. The 2018 election results showed, however, that ethno-nationalism, closely articulated with cultural traditionalism, retained a considerable following among indigenous Fijians (see, e.g., MacWilliam, 2019). In 2022, the Bainimarama regime lost power to a coalition of opposition parties in a close election.

Women and non-heteronormative Fijians have similarly experienced physical as well as socio-political forms of domination. Gender justice advocacy has conventionally been denounced as an 'anti-Christian and anti-Fijian' sacrilege that 'would destroy the essential nature of Fijian indigenous society' (Jalal, 2002). Traditionalist gender discourse exercises extensive influence, as it is typically coupled with anti-imperialist ethno-nationalism, and castigates feminists as 'alienated from their own societies and corrupted by Western thinking and values' (Slatter, 2011). Non-heteronormative Fijians are similarly condemned on traditionalist and religious terms (George, 2008), notwithstanding the diverse existence of gender liminality and same-sex sexuality in Fiji and across the Pacific (see, e.g., Besnier, 1996, 2002; Besnier and Alexeyeff, 2014; George, 2008, 2014). As one of my research participants explained: 'In Fiji, being gay is a big issue ... It's to do with the whole values, tradition, culture, all this ... Your whole identity gets questioned'. It may be argued that the histories of 'colonialism, structural violence and political turmoil ... have created a context where masculinist ethno-nationalism augments the heterogender system' in postcolonial Fiji (Thompson 2014, p. 2).

Consequently, as George (2017, p. 63) points out, there are conspicuous contradictions between 'the rhetoric of reform' in gender policy and 'everyday practice'. The Fiji government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1995, and a number of legislative and policy breakthroughs have been made through

active lobbying by women's rights bodies (George, 2012; Mishra, 2012). Indicators of progress towards gender parity are, however, mixed. Virtually all Fijian children attend primary school. Ninety-two percent of girls complete secondary school, and female students comprise 57% of tertiary institution graduates (UN, 2020). Yet, in terms of women's economic participation, unequal access to employment, unequal pay and other gendered barriers remain (Singh, 2018). Women make up just 35% of the workforce of tourism, the nation's principal industry, and only a quarter of its managerial and professional positions (ADB, 2016). Women's representation in the national parliament has been increasing and is higher than in many other Pacific Island countries, but still stands at a relatively low 20% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Less than 30% of leadership positions in the civil service are held by women (UN, 2020). In the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index, Fiji was ranked 107th out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum, 2021). Gender relations on the ground for the majority of grassroots women and non-heteronormative Fijians remain decidedly unequal and have direct and far-reaching impact on their wellbeing and life chances.

Indeed, out of the convergence of militarism, masculinism, the centrality of physical power, traditionalism and nationalism emerged a particular variant of heteropatriarchy, whose legitimacy rests not only on cultural and biblical sanction but often on undisguised violence. That is, 'violent expressions of masculine authority have become normalised with devastating effects' (George, 2016, p. 102). Women and non-heteronormative Fijians encounter pervasive threats of violence in everyday life. Sixty-four percent of ever-partnered Fijian women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), 2013) as against the global prevalence of 30% (World Health Organisation, 2021). Gender-/sexually-nonconforming Fijians face risks of systematic bullying and physical/sexual assaults (Fiji National Civil Society Joint Submission, 2014), rendering hollow the government's decriminalisation of same-sex relations in 2010 and the current national constitution prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Although transfeminine non-heteronormative men (derogatorily called *qauri*) are a conspicuous urban presence and may have access to circumscribed social spaces (Presterudstuen, 2014), they have also been the targets of brutal assaults (see, e.g., Fox, 2018; Haus of Khameleon, 2016). Non-heteronormative women are much less collectively visible and experience even less social tolerance. Over 80% of lesbian, bisexual, transgender/transman/transmasculine Fijians have left home, been turned out of home or been disowned by their family (Diverse Voices and Action for Equality, 2019). Another research participant shared her own experience:

I left home at 36 because my father kept beating me up for being lesbian. He beat me up all the time – when I was 36! I never gave in ... When I was 36, I couldn't do it anymore, because I was starting to fight back. So I decided to leave [home]. He never accepted me till he was 70.

Such punitive heteropatriarchy can constrain the scope for women's participation in sport and physical activity. Fijian women have markedly lower physical activity levels than men, and about 63% do not engage in any recreation-related physical activity, reflecting their limited presence in the sport and exercise arena (Ministry of Health and Medical Services and World Health Organisation, 2011). Volleyball, netball and athletics are among the limited 'gender-compliant' sports where (especially indigenous) girls'/women's active participation is not regarded as contentious. In this context, claiming rugby, the primary sporting embodiment of the social hierarchies of gender, 'race' and physical power, amounts to grievous dissent against the heteropatriarchy that resides on these hierarchies.

Women's rugby in Fiji

Fijian women began to play rugby in an organised fashion around the late 1980s (Fiji Rugby Union, 2022b; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2017a; Vuli, 2022). The Marist Rugby Sevens tournament, a major national competition, included women's teams in 1989. Formal affiliation with FRU had been forged by 1997, when the first women's national seven-a-side team participated in the Hong Kong Sevens tournament. By 1999/2000, Suva had six women's rugby clubs. Much of the early development of the game was facilitated and financed by the players and club administrators themselves. They operated largely outside of the official rugby governing structure, which organises men's rugby through the national union, provincial unions, local clubs and school rugby. In 2006, women's clubs collectively formed the Fiji Women's Rugby Union, which remained active for over a decade until their integration into the official structure.⁵ During these formative years, the clubs negotiated constant resource shortages by relying on fundraising and self-funding, with ad hoc institutional involvement at times of international competitions and test matches. External assistance came mostly from individual supporters, including male champions of the women's game and some men's rugby bodies such as the Marist Rugby Club (Vuli, 2022). FRU's involvement became more extensive in the later years, especially after the establishment of the Women's Rugby Development Officer position in 2012, with the two women who have taken this role to date critically contributing to the structural development of the game.

The past decade saw the women's national team score major international successes, including gold medals in rugby sevens at the 2011, 2015 and 2019 Pacific Games, qualification for the 2016 Rio Olympics and the 2021 RWC, and more recently, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic bronze and the 2022 Commonwealth Games silver. These achievements have had a considerable positive impact on the women's public profile as well as institutional support for and media coverage of them (Kanemasu and Johnson, 2019; Kanemasu, 2022). In 2018, FRU took a critical step towards gender mainstreaming by integrating women's games

into provincial-level tournaments. The unions across the country's 14 provinces were required to enlist women's teams in domestic competitions, and accordingly, the women's clubs became affiliated with them. Today, FRU organises two-tier fifteen-a-side provincial championships for women, along with a number of other competitions. FRU also recently launched a women's high performance academy, and with Oceania Rugby, began to promote girls' rugby and initiated national tournaments for schoolgirls (see, e.g., *Get Into Rugby – Fiji*, 2021). The player population increased, from just 270 senior players and 100 teen players in 2012 (World Rugby, 2012) to 640 registered players in 24 provincial teams in 2020 (FRU, personal communication, 23 April 2020).

While these are important testimonies of the game's growing significance and recognition, they are also a product of many years of struggle and hard-won victories by the rugby women. Their journey of pursuing the 'national' sport has been accompanied by enormous adversities and tribulations, which often emanate from, in addition to their socio-economic status (discussed later in this chapter), them being or suspected of being lesbian and/or transmasculine. Few players are open about their sexual orientation, but many adopt an unapologetically masculine appearance, as described by this senior leader in their community:

We have a lot of these girls who come in with these hair-cuts. We call it mohawk haircut. And the way they dress is just like men. When you look at some of these girls playing rugby, there is no femininity about them. They just look like boys. It goes with their build as well.

Besides short hair, masculine/non-binary clothing and demeanour, enhanced musculature and other bodily expressions, athletes may capture the sport's physicality to express their 'female masculinity' (Halberstam, 1998). As Chase (2006, p. 239) observes in an American context, 'tackling, hitting, and intense physical exertion' enables women to use 'bodies in ways that are required in rugby but work against ideas of the ideal female body'. According to a pioneer player in Fiji: 'I like rugby because of how it's played, it's very physical ... I like the part of running and showing your strength, you know. I'm like a guy; I can do this, you know?' The game thus allows for non-normative gender embodiment and collective affirmation of it in the midst of a heavily gender-policed society:

Most of those girls are masculine, you know, who don't fit in. They found a place to be. We all have the same kind of way of thinking because we are boyish and all this ...

Females acting like males, when they come into this sport, they feel like they are part of this sport and they feel welcome and feel accepted. Out there, they don't feel accepted but when they come in, they are comfortable sharing thoughts, ideas and everything.

They are a conspicuous community, considering that transmasculine women generally do not share transfeminine men's (limited) social visibility and space in Fiji. Such a collective display of nonconformity, which, 'as articulations of corporeal gender motif, destabilise[s] the compulsory order of woman-feminine-heterosexual' (Caudwell, 2003, p. 383), poses a major threat to postcolonial heteropatriarchy. While women's rugby around the world has contended with lesbian stigma (Carle and Nauright, 1999; Shockley, 2006; Tovia, 2014), the issue is doubly consequential in Fiji because these women impinge on a cultural practice heavily invested with symbolism that enshrines heteropatriarchal corporeal power, traditionalism and postcolonial nationalism. They have pursued the game against many odds, especially long-standing gender disparities within the sport, and family- and community-level antagonism.

Battling for institutional support

The players welcomed FRU's recent gender mainstreaming initiatives, particularly its decision to integrate women's teams into the provincial rugby structure. At the same time, they were keenly aware that this decision was not immediately embraced by all provincial unions. While some provincial unions have been consistently supportive towards the women, others have been less forthcoming and needed persuasion. Historically, men's teams have represented the provinces, and the fierce rivalry among them has taken centre stage in the domestic rugby scene (see Waqavonovono, 2009). A senior player explains:

So the whole province comes together to take care of the [men's] team. If the leaders of the province don't see women's rugby as something, then you will be at the bottom level of everything. Once they take care of their main team, then what's left will be given to the women.

'What's left' is often little, given that the national and provincial unions are under-resourced in the first place and dependent on sponsorships and grants. Rugby is largely a non-professional sport in Fiji, and the only monetary rewards for provincial players are modest allowances paid to squad members during camps, tournaments and tours. In 2020, one provincial union was able to pay women squad members a weekly allowance of just F\$20 (approximately US\$9) and their male counterparts F\$80 (US\$37). The women's allowance was below the weekly Basic Needs Poverty Line of F\$55 (US\$27) per adult in urban areas (FBS, 2015). Similarly, many participants were excited that women's national team players began to be contracted, but added that their annual remuneration package of F\$8,000–14,000 (US\$3,900–6,800) (in 2020) fell short of a full-time salary.⁶ Women's national/provincial teams have also worked to lift their playing standard with modest camp accommodation, facilities and support services:

'Men's team, if they are playing next month, next thing, they will be camping at a hotel, and us gang, we'll be camping in the community hall' (see also Besnier and Brownell, 2016; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2019; Vuli, 2022). Sharing limited resources with the more established men's game has impacted on the organisational support available to the women.

The women's challenges within institutional settings have at times gone beyond securing resources; it has in some cases extended to experience of gender policing. In particular, there have been attempts to 'heterosexualise' the game by censoring the players' gendered appearance. As one club administrator observes: 'there's always attempts to make women's rugby sexier, prettier so that there's acceptance at the national level'. She recalls an occasion when an official 'asked the girls to cut their hair. You know they have these short, funky hairstyles going on. They wanted to chop it all off. They impose on the girls to look a certain way, because of this [lesbian] image'. Players have also spoken of cases in the past where openly lesbian athletes were dropped from team selection, which sent many 'back into hiding, taking their photos with partners off Facebook'. It must be stressed that a number of male coaches and officials have been key allies of the women and provided critical technical, organisational and moral support spanning decades (see Kanemasu and Molnar, 2019; Vuli, 2022). The work of these individuals as well as the structural and policy support of FRU and associated rugby bodies has been essential to the growth of the women's game. The research participants' accounts nonetheless add nuances to the picture by illustrating the layers of historical and ongoing adversities they have battled with.

Battling against family/community antagonism

As critical as institutional settings are to the women's rugby pursuits, for some players, the immediate challenge is negotiating their standing within their family and community, which may be far more onerous. Women rugby players have historically faced an array of backlash at family and community levels, in stark contrast to the concerted assistance offered to male players. Families, villages and provinces, fiercely proud of their 'rugby boys', are usually the primary source of financial and emotional support for young men in pursuit of rugby careers (Guinness, n.d., 2018; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2014). The same families and communities can be 'hostile' environments for women players (Kanemasu, Johnson and Molnar, 2019).

It is important to note that some women players' families take great pride in their sporting career, especially if they reach the elite level. Family support has indeed become much more evident since the national team's recent rise to glory. However, historically and generally, families have ranged from being indifferent to intensely hostile, and few have shown tangible support by attending games or fundraising events. Some have prevented their daughters/sisters/wives from playing, even at the elite level, where national squad

members have dropped out as a result of family/spouse disapproval. Consequently, some women have concealed their involvement in rugby from their family or continued to play in the face of relentless objection. Many have also been confronted with negative community sanctions. Typical community perceptions of the women were expressed by male school-teachers in a focus group discussion in 2016:

When you look at the overseas women's rugby, they are very feminine, nice long hair, you know, a really female look. It's just our Fiji rugby women, they cut their hair short, so toughed up; sometimes you wonder whether they are actually male or female!

One thing that I hate to see is for girls to act like boys and play rugby. When you see New Zealand and Australia, it's the mums who play rugby. It's a little different with us; that is not happening. I don't want to see them turning into boy-girl when they go out and play rugby. I want them to be still girls, you know.

As these statements illustrate, family/community disapproval is often not simply about women's encroachment on a male preserve but essentially about their (perceived or actual) gender (and by implication sexual) variance. Antagonism therefore translates into not just an absence of support but active sabotage and punitive violence. Emotional abuse, such as insults, threats, intimidation, ridicule and jeering, is the most prevalent form of violent sanction: 'You know, the Fijian mouth is very sharp. They say we are not good; we are meant to be in the kitchen rather than come and play. Those kinds of things, those kinds of words come out from their mouths'. The players have had to consistently endure spectator jeering at matches, although it has somewhat abated in the past few years. An experienced athlete recounted her early experience at a friendly match with a visiting overseas team:

When we were playing [the visiting team] at Albert Park and the girls were lining up and we were ready, the guy, the MC, he was edging everybody on and he just made fun of us, right in front of these [visiting team] girls. Because he was the MC, he got all the attention, and in our culture, if one starts laughing, all start laughing, and they literally chased us off the field and we just went and played at the next ground, yeah.

Lesbophobic/genderphobic abuse has been directed at players of all levels, including the national team, as this squad experienced as recently as in 2020:

Sometimes we are training, and they [people] pass, and they are calling us, 'You guys are lesbians! They are gay!' 'Just go and cook!' We were training at Bidesi [sports ground], the national squad, and a bus went past, and the students from [school name] were in the bus. They were yelling out, '*Panikeke!*' *Panikeke* means lesbian. We are the national team!

Physical violence has also been a part of the struggle of many players, and whilst sexual violence may be less common, two athletes I interviewed in 2014 and 2020, respectively, knew of a case of corrective rape of a rugby player. Women generally avoid discussing violence, especially of physical and sexual nature, 'because it's still a *tabu* [taboo]'. An elite player has 'heard a few stories; it's quite heart-breaking to hear. There's a lot of them but only a few who know their stories ... it's like you peel an onion, one layer at a time, then they start to share'. A number of players have over the years shared with me their own or friends' experience of physical violence in the family:

I really did not have much [family] support, because my big brother beat me when he saw me playing rugby with the boys. My dad left when I was 11 years old. My brother did not like me to follow boys, so when that happened, he always punched me up.

There was a young woman who was playing rugby, and her brother found out. And he beat her up ... When her father came, she was bleeding and everything. The father asked her mum, 'What happened?' When the mother told him, he said [to his daughter], '[The beating was] Good for you!'

It also happens in the wider community:

It's when we go off the field, like when we go to drinking parties, they [men] say 'Those are rugby girls', and they punch because we look like boys. Last time, one of them [women players] got punched up because they [men] thought it was a boy but she was a girl ... They can't stand women being strong.

Violence, then, 'can come from the family. It can come from the neighbour. It can come from the township, from anybody'. Such relentless retribution serves as an effective means of control. A great majority of the women I have interviewed knew of other women who were directly or indirectly coerced into giving up the sport.

In the face of adversities

Until recently, the multiple layers of heteropatriarchal sanctions left only a small number of 'diehard' players whose passion for the game was central to their lives and identities (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017a, 2019; Kanemasu, Johnson and Molnar, 2019). Even with an increasing player base, rugby remains a minority sport among women in Fiji. The 'last ones standing', so to speak, are prepared to pursue the game at a remarkable cost. A number of senior players/administrators have successful professional careers, but many exited formal education early and the majority (estimated by the research

participants at 60–70%) are unemployed. In one Suva-based club, 80–90% of the players were not in paid employment in 2020. Some may sustain themselves by taking up underpaid ‘odd jobs’ and seasonal work in areas such as construction and other manual labour. Compounded by the limited institutional resources and little family/community support, the lack of wage employment results in severe material hardships.

The women’s clubs, none of which receives sustained corporate sponsorship, rely on fundraising among themselves to meet basic material needs like rugby gear and game/tournament costs. They must do without medical insurance (other than that provided for national squad members), and many injured players turn to traditional healers whose services do not require payment. Those who cannot afford bus fares to reach training/match venues walk for miles or are assisted by other players: ‘And the girls still show up. If they have no money, they come and share one tuna sandwich with each other. That’s how it is’. There have been cases where players have been without adequate housing as a result of being turned out of their home or leaving their home by choice to avoid harassment and persecution:

A lot of women get beaten up. [Player name] too. She was 17 when she started hanging out with the rugby gang... It was not her father; it was her mother who used to beat her up. But she continued. She left home and lived with rugby players. They would stay in a house with 20 or 15 rugby players. This would be in places like [an informal settlement]. I even went there and drank there a few times. I looked at the space and wondered, ‘Man, how do they make it?’ They don’t work. Only one could be working out of 15, or two could be working out of 20 ... It was really sad. Yet this is the place where they could feel safe.

The players stress that this happens less frequently today. But some continue to shelter those who are otherwise destitute, and others may share board and lodging in times of difficulty:

She [a rugby player] ran away from home; she came to the space where all these sportswomen stay when they are pushed away from home, when they can’t go back home due to the verbal abuse they face because of the sports they’re taking up ... The violence that we face from our community, from home ... we always go and look after each other just to continue the love of the sport ... coming together, paying the rent, or when there’s no food, if you just have rice and [tinned] tuna together, if there is six or ten of us, we just share ... When we go into the field it’s all rugby, rugby, but when we come out of the field, we think of how we’re gonna live day by day, the struggle of getting the fare to go to training.

Thus, being a woman rugby player can be an unforgiving and trying existence. As the Fijiana prepared for the RWC qualifiers in 2016, a squad

member compared themselves with Global North teams who ‘play rugby as a living ... play day in and day out and get paid to do it. The rest of us – it’s purely our passion and love for the game and wanting to represent the country that keeps us going’. Another elite player, interviewed in 2020, reflected on their journey of struggle as tears welled up in her eyes:

I always tell the national team, ‘If the boys can do it, why can’t we?’ We can also do that. We can be standing on the podium lifting the trophy, make Fiji proud. We just need the support, those words of support and advice. The boys are called our heroes, our warriors, our legends, you know. Those kinds of words, they can tell us too. Look at other countries like Australia, New Zealand, the women. Australian women are better than men. I just wish those kinds of support is given to us.

In recent years, several national/regional/international bodies have become involved in the game, with increasing policy interest in ‘sport for development’ (Henne and Pape, 2018) as a backdrop. This has resulted in multi-agency interventions aimed at addressing social barriers to women’s participation, involving FRU, Oceania Rugby, the Fiji government, local CSOs, UN Women and donor countries (see, e.g., Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016; UN Women, 2018). These interventions, along with FRU’s gender mainstreaming initiatives, are beginning to shift the dynamics surrounding the game. Still, grassroots athletes’ daily realities may be far removed from the sanguine message of ‘Girls Can Play Any Sport’ (UN Women Asia and the Pacific, 2020) celebrated by development agency discourse.

Sport, violence and heteropatriarchy

Feminist and critical sport scholars have examined the nexus between sport, violence and (hetero)patriarchy (Brackenridge, Ruskin and Lämmer, 2001; Bryson, 1983, 1987; Daimon, 2010; Dunning, 1990, 1999; Dunning and Maguire, 1996; Lenskyj, 1986, 1990; Messner, 1990, 2007; Messner and Sabo, 1994; Tjønndal, 2016). Messner (1990, p. 204) in his early work noted that ‘one of the key elements in the elevation of the male-body-as-superior is the use (or threat) of violence’. Sport plays a crucial role in facilitating ‘male dominance not only through the exclusion or marginalisation of females, but through the association of males with violence ... Modern sport naturalised the equation of maleness with violence, thus lending support and legitimation to patriarchy’ (Messner, 1990, p. 205). ‘Combat sports’ like rugby, where sporting ‘warriors’ symbolically and materially (re)construct masculine corporeal power, become a powerful medium of such processes of normalisation. These sports serve as a conspicuous site of gendered spectacle of ‘the ultimate basis of social power – physical force’ (Bryson, 1983, p. 413). In this context, (especially non-heteronormative) women’s persistent claim on rugby, the

quintessential violent sport and 'flag-carrier' of masculinism (Bryson, 1990, p. 174), is a direct challenge to the gender/sexual/corporeal configuration of power; it can therefore incur violent reprisals in attempts to reclaim physical power in the service of heteropatriarchy. It is in this sense that 'women's exclusion from sport is linked to the constraints on women's lives posed by male violence' (Lenskyj, 1990, p. 236).

Not surprisingly, then, while studies show that sport participation can reduce athletes' likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment and victimisation (Fasting, et al., 2008; Taylor, et al., 2012) and intimate partner violence (Milner and Baker, 2017), there is also evidence that it can be a risk factor for women in 'masculine' sports (Fasting, et al., 2004) and minority athletes in terms of ethnicity, sexuality and disability (Vertommen, et al., 2016). The so-called female apologetic – women athletes' display of normative femininity and heterosexuality to compensate for their masculine sport and/or body (Cahn, 1994; Caudwell, 1999; Scraton, et al., 1999; Watson, 1987) – can also be understood in this light. Researchers have documented North American women rugby players positioning themselves as 'a cute rugby team' (Adjepong, 2015) and 'Barbie dolls on the pitch' (Ezzell, 2009). Following Kandiyoti's (1988, p. 274) concept of 'patriarchal bargain', it is useful to consider how 'different forms of patriarchy present with distinct "rules of the game" and call for different strategies to maximise and optimise life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance'. For women engaged in sports where heteropatriarchal stakes are particularly high, apologetic display may serve their immediate interest of pre-empting negative and possibly violent sanctions.

At the same time, other women rugby players in American and British settings have been shown to adopt markedly unapologetic approaches. Broad (2001), Chase (2006), Gill (2007), Hardy (2014) and Wheatley (1994) all discuss women's rugby practice as acts of disrupting heteronormativity. The most evidently oppositional interpretation is offered by Broad (2001), who sees an American women's rugby club as a site of queer resistance consisting of gender transgression, destabilisation of heterosexual-homosexual binarism and 'in your face' confrontations of stigma. Fijian rugby players have also steadfastly resisted pressure for apologetic display, but under considerably different conditions. In their case, the country's postcolonial social order is inextricably meshed with heteropatriarchy: the gender/sexual/corporeal power matrix is doubly consecrated on traditionalist and (ethno- and postcolonial) nationalist terms and defended with myriad institutional, family and community sanctions. In particular, the use of physical power, and its sanction by diffuse militarism, became the lynchpin of this postcolonial heteropatriarchy. As Thompson (2014, p. 6) puts it, 'privileged iterations of Indigenous Fijian masculinity have been continuously reproduced through acts of force and violence that in turn reinforce the significance of physical strength'. Breaking through such sanctions demands great sacrifice on the part of dissident women, especially

if they are unapologetic: these women show no intention of engaging in heteronormative compensation, far from emulating the overseas 'Barbie dolls on the pitch' that community members may approve of.

Silent resistance and counter-hegemonic struggle

It is important to note that Fiji's postcolonial heteropatriarchy presents its own 'rules of the game' (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 274), which constrain the scope for the 'in-your-face' queer resistance of the American players in Broad's (2001) study or the 'violent femininity' of the British players Gill (2007) describes as militant and not hesitant about retaliating verbally and physically against any attack. In the above-mentioned example of a Fijian player punched by a stranger, the player herself and the others around her did not protest or react to the assault. As noted earlier, most players choose not to publicly assert their gender identifications or sexual orientations, and do not openly discuss, and much less report, incidents of violence and abuse. There is an absence of the kind of direct counter-attack or militant resistance documented among unapologetic Western women rugby players. Some clubs and players have connected with women's rights and lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) bodies over the years, which may foster more formal activism in the future, as discussed at the end of this chapter. But historically and predominantly, grassroots rugby players have operated outside of open resistance or organised political action. This should be considered in the context of 'culture of silence' in Fiji and the broader Pacific, which 'condemns women's assertiveness as disrespectful to those with traditional power' (Reddy, 2012, p. 155), which, in turn, calls for attention to the specific 'varieties of patriarchy' at play (Hunnicut, 2009). As outlined above, Fijian women rugby players are confronted with a socially sanctioned, culturally validated form of heteropatriarchy where 'the use of violence as a form of discipline and conflict resolution is normalised' (FWCC, 2013, p. 70). What this means on the ground is illuminated by *Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality Fiji*, an LBT-led feminist collective:

Many proposed attempts at change, dissent and difference in Fiji are not allowed to breathe and form. They are squashed early, quickly and effectively through social, economic and political sanctions... There is mental, physical and sexualised violence and disciplining of bodies in terms of hair, clothes, dress and body language. There is a pressure to conform and expect others to do the same, even as we outwardly push for diversity and difference.

(DIVA for Equality, 2019, p. 19)

Under these conditions, many women choose not to openly protest. But if their struggle is unspoken and implicit, it is also persistent and unyielding. In the face of myriad sanctions, not giving up the game is, in itself, resistance.

In the words of Fiji's late high court judge and vice-president, Jone Madraiwiwi (2016):

'Silence' does not necessarily mean consent. It is the lack of oral and written expression about issues passing for acquiescence. From the colonial era to the present, Taukei [indigenous Fijians] took refuge in silence until the political climate improved.

For these women, persistence is the primary medium of resistance – i.e., silent refusal to give up the game, apologise for it, or abandon their haircuts, musculature, 'tomboy' demeanour or intimate relations. This may be deemed covert resistance due to its tacit nature; yet it is equally overt in that they very visibly and collectively persist with their rugby pursuit as well as gender nonconformity on and off the field. The women I interviewed all stressed, often passionately, that they fought back through their rugby practice:

Nobody talks back [when verbally abused] ... We just do our own training. Not to give up. Just go hard. We just keep on doing what we love. Keep on training. Never mind they talk like that, but we just show them in the field, attending training every day. We just keep on doing what we love. We won't give up.

The oppositional strategy they employ is thus considerably different from those documented in Western literature. Importantly, such resistance is far from passive victimhood. It indeed brings them much joy and a collective sense of fulfilment and agency. In one of my first interviews in 2012, well before the Fijiana's recent successes, a pioneer player shared with me what it meant to her to claim this sport in the midst of community animosity:

I like the part of being physical, telling the other girls that we are strong, we can do this ... At first when I played in [front of] a crowd, I felt really nervous, because this is a men's game. But when I made a try in [front of] this big crowd, it really built something in me: 'I can do this, we can do this. Even though people are laughing at us, we still can do this'.

Further, if their rugby practice attracts heteropatriarchal backlash, it also provides a refuge from it, and for some, a critical sense of belonging not found in other social spaces:

The sense of community is stronger because we share the struggle as we try to make it. We know that we have this discrimination issue, and we're all together and know that we all have similar problems. It makes it easier for us to bear the burden, to help each other out ... So it's sort of a community happening.

Most of the girls playing rugby, the sport is their getaway. It is the way of feeling some belonging. I am appreciative of that because a lot of them came from broken homes. For their sexuality they were kicked out of their homes ... Rugby became a place where families were built.

Silence tends to be 'associated with violence, and thus disempowerment and disenfranchisement' in Western liberal discourse (Dingli, 2015, p. 723), but postcolonial/transnational feminists and other critical scholars have questioned the binary opposition between voice-agency and silence-oppression (Glenn, 2004; Parpart and Parashar, 2019; Parpart, 2020). Parpart (2009) calls attention to the material and discursive conditions that determine who can speak and thereby render silence and secrecy crucial survival strategies for some women. Silence may provide 'empowered choices/agency for women in an often masculinist, dangerous and conflict-ridden world' (Parpart, 2009, p.16). Bhattacharya (2009, p. 360) argues in an Indian tribal setting that, where the scope for formal and overt resistance is limited, silence may be deployed by women:

as a tool to resist the very discourses that imposed the silence in the first place ... Although there is a silencing, there is also a subverting of precisely the structures that silence, which is employed by individual women in and through different acts of resistance. These are the interventions the women make and negotiate everyday.

In the case of Fijian women rugby players, even as they outwardly swallow retributions in silence, they work steadily at reconfiguring the gendered rugby discourse. This transformative practice may be discussed with reference to Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony/counter-hegemony, which explicates relations of power as both maintained and contested through the medium of cultural struggle. Hegemony/counter-hegemony, according to Gramsci (1971, p. 349), does not rest on the imposition of an already-formulated discourse but emerges out of a strategic and contested process, whereby differential interests and discourses are continually aligned, realigned and disaligned to form a 'common conception of the world'. Here, rugby nationalism constitutes a site of such counter-hegemonic struggle. With their growing international profile, the women have sought to align themselves with the nationalist rugby discourse that celebrates excellence in the sport as a matter of Fijians' pride and challenge to geopolitical marginalisation. Researchers have previously shown how the symbolic power of the game has been mobilised for multiple purposes in the context of national and international politics. In particular, the Fiji government has actively used rugby to project an image of national unity at times of domestic political tensions (Cattermole, 2008), promote the nation globally and claim its own legitimacy in the wake of the coups (Connell, 2018). The women players have waged their own counter-hegemonic battle by seeking to capture the

game's potent national symbolism and disrupt its hegemonic articulation with heteropatriarchy:

At the end of the day, it's not about women or men playing the sport, it's about making the nation proud. What they [people] should try and realise is ... when you go inside that field and you're wearing the Fiji jersey, you take the pride of the nation with you.

The women have scored some major victories in this battle (Kanemasu, 2022). There have been cases of elite players being able to convince their family and village to support them when selected into the national team, because 'it's everyone's dream here to don the national jumper'. The coveted honour of carrying the pride of the nation in the privileged sport has had notable persuasive effects:

They [the participant's village] are so proud of me because I'm the only one in the village who represents Fiji. No men, no women, only me in my village, eh. That's why when I come back, they all want to celebrate with me. They do the *lovo*,⁷ drink *kava*. They tell me to bring all the team [members] to come and celebrate with me at the village.

In fact, many of the Olympic bronze medallists, who previously struggled with the disapproval of their families, are now accepted with enthusiasm:

A few girls that I came across would hide from home, because their parents, mainly their dad, would say, 'That [rugby] is not for you' ... An example is [player name]. She's a bronze medallist for the Fijiana. She used to run away from home, getting the smack from her dad. But she kept going, she kept going, and now, she's built a house for herself, and the dad is fully supporting her. From the smacking and slapping to a hero.

Beyond these individual cases, the women's RWC qualification and especially Olympic medal – the ultimate 'proof' of their legitimacy as rugby players with the designated mission of 'putting Fiji on the map' – have recently brought about what appears to be a dramatic shift in the public discourse around the game. Since the Olympic achievement, numerous laudatory comments from community members have been posted on women's clubs' and the Fijiana's social media pages. There has been a sudden increase in the number of schoolgirls and young women interested in taking up the sport. National team players who have become familiar faces via televised games and media coverage are greeted and congratulated by strangers on the streets. In March 2022, the Fiji government issued another special seven-dollar banknote to commemorate the double Olympic victory, with images of the Fijiana on the obverse and the men's side on the reverse (Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2 Olympic Medal Commemorative \$7 Banknote, 2022.

This is a moment of vindication for veteran rugby women who have persevered for so long: ‘Nobody supported us, nobody believed in us. But now, we’re in the world stage’. A pioneer player looked back on the early days of her rugby career as she shared her feelings about the Fijiana’s Olympic feat:

You know, one time, we were playing and we lost to [another club]. And the commentator goes: ‘Well, you were made to be in the kitchen’. It still rings in my head today. Think about that. From that time to watching them win bronze. I just banged down the table and said: ‘We were not made to be in the kitchen! We can be in the kitchen; we can be in the ground; we can be anywhere!’

The structural implications of this remarkable milestone nevertheless require critical scrutiny, given the enduring nature of the hegemonic rugby discourse.

Key figures in the women's rugby community observe that, even with considerable improvement in their standing, the sport's gender order persists, including in institutional resource distribution. Within families and communities, heteropatriarchal sanctions may remain just under the surface. Many Fijians, in a seasoned athlete's view, continue to think: 'While you're producing results, you're still this and that ... While they're supportive of rugby, sometimes the tradition and culture still creeps in. And it still influences the way families make decisions and how they control the young women'. Moreover, if their claim to sporting/social legitimacy is contingent upon high performance outcomes, their legitimacy may be essentially conditional, and even transient. Even so, the latest developments signify major advances in their struggle over the nation's most prestigious and gendered game, revealing that heteropatriarchy, like any relations of power, is never static or total. Heteropatriarchal systems are 'varieties in movement' (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 559) inherently susceptible to historical transformation. With their 'collective embodied silence' (Parpart, 2020, p. 321), the women continue to wage their counter-hegemonic battle against all odds.

Conclusion

The trajectory of the rugby women's journey in the coming years may be impacted by some trends emerging from broader social domains. These include the shifts brought on by the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic-imposed gap in the activities, routines, priorities and plans of athletes, coaches, officials and sporting stakeholders proved to be another counter-hegemonic opportunity. For instance, the cancellations of World Rugby Sevens Series tournaments in 2020 and 2021 and other international tours of the men's national team, which normally occupy the public and media attention and claim most of institutional resources, created a space where women's teams were able to increase their visibility and gain greater media coverage and public support. In the absence of glitzy international tournaments, people followed provincial matches,⁸ including women's, more closely:

So we had a jam-packed stadium watching the Tailevu [province] women win [a provincial tournament match]. I think after that experience, there were a lot of likes on our Tailevu women's Facebook page. Now they [people] are giving advice, you should do this, you should do that – you know, technical advice. I think it brought a really positive impact. It was a really big plus during this COVID.

A number of players and administrators shared similar observations, pointing to possible shifts in spectatorship and an opportunity for the women's game to be more substantially integrated into provincial rugby. At the institutional level, the disruptions caused by the pandemic to the rugby calendar resulted in women's and grassroots rugby development receiving

renewed attention from policy makers and administrators. Combined with their rising international profile, the women may make further gains out of these unexpected shifts in the status quo.

In addition, the possible alignment mentioned earlier of the rugby women's struggle and rights-based advocacy may assume greater significance in the future. Despite the persisting influence of cultural/religious traditionalism and the setbacks CSO activism has suffered from the recurrent coups, global human rights discourse is increasingly and diversely being appropriated by women, non-heteronormative Fijians and other historically marginalised social groups in their claims to equality (see, e.g., Llewellyn-Fowler, 2010). A veteran athlete observes that, while, previously, 'no one could say the word "lesbian"; we said "*viavia tagane*", tomboy', younger players of today are developing an awareness that gender equality is 'under World Rugby law, SOGIESC [sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics]. Yep, you cannot be discriminating ... They know their rights'. The growing reach of rights-based movements may offer these women new agentic resources and possibilities.

The rugby women have come a long way. Their journey, with its many pains and gains, offers insights into how a community of marginalised women, even under the most entrenched heteropatriarchal conditions, find ways to negotiate and surmount them. They do this to continue to play the sport of their passion; to claim it as a medium of their gender identification and embodiment; and to defend it as a subaltern community where they stand by and with each other against external hostility. In this process, silent resistance is the strategy the players have deemed the most effective under the existing conditions, coupled with sustained attempts at contesting and re-working the hegemonic rugby discourse.

In discussing these athletes as the 'irrepressible subaltern' (Thomas, 2018, p. 871), it is equally important to highlight the affliction their resistance has caused them. Their persistent and visible nonconformity has entailed severe and often violent ramifications. For much of the game's history, only the most ardently committed were able to continue with their pursuit. This reveals not only that women in a highly antagonistic environment can nevertheless cultivate strategic avenues for exercising resistive agency, but also that they may do so at serious cost to their immediate wellbeing and even safety.

The women's game also has other important dimensions that need to be acknowledged. In particular, rugby is deeply implicated in ethno-racial as well as gendered relations of power in Fiji. The women's rugby community has been overwhelmingly indigenous and may inadvertently reproduce the exclusion of Indo-Fijians and other non-indigenous Fijians. Few Indo-Fijian athletes, coaches and officials are found in women's and men's rugby at all (and especially elite) levels (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c). Indigenised rugby practices like Christian rituals at meetings/games and the use of the indigenous Fijian language as the primary medium of communication have

become entrenched in the game (Guinness, n.d., 2018; Presterudstuen, 2010; Schieder, 2012). In this regard, the ethno-racial hierarchy of physical power that rugby has historically consolidated remains unchallenged. Moreover, in this corporeal-political landscape, Indo-Fijians and women are not the only subordinated groups; so are all those whose bodily functions are least aligned with the dominant ideals of physical prowess. Deaf rugby, for instance, has existed in near-isolation since its inception in the late 1990s, without even formal affiliation with FRU (Kanemasu, 2020).

Hence, the women may be battling a corner of rugby's extensive and complex power matrix. But it is a highly consequential battle. Because heteropatriarchy with the armour of militarism has become central to Fiji's postcolonial social order, the women's counter-hegemonic victories may be creating a fissure that may ultimately open up further space for 'multiple appropriations of democratic discourse' (Smith, 2003, p. 9) challenging multiple power differentials in the manner envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) version of hegemony. Notably, Indo-Fijian and Deaf rugby players are already engaged in their own struggle against racialised and ableist rugby discourses and practices (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c; Kanemasu, 2020). It remains to be seen if a new counter-hegemonic project articulating a multiplicity of emancipatory struggles can emerge from these contestations over a sport that both unites and divides the nation like no other.

Meanwhile, the women battle on:

Even though there are a lot of problems, like our bus fares and how people treat us – people are talking from outside – we just don't care about it because we *love* this game [emphasis original]. We love it. It's our talent. They can't stop us.

Notes

- 1 Super W is an Australian women's rugby union club competition. The Fijiana competed in Super W, under the new franchise Fijiana Drua, for the first time in 2022.
- 2 The Fijiana Drua in fact outperformed the Fijian Drua, the men's franchise, who finished 11th out of 13 teams in the same year's Super Rugby Pacific season, the first Super Rugby season that included a Fijian team and a combined Pacific Island team, Moana Pasifika.
- 3 *Kava* (also called *yaqona*) refers to the plant *Piper methysticum* and the drink made from it, which has historically had ceremonial and spiritual significance and is today also consumed for social and recreational purposes.
- 4 A recent rise in the number of girls and women interested in the game, following the Fijiana's Olympic medal achievement, may result in greater diversity in the player population.
- 5 The Fiji Women's Rugby Union became dormant by 2018 due to legal ambiguities surrounding its existence and the incorporation of the women's clubs into the provincial unions.
- 6 The national average income was approximately F\$20,000 (US\$9,760) in 2019 (Narsey, 2020). The men's national sevens team salaries were reported in 2014 as

F\$20,000 annum for 'world class' players, F\$17,500 for 'middle class' players and F\$15,000 for 'players who have established themselves in the national team' (Mannan, 2014).

- 7 *Lovo* refers to an underground earth oven used to cook indigenous Fijian feasts. The term also refers to the cooking method.
- 8 Fiji was largely COVID-19-free in 2020. Although the country was hit by the first wave of the pandemic, which led to a three-month sporting ban, domestic competitions were resumed thereafter. The second wave in 2021 resulted in much more extensive sporting restrictions.

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3 Athletic Indo-Fijian Women Beyond Sporting Absence

I want to be stronger, every single day.

Introduction

Sports fans, journalists and researchers tend to associate Fiji primarily with men's rugby; given the prominence of the sport, they may even be able to name some Fijian star players. Images of athletic and muscular Fijian men of rugby have been disseminated across the global media and constitute the sporting face of the nation today (Chapter 2, this volume). For those who are unfamiliar with rugby, Fiji may represent, more than anything else, an idyllic holiday destination. The country's successful tourism industry has long relied on a widely established notion of a smiling and amiable indigenous population, alongside the tropical setting, as its marketing image (Kanemasu, 2013a,b). Typically described as the 'friendliest people in the world' (Hackwood, 2012), indigenous Fijians have taken centre stage not only in tourism posters and advertisements but also as front-line workers at hotels and tourist facilities. These images of sporting prowess and holiday idylls share a notable commonality; their predominantly indigenised character, which is peculiar considering the multi-ethnic nature of the postcolonial nation. Fiji has two main ethnic groups, indigenous Fijians (57% of the national population) and Indo-Fijians (37%), with smaller communities of Fijians of Chinese, European, mixed-heritage, Rotuman and other Pacific Island descent (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Despite comprising the second-largest group, Indo-Fijians have historically been absent in dominant sporting and touristic representations of their country. In sporting spaces, they are presumed to be rugby fans on the side lines or confined to the 'Indian sport' of soccer (Sugden, 2017); in tourism, they tend to be 'hidden' in their back-office roles such as in the hotel accounts, maintenance and kitchen (Kanemasu, 2013a,b; Naidu, 2013).

The invisibility of Indo-Fijians in the two primary depictions of the nation illustrates how Fiji's sporting arena and other social spheres like tourism deeply shape and are shaped by the country's postcolonial social order. In particular, there is a long history of politicisation of ethnicity in Fiji, which dates back to colonial divide-and-rule policy (Ghai and Cottrell, 2007;

Naidu, 2008; Pangerl, 2007; Ramesh, 2019) and has manifested most violently in ethno-nationalist coups d'état of 1987 and 2000. This history has profoundly conditioned many social arenas, despite the fact that the government that stayed in power for nearly 16 years following the last military coup of 2006 (until its election defeat in 2022) officially upheld a multi-ethnic national vision. In the sporting domain, indigenous Fijians have dominated at both high performance and recreational levels, the most conspicuous example of which is the 'national' sport of rugby (Chapter 2, this volume; Kanemasu, 2019; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013; Sugden, 2017; Sugden, Kanemasu and Adair, 2020). The postcolonial ethno-racial relations that have often rested on the exercise/threat of physical force have been paralleled by heavily racialised sporting discourses and practices.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 2, Fiji's postcolonial hierarchy of 'race' is inextricably meshed with a heteropatriarchy anchored in the convergence of indigenous masculinism, the primacy of physicality, traditionalism and nationalism. In this context, the dominant discourse of indigenous masculine physical power locates non-indigenous women, especially Indo-Fijian women, in a position of double marginalisation, whereby their pursuit of sport or physical activity is negated on racialised as well as gendered terms. Historically, Indo-Fijian women have been among the most under-represented in Fiji's sporting and athletic scenes. Fiji's 2012, 2016 and 2020 Summer Olympic and Paralympic contingents, for instance, did not include any Indo-Fijian woman. In another telling statistic, out of the 216 women athletes listed as 'Top 10 All Time' by Athletics Fiji (n.d.), only four (collectively appearing nine times on the list) are Indo-Fijian.¹ Similarly, in school athletics, as one of my research participants observed, 'one in 100 athletes in Zones Games [a prominent inter-house athletic competition] would be an Indo-Fijian girl'. A common view of Indo-Fijian women's/girls' limited sporting presence is that it is simply a matter of lack of interest among them and (in the case of schoolgirls) the well-known Indo-Fijian family emphasis on academic attainment. This explanation has been presented to me by many sporting stakeholders in my ongoing research in Fiji.

Yet, a small number of Indo-Fijian women stake a claim to athleticism,² even if it is a solitary struggle, by employing options and strategies available to them. These are often found in recreational and individual athletic pursuits, while some women take on multiple barriers to enter competitive and/or team sports. This chapter explores their narratives of sporting experiences and challenges, which demonstrate that Indo-Fijian women's sporting 'absence' is far more complex than a matter of 'choice' or personal volition and is in fact integral to the broader socio-historical conditions under which constructions of physicality are asserted and contested. These accounts also show that Indo-Fijian women, in their varied social locations, cultivate varied spaces for physical agency, calling into question uncritical assumptions about their absence in the sporting and athletic arena. It is important to note that little academic or institutional attention has been paid to Indo-Fijian women's

engagement with sport and physical activity to date (see, for exceptions, Balrum, 2022; Balrum, Pang and Knijnik, 2022; Kanemasu, 2019; Sugden, Kanemasu and Adair, 2020). This chapter is intended to challenge the structural and epistemic violence against athletic Indo-Fijian women by illuminating some of the insights emanating from their voices. The inquiry is centrally focused on the ways in which these women negotiate racialised and gendered sporting discourses and the transformative potentials of such infra-political practices by the ‘marginalised of the marginalised’.

The discussions in this chapter rely on primary data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 physically active Indo-Fijian women, two female (one indigenous Fijian and one mixed-heritage) fitness trainers with experience of working with Indo-Fijian women and one female (Indo-Fijian) instructor of classical Indian dance. The interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2021 in the capital city of Suva, with the exceptions of one interview in Lautoka (the second largest city) and two online. The physically active women were largely in their 20s and 30s, but also included one teenager and two in their early 40s. While all of the women were actively involved in sports or exercise (often multiple sports/physical activities, three or four days a week to every day), they also diversely pursued these activities. Five engaged solely or mostly in fitness exercise such as gym workouts and jogging; five played one or more sports such as powerlifting, bodybuilding, netball, hockey and soccer at elite (including national representative) levels; and another five played recreationally one or more of the following sports: soccer, netball, tennis, squash, volleyball, seven-a-side/touch rugby, karate, mixed martial arts, kick boxing and tang soo do. Seven were students and eight in professional occupations at the time of the interviews. Twelve were Hindus and three Christians. Six considered their family background conservative or ‘traditional’³ and seven as liberal or ‘modern’, with two identifying their families as between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. Four were married. Due to their minority status, it was a major challenge to identify these women, especially in elite and team sports. But once contacted (via personal networks and social media), they had much to share about their athletic quests and thoughts, which do not always find their way into public forums, as physically active Indo-Fijian women are simply assumed to be non-existent or treated as rare anomalies in an indigenised and masculine sporting world.

Postcolonial corporeal hierarchies of ‘race’ and gender

Indo-Fijians have been an integral part of Fiji’s social fabric since the late 19th century. Many are the descendants of approximately 60,000 indentured labourers (*girmitiya*) brought over by the British colonial government between 1879 and 1920 to work on sugar plantations under extremely harsh conditions (Lal, 2012; Naidu, 2004). By 1946, former *girmitiya*, their descendants and other immigrants from India (such as Punjabis

and Gujaratis as farmers, traders, merchants and artisans) outnumbered indigenous Fijians (Naidu, 2013). Indo-Fijians have maintained their faiths and related cultural practices, while caste distinctions have largely disappeared and there has been substantial inter-ethnic cultural overlap (Lal, 2004; Voigt-Graf, 2008). Approximately 77% are Hindus, 16% Muslims and 6% Christians (Prasad, 2007). The majority are labourers and peasant farmers, and many also run small businesses. Despite a myth of Indo-Fijian wealth, existing statistics show similar poverty rates for the two major ethnic groups (34% for Indo-Fijians and 37% for indigenous Fijians in 2008–2009) (World Bank, 2011). In fact, rural Indo-Fijians are among the poorest of the poor (Naidu, 2009, 2013; World Bank, 2011). Given nearly 88% of land in Fiji is owned by indigenous kinship units (*mataqali*) under a customary tenure system, Indo-Fijian tenant farmers depend on agricultural land leases for their livelihoods. Their economic prospects worsened significantly after the late 1990s, when many expiring leases were not renewed and displaced farmers were compelled to move to urban areas including informal settlements (Lal, 2019; Naidu, 2009; Naidu, et al., 2015; Pangerl, 2007; Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2017).

Fiji's colonial and postcolonial history has seen the socio-political marginalisation of Indo-Fijians. The colonial regime of 'indirect rule' championed indigenous Fijian interests vis-a-vis those of Indian immigrants in return for the allegiance of indigenous populations (S. Durutalo, 1986; A. Durutalo, 2008; Lawson, 2004; Naidu, 2007, 2008, 2013). Although it was primarily chiefs of eastern Fiji and the political/business elite (of various ethnicities) that gained privileged access to power and resources under this arrangement, it effectively politicised ethnicity and positioned the colonial government as the protector of indigenous Fijians (S. Durutalo, 1986; Lawson, 1991). This, Simone Durutalo (1986) argues, eventually rendered Fiji one of the few colonies where a substantial section of the indigenous population resisted calls for independence (eventually achieved in 1970). The notion of indigenous paramountcy gained wide currency despite significant intra-ethnic diversity, disparities and conflicts. It became the basis of a powerful ethno-nationalist discourse asserting that 'Fiji is their [indigenous Fijians'] God-given land and, as owners of the land, they have special rights and privileges that override the rights of citizens of other ethnicities' (Naidu, 2013, p. 11).

The masses of Indo-Fijians⁴ (along with western and interior indigenous Fijians) were excluded from this hegemonic alliance (S. Durutalo, 1986; Norton, 1990, 2002). By the early 20th century, Indo-Fijian groups began demanding political rights and actively pursued, through electoral means, political equality (especially with Europeans) in the form of a common roll, and later, independence (Ali, 1980; Gillion, 1977; Norton, 1990, 2002; Ramesh, 2019). With their population growth as a backdrop, Indo-Fijians came to be collectively regarded as a threat to the colonial order. The cultures and interests of the two ethnic groups were deemed diametrically opposed (Naidu, 2008,

2013; Norton, 1990), and mutual ethnic stereotypes developed, casting Indo-Fijians as ‘cunning’, ‘selfish’ and ‘scheming’ and indigenous Fijians ‘lazy’, ‘stupid’ and ‘savage’ (Ratuva, 2003, p. 315). The ethnic polarisation escalated especially in post-independence national politics, to the extent that, in the 1970s, Sakeasi Butadroka, a well-known ethno-nationalist politician, called for the repatriation of ‘Indians’ with the slogan: ‘Fiji for the Fijians’ (Lal, 2011 p. 417). Naidu observed in 2008:

Nearly a 100 years of British colonial policy of divide and rule has been accompanied by another four decades of post-colonial divisiveness by the country’s racially imbued state, communal electoral system and politicians who mastered playing the racial card in Fiji’s politics.

(Naidu, 2008, p. 159)

Ethnicity-based electoral rolls and parliamentary seat quotas were central to three of Fiji’s four post-independence constitutions. Institutional racism became widespread in public sector policies and the provision of public services (Naidu, 2008, 2009, 2013; OHCHR, 2017; Pangerl, 2007; Robertson and Sutherland, 2001). Indo-Fijian conformity to the racialised political arrangements was achieved largely by the actual use or threat of force. The 1987 military coups d’etat and attempted civilian coup in 2000, which forcibly removed the challenges to the entrenched order posed by newly elected governments (with support from the majority of the Indo-Fijian electorate), are conspicuous examples of this essentially coercive rule (Naidu, 2008, 2009, 2013). The 2000 putsch had particularly violent consequences (Naidu, 2007, 2013; Trnka, 2005, 2008). In the capital city, large-scale looting and arson attacks on Indo-Fijian businesses and properties took place. In isolated rural settlements:

Indo-Fijian families were physically assaulted, had their houses burned down, and were driven out of villages and off of their farmland. Many of those who fled made their way across Viti Levu [Fiji’s main island] to Lautoka where they spent months living in tents, making up Fiji’s first ‘refugee camp’.

(Trnka, 2008, p. 3)

The largely indigenous male involvement in these acts of violence asserted, in a blatant manner, indigenous masculine physical domination over Indo-Fijians (George, 2008). Following the ethno-nationalist coups, Indo-Fijians and their property remained common targets of violent crime (Naidu, 2008; Norton, 2000; Pangerl, 2007). Beyond physical and political domination, the rise of ethno-nationalism also entailed social and symbolic marginalisation of Indo-Fijians, whereby the indigenous Fijian cultural heritage was officially championed over that of Indo-Fijian and other communities. Writing in 2000, Norton (2000) observed ‘little attempt to

create a narrative of shared history and citizenship, and images of [indigenous] Fijian culture predominate in the public domain' (p. 87; see also Lal, 2012). A primary example is the touristic representation of the nation noted at the beginning of this chapter.

In staging the 2006 coup, Voreqe Bainimarama declared to 'end the indigenous capture of the state and promised a new system of good governance that would limit the political influence of the *lotu* (church) and the *vanua* (customary ways of the land)' (George, 2017, p. 63). In addition to disputes over its democratic credentials, the post-2006 Bainimarama government faced accusations of being anti-indigenous Fijian for abolishing or undermining powerful indigenous institutions,⁵ removing ethnicity-based state policies and introducing a common electoral roll (Naidu, 2013; Norton, 2015; OHCHR, 2017; Ratuva and Lawson, 2016; Trnka, 2008). The 2013 constitution enforced under the Bainimarama government proclaims all citizens to be called Fijians, breaking away from the ethnicity-based demonyms of 'Fijian' for indigenous Fijians and 'Indian' for Indo-Fijians, which were formerly widely used, including in the preceding constitutions. However, ethno-nationalism, fused with enduring traditionalism, has never receded from the country's socio-political landscape and continues to hold sway over significant sections of the indigenous population. In 2019, for instance, an ethno-nationalist parliamentarian stated in a controversial Facebook post that murder and stabbing were what the indigenous community learned from Indo-Fijians, whom he referred to as *vulagi* (foreigners) (FBC News, 2019). The most recent election in 2022 brought in a new coalition government (Herr, 2023), the impact of which on the nation's ethnic politics and broader social relations remains to be seen.

At this point, it is important to caution against a wholly dichotomic representation of Fiji's ethnic relations. As Pangerl (2007) and Naidu (2008) point out, there were and are mutual support and amity across the ethnic groups in everyday life. In Naidu's (2008, p.161) observation: 'given the extent of political instability and ethnic polarisation ... it is truly remarkable that the goodwill among ordinary people continues to persist'. This is particularly visible in western and northern Fiji compared to the central division where the capital is located (Doornbos and Akram-Lodhi, 2016; Naidu, 2013). Even during the ethno-nationalist coups, indigenous Fijians 'came to the aid of many Indo-Fijians ... but these actions were not highlighted in media or scholarly representations' (Pangerl, 2007, p. 256).⁶ A more nuanced discussion is not possible here, but it needs to be noted that Fiji's ethno-racial relations are complex, heterogeneous with geography and other social relations, and 'more apparent in politics than on the streets and in the marketplace' (Willard, 2018, p. 229). It is nonetheless evident that the ethnic politics has done immeasurable damage to Indo-Fijians' sense of security about their prospects in Fiji. The post-coup years have seen their mass emigration, reducing their proportion of the population from 51% in 1986 to 37% in 2007 (Pangerl, 2007). Indeed, a third of Indo-Fijians have left Fiji in the past four decades (Mohanty, 2017).

This is the socio-political context within which Indo-Fijian women experience sport and physical activity. It is a context where, 'as ethnicity became perpetually reproduced, politicised and crystallised, it also became objectified as a legitimate social construct and representation on its own, around which other realms of social existence were to be defined' (Ratuva, 2003, p. 318). In postcolonial Fiji, physical power has been systematically constructed as indigenous and masculine, and violently mobilised in the coercion of the Indo-Fijian masses (and other dissident Fijians such as non-conforming women, as discussed in Chapter 2). Physical prowess has become firmly articulated with indigenous male dominance, epitomised not only by the perpetrators of racialised violence but also, peculiarly, by the military that turned against ethno-nationalism under Bainimarama's rule yet is itself indigenous-male-dominated. Indo-Fijians, by contrast, have been 'often disparaged as "kai Idia,⁷ skinny malila"⁸ – a comment formed by the perception that Indo-Fijians' physical frames tend to be not as robust as those of indigenous Fijians' (Teaiwa, 2008, p. 122). In this context, sport, as a cultural expression of physical power, becomes a decidedly indigenous Fijian domain.

In addition, Indo-Fijian women are differently located under this corporeal hierarchy from Indo-Fijian men. While Indo-Fijian masculine physicality may be eclipsed by the racialised sporting discourse, Indo-Fijian men have cultivated their own sporting spaces, primarily soccer, which is multi-ethnic in terms of the player population and Indo-Fijian-dominated in administration and following. They have also developed sporting enclaves like car racing, which is practised, organised and supported almost exclusively by Indo-Fijian men and thus disrupts the indigenous sporting hegemony. Indo-Fijian women, on the other hand, are largely invisible in sporting spaces, as those who seek athleticism must jump the double hurdle of 'race' and gender, compounded by class, geography and other matrices of power. The rest of this chapter examines these intersecting barriers, the strategies Indo-Fijian women employ to negotiate them, and how their athletic practices hold out 'hidden' yet deeply oppositional and potentially transformative meanings and effects.

Contending with postcolonial corporeal hierarchies

The participants in this study, who took sport and/or exercise very seriously, are a part of a small minority. Few of them knew other Indo-Fijian women who were as actively involved in sport/exercise as themselves. The uncommon quest began, for some, as an effort to attain greater health or a desired body figure: concerns over body weight and/or health conditions such as asthma and diabetes were the initial motivation for several of these women to take up physical activity. For others, sport/exercise had always been their passion and had intrinsic, rather than instrumental, value to them. Various positioned in terms of motivation as well as family, socio-economic and religious

backgrounds, the participants' athletic experiences were diverse. But they all highlighted gendered barriers they themselves or other Indo-Fijian women were faced with in seriously pursuing sport/exercise. Primary amongst them is that, especially in 'traditional' families and communities, Indo-Fijian girls and women are not encouraged to be physically active due to entrenched patriarchal norms that define femininity as concomitant with domesticity and subordination to males. Such constructions of femininity, according to the participants, cut across religious faiths. Asked what she thought was the greatest impediment to Indo-Fijian women's participation in sport/exercise, this elite athlete responded with a typically expressed view:

It's culture ... Ever since you're little you are taught to stay in the kitchen, cooking, doing housework. The boys are allowed to go outside and play soccer, go to their friend's place and everything. But when it comes to a girl, if you want to go to a friend's place, you have ten questions to answer before you go ... That's when you start keeping yourself inside of the box ... and it's very hard to get out from the box. So growing up, you know what's right and wrong but it's not your right and wrong but what has been taught to you. So moving away from that is like the greatest barrier.

In families where girls 'have to have an inferior position, staying at home, and if someone visits, moving back inside [while the visitor is present] and all that', the scope for spatial mobility and bodily autonomy may be significantly restricted. The masculinist definition of physicality also fosters 'a very typical mentality where they think if a woman trains, she will become manly', or, conversely, generates persistent concerns over safety: 'I've had family members saying "What if you get hurt?" "What if you fall and break your bones?"'. Families also 'wouldn't want their daughters training out late, training in the evening, because they are scared of their daughters being raped while coming back home'. Further, as commonly known in Fiji, Indo-Fijian families place great importance on their children's academic advancement: 'That's the main thing for most Indo-Fijian families. They want their kids to do well academically'.

Under these circumstances, school sports and physical education (PE) may be the only opportunity for some girls to engage in sport/exercise. But schools often reflect and reproduce the dominant sporting discourse that positions Indo-Fijian girls as the antipode of physicality. While a few participants had started their athletic journey via school sports, others remembered the sporting environments in their schools as disheartening or indifferent. Although PE is compulsory in primary schools, its implementation varies from school to school, especially near exam periods. Indo-Fijian schools⁹ and teachers may discourage (particularly female) pupils from playing sports, and some restrict girls to 'gender-compliant' sports (such as volleyball, netball and athletics). Even in Indo-Fijian schools renowned for sporting success, whereas male soccer players are 'actively sought after,

developed and built up ... treated like gods ... I don't think I can name any school where girls who dominate sports are treated like that'. Moreover, as the participants pointed out, parents often disallow daughters from playing sports in PE classes.

Not surprisingly, then, some participants felt that they were able to pursue sport/exercise because their families were different from others – supportive or at least not opposed to their athletic interests. Three came from sporting families where their parents and/or siblings also actively participated in sports/exercise. All four married women had husbands who themselves took great interest in fitness and/or health and encouraged them to do the same. However, many contended with family discouragement:

I'd like to say my parents are encouraging, but they really are not. No, they are not. They are like: 'What do you need to learn to fight for [in mixed martial arts]? Are you going to be fighting?' So I say: 'No, it's just self-defence. It's not a bad thing to know' ... Even though they were really discouraging, I did it. They didn't like me buying supplements or workout wear, or eating eggs on Tuesdays because we're [as Hindus] supposed to be vegetarians, but I needed protein.

There was a time when my mother-in-law was sick and a lot of relatives would come home, and if I came from the gym in my gym clothes, they would see me and went like: 'Oh you went to exercise?' and I said: 'Yes, I went for my gym session' or 'I went for a run', and they said: 'Oh no, don't go to the gym a lot, because you'll develop muscles and it's not good for girls' and things like that ... There was a point when, if they came over, I wouldn't go to the gym. I'd tell my husband: 'It's okay, I'll skip today. Let me cook, let me entertain them, let me make sure everything is okay at home'.

Besides families and spouses, boyfriends may also constrain women's athletic endeavours. A young fitness devotee had previously given up exercise because of her then-boyfriend 'trying to stop me from going to the gym. He did, so many times. That's why I had breaks [in exercise]. A typical statement he made was I was going to the gym because I wanted to fix somebody else'. Hence, in her view, 'it's either their [Indo-Fijian women's romantic] relationship that'll stop them, or it's their family'.

Women with supportive families and partners may still face negative sanctions from local communities. For instance, they may be shamed for their athletic bodily display, as illustrated by this bodybuilder who recounted the first time she had competed in a bikini:

Ladies [in the village the participant came from] were very conservative in nature. They don't expose their bodies ... When I competed first time around, you know, I'm from a very classical local village back home. So people in the village, they were talking like: 'Oh my gosh'; 'She has

brought shame to the family'; 'Look at the way she's dressing, you know, no culture, no sense of decency'. Just because my parents were supportive, I guess I overcame it.

Direct negative sanctions often come from males in the community. Discussing how Indo-Fijian men reacted to her daily commitment to gym exercise, a young woman shared:

They don't take it in a positive way. That's why I'm single! The guys who go to the gym, they're okay because they understand and most of them are very motivating. But outside, I don't get to hear good compliments, you know. It's like 'Why does she even need the gym?' or I go to the gym because I want to fix guys.

Those who play outdoor sports may be harassed or ridiculed by male players or passers-by. A university student who played multiple sports at elite levels felt that in her sporting career, 'one of my biggest challenges is blocking the males out because most ... discourage you'. She described her challenges in detail:

If the ball goes out of the field and I go to pick it up, if there are boys, they'll chick-pass [make catcalls] or say bad things that you don't want to hear. Indian boys say things like 'Look at her, what is she doing?', 'Oh she thinks she can play soccer!' Those kinds of things. That's discouraging. And they try to flirt with you. You don't want that. Just because you're playing soccer, some of the boys think you are interested in boys ... And the boys that I play [a mixed-gender sport] with ... I have eavesdropped while they were talking about another Indian girl ... When she kicks a ball or passes a ball, [they say] '*Oilei*¹⁰! What are you doing, *bhaini*¹¹?' You are standing there and you can't fight for her, because you are a minority.

Furthermore, Indo-Fijian women who negotiate gendered barriers within their families and local communities and enter the sporting/athletic domain must confront the racialised sporting discourse in wider society. In nearly every organised sport and public exercise arena, they find few other women of their ethnicity. A prominent example is netball, the most popular women's sport in Fiji, which is overwhelmingly dominated by indigenous women athletes and officials, forming a mirror image of men's rugby (Sugden, Kanemasu and Adair, 2020): the two most prestigious sports of the nation each serve to consecrate indigenous physical supremacy in a deeply gendered manner. Thus, positioned at the bottom of the gendered and racialised hierarchies of physical power, Indo-Fijian women must, in one participant's words, 'handle being a girl and being an Indian girl – the two hurdles'.

They encounter racialised hurdles early, often at school age if they attend multi-ethnic schools. On the one hand, multi-ethnic schools present opportunities for Indo-Fijian girls to regularly interact and play sports with girls of

other ethnicities. On the other, multi-ethnic school settings can work against their athletic interests, as many participants observed:

My class girls, they used to compare themselves, like, with the [indigenous] Fijian girls. 'They are so good. If I go and play with them, I'll lose every time' and all. So they feel down and insecure and all that.

There is a perceived idea that other races are better in sports, mostly [indigenous] Fijian girls. So Indo-Fijian girls either don't get opportunities by the system or they themselves feel unconfident to participate or to put themselves out there because they are shot down or they might not be better.

Apprehension about or actual experience of marginalisation can drive away even those who have an active interest. A fitness enthusiast with over 10 years' experience recalled that she had been keen to take up hockey as a student but found the absence of Indo-Fijian girls too daunting: 'I always wanted to play. I would read all the rules, I would watch hockey games, you know. But I never got to play'. In the case of another participant passionately involved in a variety of individual sports and exercises:

I did play netball. I was never chosen in the netball team at school, because presumably there's an iTaukei [indigenous Fijian] girl who is better than me. It was just assumed. So I wouldn't be chosen. Sometimes, you're like 'Why am I doing this sport?' ... I never got into a particular sport because of that.

These challenges continue through and beyond school education. Unless they opt to play recreationally in intra-ethnic environments (which some do, as discussed below), Indo-Fijian women must negotiate the racialised sporting discourse that can shape the attitudes of (largely indigenous) players, coaches and officials around them. The taken-for-granted use of the indigenous Fijian language, for instance, serves to exclude the non-indigenous: 'In training, sometimes they talk in full iTaukei [the indigenous Fijian language]. There's an Indian girl standing there, but they just carry on'. Often, it is not open hostility or conflict but silent and normalised disregard that constitutes an 'unspoken barrier' to breaking into a team sport, as this elite athlete explained:

I felt that I was pushed away from the team. My input wasn't valued. Generally being the only Indo-Fijian player in the team at the time, I felt that I was just a number for the team, nothing else ... I felt like there was a barrier there. You know, it's not visible, you don't talk about it, but you know it's there.

Those who opt for individual fitness exercise may experience discomfort and a sense of alienation in the highly gendered and racialised gym space. A vast

majority of the participants remembered feeling they did not belong when they had first joined a gym:

I was very shy. I was very shy of the way I looked in my gym clothes. Then I saw all those males. I was like, 'Oh my god, what have I done?' The presence of men. I could feel that eyes were on me. They were looking at me and they were like: 'Look at her, she's coming to gym'. That was the feeling I was getting when I first started.

When I started going to the gym, I didn't know how I would cope or what to do in the gym. I'd been, like, looking at people, and I always thought that people were judging me for some reason, because [with] Indian girls, it [gym exercise] is very rare ... I was like, 'How am I supposed to do it?' you know. I didn't want to do leg raises, I didn't want to do squats because many people were looking.

In short, Indo-Fijian women's active participation in sport/exercise entails varying degrees and forms of struggle against the dominant discourse of masculine and indigenous physical superiority, whereby their sporting pursuit may be impeded, sabotaged or discounted in their families as well as in local and wider communities. These women's stories are indicative of the complexities of what may outwardly appear to be a simple lack of athletic interest among Indo-Fijian women/girls, yet, on closer examination, emerges as a formidable battle with the heavily gendered and racialised constructions of physicality that have come to assume immense power in Fiji.

Similarly, the familial emphasis on academic attainment, which is frequently cited in rationalising Indo-Fijians' limited sporting presence, needs to be understood in a broader context. As one participant asserted: 'it's not that simple ... There is more behind it. You have to understand why it has been happening'. While the drive for academic success was regarded by most participants as a characteristic shared by the Indian diaspora, it takes on added significance under Fiji's postcolonial conditions:

I think it's because of the political situation as well. You know, in 2000, the leased land which was given to the Indo-Fijians started expiring. And Indo-Fijian parents saw that education was the visa out of poverty. So they told their children, 'No matter what you do, you have to study hard and get out of this situation. We don't want you suffering like us in the farm. You're not gonna get anything out of this place' ... It all comes down to how Indo-Fijians have been treated in this country over the years, since the 1987 coup, and in 2000. People don't talk about it because of racial discrimination. At nearly every election, Indians are told, 'If you want to exercise your rights, if you want to be heard, go back to where you came from. Go back to India'. I was born here; my parents were born here. Where do you want me to go? If I don't belong here, where? for any man. Nobody ... I'm able

The sense of disenfranchisement engendered by pervasive ethno-nationalism, which has historically been asserted by way of physical and political domination of Indo-Fijians, can render physical pursuits alienating, and moreover, an unwise use of their time and energy. Even Indo-Fijian parents' apprehension over their daughters' physical safety in leaving home to play sports is embedded not only in assumptions of female physical vulnerability but also in Indo-Fijians' historical experience of racialised violence. Gender-based violence is experienced by the majority of women of all ethnicities in Fiji (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, 2013); yet 'the wider context of fear in post-coup Fiji did have specific implications for Indo-Fijians. As targets of violence, many families tightened controls on women's mobility' (Leckie, 2016, p. 187). The 'absence' of Indo-Fijian women in sporting/athletic arenas is thus an integral part of Fiji's post-colonial corporeal-political landscape, where 'women and "Indians" become obvious "others"' (Teaiwa, 2008, p. 112).

Importantly, Indo-Fijian women's relationship with sport/exercise is not simply determined by gender and ethnicity. Indo-Fijians are culturally, socio-economically and politically diverse and experience gendered/racialised barriers differently in their multiple social locations. Rural women, for instance, have access to few or no sports facilities and may face more entrenched gendered barriers. A participant originally from Rakiraki (the northern coast of Viti Levu) did not know of a single Indo-Fijian woman in her hometown who exercised in a gym. At the same time, there may be greater scope for inter-ethnic interaction and integration in everyday sporting activities in some rural areas and in western/northern Fiji where ethnic polarisation is less pronounced. Another participant, who had attended a boarding school in the island of Vanua Levu where 'we used to eat, sleep, and do everything together', was proficient in the indigenous Fijian language and had played with indigenous girls in the school's soccer team. Socio-economic status also serves as a major constraint or enabler. The women I interviewed were students or professionals, some with the means to engage a personal trainer. By contrast, women outside of paid employment, in low-wage employment or without financial assistance from family have limited material resources to facilitate sporting activities: 'Someone who stays at home, if she wants to go to the gym, she'll need to ask the husband to take her to the gym or ask the husband for a bus fare or taxi fare, and it's hard'. Clearly, then, an Indo-Fijian woman's relationship with sport/exercise is intersected by her socio-economic, geographical and a multitude of other social positionings. Nevertheless, gender and 'race' emerge from the participants' narratives as two primary axes of power deeply structuring the postcolonial social conditions, under which Indo-Fijian women experience sport and physical activity.

Claiming physicality: going it alone *and* strong

The participants shared the various ways in which they sustained their athletic endeavours in the face of obstructions. Operating under highly

restrictive conditions, many employed options and strategies immediately available to them. Some found such options in individual sports and fitness exercise such as jogging, gym workouts and martial arts, or recreational team sports played in intra-ethnic settings, which provided them with a degree of protection from marginalisation: ‘My netball teammates were Indo-Fijian girls, and we had very fierce competitions, without other races who are known to be better than us. I thought Indo-Fijian girls were really skilled’. Many also started their gym exercise with friends or husbands/boyfriends to ease the pressure: ‘I needed somebody there to start off, you know, I needed somebody. If it was not my husband, it would have been a friend. I wouldn’t go alone’. But also, over time, the gym transformed into a source of a sense of belonging that sustained them. As observed by a personal trainer: ‘Even if they [gym users] don’t know each other, an Indo-Fijian woman can immerse herself in the space. The gym is an open space in that regard’. A young woman enthused about the collegial inspiration she gained from indigenous women in her gym: ‘They’re so fit [emphasis original]. They’re all working on the barbells, heavy dumbbells, take up huge space, and I stand there admiring them: “Yes, you go girl!”’.

The participants also found ways of managing family concerns. Some concealed their athletic practices from their parents, especially if they played ‘a male-dominated game. They wouldn’t allow me if I told them. So, they don’t know I play soccer’. Several others found it effective to invoke the health benefits of physical activity to persuade their families. There is a growing awareness of the non-communicative disease (NCD) epidemic in Fiji: among Indo-Fijians, 24% of adult women and 23% of men are estimated to suffer from NCDs (Lin, et al., 2016). Accordingly, exercise is promoted by public health authorities as preventative therapy (Ministry of Health and Medical Services, 2015). A young mixed martial artist spoke of an aunt and a cousin with major health conditions requiring overseas medical interventions: ‘that’s when my parents were like, “Okay, you can spend your Friday nights at the gym. You know what, it’s a good thing; you might as well do it”’. Health thus appears to be of considerable importance both as women’s motivation for sport/exercise and as a basis of persuasion of their families. With a gradual rise of what may in some respects resemble the ‘healthism’ of the West (Crawford, 1980), the medicalised discourse of physical activity may increasingly offer Indo-Fijian women a strategic entry point for and legitimation of sport/exercise.

But above all, the participants relied on their inner strength to withstand negative sanctions. Athletic Indo-Fijian women are often not able to form a network or seek support from each other, since there are so few of them. Consequently, unlike many indigenous Fijian women athletes, whose central source of moral support is the camaraderie of their closely-knitted sporting community (Chapter 2, this volume), these women must ‘go it alone’. When unsupported by the family, community or sporting structures, an Indo-Fijian woman has only her own resolve to rely on: ‘Even if she wants to, people’s opinions can really hurt at times ... She probably will not be able to do it,

unless she's very strong'. Such solitary struggle, not assisted by athlete communities or networks, can be arduous:

I come from a very poverty-stricken family. My dad was a bit into sports, but he was ... not too supportive. When I was in Year 11, I picked up tang soo do. I would save my money for that [tang soo do classes]. In the morning, like 5am, I would jog. In high school, I again jogged in the morning. The taxi drivers would see a girl and toot the horn and stuff. So, I would try to hide my hair in a beanie or something and I would run ... I would train like it's no one's business. I developed four-packs and stuff and I was happy.

At times, I do cry about it [feeling disregarded by indigenous Fijian athletes/officials in the participant's sport], but what's the use of talking back? I just keep trying and show them I can do it ... Every time I go into training, I tell myself, 'If you are going, you have a purpose. No matter what they say, you go for it' ... Every day I go for training, I'm nervous. Every single day, I'm nervous about how people will see me, judge me ... But I stand there and tell myself: 'Whatever will happen will happen. Just go for it'.

Emanating from these accounts is the women's refusal to give up their athletic quests. By employing strategies and options accessible to them, they resolutely continue to return to the gym and the sports field to assert their physicality, thereby circumventing, thwarting and/or surmounting the 'two hurdles'.

The women's narratives also illuminate a strong sense of ownership of physicality that they developed in this process. If improved health or weight loss was the initial motivation for some, all of them fostered a sense of fulfilment in pursuing athleticism, and in particular, physical strength:

They [people] can't understand the logic behind me going [to the gym] every day, because, once you lose the weight and you become skinny, people ask, 'Why do you still go there?' But I want to be stronger, every single day. I started to get into fitness just to get skinny. Now, that thought has changed to becoming stronger.

I've realised I'm building muscles! [displaying bicep muscles]. My focus is not to lose weight anymore. My focus is to build muscles and abs. So I'm working hard on that.

[Asked about goals in pursuing a martial art] You know, the fighting part. I really wanna be like, 'You don't wanna mess with me' kinda [laughs]. Yeah, the fighting part, and the energy. You know, being able to fight.

Furthermore, many consciously derived oppositional meanings from 'becoming stronger'. There were clear intentions of defiance in the very act of continuing to claim physicality against sporting discourses and practices that deny them:

I'm not leaving it [fitness exercise] for any man. Nobody. I'm able to lift, I'm able to bash it. This is what I wanna do. I'm gonna do it. And when you see yourself in the mirror: 'Damn, girl. This is where you are going. You're going on the right path. You're making it happen'.

Some [indigenous Fijian] girls talk about you behind your back. They call you *bhaini*, *jiji*,¹² like that. [Or they say] 'Oh, she can't do it' ... I just take all your negativity and turn it into my positivity. If you call me *bhaini*, if you can me *jiji*, guess what, I'm the only *jiji* here. I'm the only Indian girl standing here, ready to fight for a position!

Initially, when I started lifting, there were a lot of guys in the gym. So I got lot of negativity, like, 'You shouldn't be lifting weights' ... I was a very skinny person trying to lift weights, yeah. Somebody even told me: 'You should go home and eat! What are you doing here?' So whenever I see that person again, I am like: 'Remember what you said to me. This is the person I am today'.

Thus, despite its apparent power, the gendered/racialised discourse of physicality is strategically, and often consciously and defiantly, contested by these women. Moreover, several participants argued that even women outside of the mainstream sporting/athletic domain may find options in everyday life to explore their physicality. Those who are not seen in organised sports and gyms may find alternative athletic spaces within the parameters of dominant socio-cultural norms, primary examples being walking and dancing. Walking is a common recreational physical activity among Indo-Fijians: families and friends are routinely seen walking together along the seashore in the capital. Situated as an ordinary and often family-oriented leisure activity, walking is an immediately accessible form of exercise for (especially urban) women. As a participant stressed: 'It's not like all of the Indian women [seeking fitness] come to the gym. My mum does a walk every 5am in the morning with my dad. So, she's also into fitness'. Recreational dance is another physical activity within the reach of the masses of Indo-Fijian women and girls. Parents who are opposed to their daughters engaging in sports or gym exercise tend to be more receptive towards their involvement in dance. Although Fiji has only a few dance schools, many girls and young women take a keen interest in learning contemporary Bollywood dance from films and YouTube videos at home. It becomes a major commitment for some, who 'dance in school concerts, in their circles, perform at family weddings, birthdays, engagement parties'. Some take lessons in classical Indian dance (provided free of charge by a non-profit dance group in Suva), which, a dance instructor observed, is a key culturally sanctioned physical activity for women. Its close linkages with Hindu mythology and the 'modest' clothing worn by performers make classical dance not only culturally legitimate but also in some cases familiar to those who find the protocol of modern sports/exercise alienating. For this reason, it is also accessible to girls

and women of all ages, including older women who are rarely seen in mainstream sporting scenes.

These women's stories suggest that assumptions of Indo-Fijian women's absence in athletic domains may be misleading. Indo-Fijian women cultivate a myriad of spaces – within the mainstream, on the fringes, and on the outside – to pursue myriad forms and modes of bodily agency by employing options and resources within their reach.

Indo-Fijian women and physical agency: beyond sporting absence

The notion of sport and physical activity as a medium of women's empowerment has long been advocated by such feminist schools of thought as 'physical feminism' (McCaughey, 1997, 1998; Roth and Basow, 2004), 'sport as stealth feminism' (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003) and others (Broad, 2001; Castelnovo and Guthrie, 1998; Gill, 2007; Haywood, 1998). In the Global South, this notion has served as a key logic behind sport-for-development programmes targeting women and girls (Hancock, Lyras and Ha, 2013; Saavedra, 2009; Seal and Sherry, 2018). Scholars have, however, also cautioned against uncritical celebration of empowerment via sport/physical activity. Cultural feminists maintain that competition and aggression promoted by mainstream sports serve to reinforce the privileged status of masculine behaviour and the patriarchally-defined relationship between social and physical power (Farkas, 2007). For other feminists, physical empowerment is essentially individual experience and not necessarily instrumental to wider social change (Burke, 2019; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune, 2013). Dworkin and Messner (2002, p. 22), among others, contend that 'contemporary reductionist understandings of empowerment as being synonymous with the development of one's body' divert women 'away from collective organising to change institutions that disadvantage all women'. Relatedly, physical empowerment has been questioned for its exclusion of 'women who are not able, or who are unwilling, to use their physicality, embodied aesthetic and physical strength as an assumed political tool' (Caudwell, 2011, p. 123). In Global South contexts, sport-for-development scholars take issue with the imposition of (neo)liberal feminism via Northern-designed/funded sporting programmes: the assumption of these programmes that women/girls can make free choices about their own behaviour reduces physical activity and gender justice to a matter of individual agency and masks underlying local and global power inequities (Chawansky and Schlenker, 2016; Hayhurst, 2014; Hayhurst, Sundstrom and Arksey, 2018; Henne and Pape, 2018).

Cutting across many of these critiques is the awareness that physical agency is increasingly co-opted by a neoliberal logic, whereby personal pursuits of physical autonomy become depoliticised and framed within the principles of individualisation, self-responsibility and decentralisation, counterproductive to radical structural change (Burke, 2019; Hayhurst, 2014). Hence, feminist scholars call for, as Theberge (1987, p. 391) did

several decades ago, 'a feminist redefinition of sport'. The transformative potential of sport lies not simply in women experiencing their physical strength and capacity but particularly in 'building organisations that develop these qualities in the community of women' (Theberge, 1987, p. 387). Some have identified such potential in alternative physical activities like wilderness, extreme and action sports (Arnold, 1994; Gieseler, 2014, 2019; Pavlidis and O'Brien, 2017; Wilson, 2002).

The struggles of athletic Indo-Fijian women corroborate sport-for-development scholars' point about structural inequalities that are neglected in unproblematic adulation of sport as a tool for gender justice. At the same time, the stories of athletic Indo-Fijian women show that the multiple relations of power intersecting sport in the Global South not only impede women but also are manoeuvred and resisted by them in multifarious ways and spaces. Often 'hidden' from the mainstream view, those with necessary resources (including the willingness and tenacity to 'go it alone') take on the gendered/racialised sporting hierarchy head-on to break into competitive/team sports. Others creatively fashion 'safe' sporting spaces by playing recreationally with other Indo-Fijians or cultivating personal realms of fitness and individual sports. Yet others may turn to alternative spaces of walking, dancing and other activities outside the sporting mainstream in a largely undetected manner. That is, contrary to the outwardly appearance of acquiescence, Indo-Fijian women are far from helpless in front of the dominant corporeal relations of power.

Critics of physical empowerment may question the validity and efficacy of such 'resistance' by Indo-Fijian women. It may be argued that their pursuit of physicality reinforces the primacy of physical power, the foundation of the very hierarchies of gender and 'race' that subordinate them. Their resistance is also of a personal nature, especially since many engage in solitary struggles, and does not tangibly contribute to women's collective liberation. Those who play in Indo-Fijian teams may be deemed to perpetuate the binary, racialised sporting discourse and their own marginalisation. Finally, it may be problematic to exalt sport and physical activity as a medium of empowerment when a substantial proportion of Indo-Fijian women do not partake in it.

Although the critiques of physical empowerment offer much useful insight into the contradictions of the play of power in sporting contexts, what constitutes 'real' resistance is perhaps not the most critical or urgent question in some global locations. Southern women (and men, along with marginalised social groups in the North) often struggle against powerful mechanisms of domination that constrain the scope for employing explicit political rhetoric or organised, formal political action. If we are to limit our attention to 'real' resistance, then 'all that is being measured may be the level of repression that structures the available options' (Scott, 1985, p. 51). Under such conditions, women's resistive agency 'often expresses itself infrapolitically' as a 'turn inward in a politics of resistance toward liberation' (Lugones, 2012, p. 76). In the Middle East and North Africa, for instance, '[o]pen social movements and intentional resistance can be dangerous activities ... particularly for women. In

this setting, female activism often takes place as non-movements ... commonplace activities such as working, attending college, or participating in sports' (Harkness and Hongsermeier, 2015, p. 1; see also Alkhaled, 2020; Richter-Devroe, 2018).

Similarly, Fijian women, as noted by Leckie (2016, p. 194), 'do individually and collectively resist the limitations of gender, ethnicity, tradition and poverty, but often covertly' through everyday acts. Whereas professional women have engaged in political movements and formal advocacy (Mishra, 2008, 2012), many grassroots women challenge relations of power in undocumented daily practices including sport. Indeed, just as sport as an oppositional tool is questioned by Western feminists for excluding non-sporting women, modern political activism in societies like Fiji may be deemed exclusionary insofar as it is facilitated and steered predominantly by women with advantageous access to economic, cultural and social capital. Here, sport and other mundane, everyday practices offer women outside of formal political spaces a key medium of in-frapolitics (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2020; Scott, 1985).

It is necessary to acknowledge that athletic Indo-Fijian women are a small minority and that, as Bradshaw (2002, p. 16) points out, 'not all women achieve feelings of increased bodily power from participating in physical activity'. Nonetheless, one should not accept uncritically that the limited participation by Indo-Fijian women is their choice, for, as it has been argued, their 'choice' is severely constricted by the gendered/racialised corporeal hierarchies. As a doubly political terrain in postcolonial Fiji, sport/exercise is the least accessible to those at the bottom of these hierarchies. At the same time, Indo-Fijian women can and do pursue athletic practices outside of the mainstream, which often goes unrecognised and undocumented. Indeed, such pursuits by Indo-Fijian women assume an added political significance in Fiji. Where physicality takes a central place in postcolonial nationhood and relations of power underpinning it, contesting sport/exercise is not just about exercising one's right but about direct engagement with such relations of power. Western (especially radical) feminists have tended to focus on the pervasiveness of patriarchal violence in discussing the body and physicality as a locus of gender oppression (DeKeseredy, 2020; Maynard, 1993). In postcolonial Fiji, ethno-racial violence has also had devastating impacts on Indo-Fijian women (and men): physical domination has been a foremost dimension of their experience of oppression both as women and as Indo-Fijians. Yet, athletic Indo-Fijian women, along with others who are not counted as such but variously explore their physicality, are everywhere employing strategies for securing their space 'to be stronger, every single day'.

These in-frapolitical acts may not directly or immediately effect structural change. However, the participants spoke of the informal ways in which they aided other women's athletic pursuits. Many made a point of offering to accompany other women to the gym: 'I encourage my colleagues to go with me for walks, to go with me to the gym. I would say, "If you're shy to go, I'll come with you, I'll show you around the gym, show you around the machines"'. One offered personal training only to women because 'there

isn't any Indo-Fijian female personal trainer', and another was enrolled in an online gym instructor course, as she planned 'to start a gym here for women generally. I want to separate them from the so-called mainstream'. Many also felt that their successful claim on sport/exercise was in itself an incentive for other women. As a prominent elite athlete stated: 'A lot them have come to me; they have been inspired by me and they have started lifting weights and learning bodybuilding'. In fact, this athlete had motivated, unbeknown to her, another participant, a fitness enthusiast, to start training to join a competitive sport. Thus, these women took pleasure not only in their own athleticism but in seeing a community of athletic women slowly take shape: 'I get happy when I see people, especially Indian ladies; they work out, struggle their arse off in the gym. They want to be somebody, they don't care about the world, they don't care about what their parents are saying'. Even as they struggle alone in their respective athletic spaces, the women recognise collective, transformative implications and possibilities of their actions.

Conclusion

One of the aims of this chapter, along with Chapter 2, has been to illuminate physical power as a primary aspect of Fiji's postcolonial socio-political order. The question of who claims physical power – the institutions of state violence, the combative game of rugby, physical might as a means of control and repression, etc. – is reflective of the country's enduring hierarchies of 'race' and gender. The two chapters have examined how women differently located under these hierarchies negotiate them in pursuing sports and physical activities of their passion. In the case of athletic Indo-Fijian women, a common thread in the research participants' stories is their battle against heavily gendered/racialised sporting discourses and practices that systematically impede them, leaving only a small number of them persisting in the mainstream sport/exercise arena. Indo-Fijian women's minority status in sport thus constitutes a part of the postcolonial ethno-racial and gender politics that is most visibly played out in the spheres of bodily practices.

But beyond this obvious absence lies a more complex picture. If they are largely invisible in the mainstream, Indo-Fijian women create their own agentic spaces in individual and recreational sports, fitness exercise and alternative physical activities. Many may do this in an undetected manner, as invisibility can serve as a resource for the marginalised. In their study about Guatemalan migrant women in Mexico, Rojas-Wiesner and DeVargas (2014, p. 203) observe that many migrant women deal with social exclusion and discrimination on their own or with little external assistance. This is because 'invisibility for some women im/migrants can be a mechanism for avoiding contact that may be "othering" or abusive to them, and also a way to avoid control and surveillance by others' (Rojas-Wiesner and DeVargas, 2014, p. 205). Indo-Fijian women may also choose invisibility, not only for protection from negative sanctions but also as an unsuspected site for resistive agency. In this

respect, their ‘patriarchal bargain’ (Kandiyoti, 1988) is distinct from that of indigenous women rugby players examined in Chapter 2: it is a doubly covert, unobtrusive strategy that nevertheless maximises their options for physical autonomy under the prevailing social conditions.

The participants, as well as the sporting stakeholders I have met in the course of my research, identified a recent increase in the number of Indo-Fijian women taking up recreational physical activity in urban areas. Globalisation and changing body ideals, growing awareness of the NCD epidemic, renewed policy attention to sport as a health and development tool and other external factors may contribute to opening up further sporting/athletic spaces for them. If some of these are co-opted by neoliberal-patriarchal agendas, Indo-Fijian women are likely to continue to capture these and other spaces – mainstream or alternative – for agentic and oppositional purposes as they have done to date.

This certainly does not mean that sport, exercise or physical activity takes primacy over other infrapolitical or political practices; resistance is not limited to any one form. Athletic Indo-Fijian women’s practices need to be situated as part of broader, multifaceted oppositional struggle, embodied here in sport, as it is in many other spheres of everyday social life. Theberge’s (1987, p. 392) early observation remains pertinent:

The struggle for women’s advancement takes place in all social arenas. Efforts to improve the economic condition of women are most fruitfully directed at the workplace and in the legal and political arenas. Although the contribution of sport to change at the institutional level is largely indirect, it is no less critical to the wider struggle.

Indo-Fijian women have managed and resisted oppression, individually and collectively, throughout the history of their existence in Fiji – as indentured and post-indentured labourers, feminist activists, housewives, in cultural and community organisations and in varied other social locations (Lateef, 1987; Mishra, 2008, 2012; Singh, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Examining sport and exercise in mainstream and alternative spaces, along with other infrapolitical practices, is important because it underscores the diverse, creative, everyday forms that resistance can take, especially in contexts where formal activism is not readily accessible. Resistance consists of a collectivity of such diverse practices of the subordinated.

Notes

- 1 These assessments are based on the number of athletes with distinctively Indo-Fijian names.
- 2 Importantly, this is not a new phenomenon. In the past decades, a few pioneering Indo-Fijian sportswomen competed regionally and internationally, such as Janki Gaunder née Reddy (lawn bowls in the 1980s) and Hamidan Bibi (lawn tennis in the 1990s).

- 3 While the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ were used by many participants to describe their family backgrounds, they are placed in inverted commas here to avoid suggesting a static ‘tradition vs. modernity’ binary.
- 4 It should be noted that some Indo-Fijian elite/business interests were allied with the colonial-eastern chiefly power. For comprehensive accounts of colonial ethnic relations, see S. Durutalo (1986) and Norton (1990).
- 5 The Great Council of Chiefs, a colonial institution that had gained significant power under the preceding governments, was abolished in 2012 (Lawson and Lawson, 2015). The political influence of the Methodist Church, which endorsed the ethno-nationalist coups, has also been weakened by the lack of government support post-2006 and other factors (Weir, 2015). It should be noted that the recent change of national government may reverse some of these situations.
- 6 In one documented case, 56 Indo-Fijians fleeing lootings and violence in Naitasiri Province were sheltered by an indigenous Fijian village for one week (Chanel, 2017a; see also Chanel, 2017b).
- 7 *Kai Idia* is an indigenous Fijian word that literally denotes ‘people of India’ and has been used to refer to Indo-Fijians, often with pejorative connotations of portraying them as outsiders.
- 8 *Skinny malila* is a derogatory term referring to the alleged physical inadequacy of Indo-Fijians. *Lila*, in indigenous Fijian, denotes ‘thin’.
- 9 The majority of schools in Fiji are run by community or faith-based organisations, with many dominated by a particular ethnicity.
- 10 *Oilei*, in indigenous Fijian, is an interjection expressing surprise, regret, frustration, etc., depending on the context and tone of voice.
- 11 *Bhaini*, in Fiji Hindi, means ‘sister’. Here, it is used to taunt and remind the participant of her being Indo-Fijian/female.
- 12 *Jiji*, in Hindi, means ‘sister’. Here, it is used to stress the participant being Indo-Fijian.

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4 Vanuatu Women's Beach Volleyball Subversive Stars in Alignment

Why Vanuatu is strong in beach volleyball? Because of the support. What we are fighting for, what we achieve, our goals and our dreams – They saw that was so important. I think that they're so proud ... We support each other and build ourselves up.

Introduction

Vanuatu claimed its third Commonwealth Games medal when Miller Pata and Sherysyn Toko won a bronze in women's beach volleyball at the 2022 Birmingham Games. As reported by the regional media *Islands Business* (2022), the country's small contingent to the Games (just 17 athletes) was centred around the beach volleyball team, who 'lived up to the pre-games hype to undeniably win a bronze medal for their beloved island country home' by defeating New Zealand 'in a thrilling third set decider'. The 'pre-games hype' was expected, since one of Vanuatu's first Commonwealth Games medals, also a bronze, had been won earlier at the 2018 Games in the same sport by Pata and Linline Matauatu (along with Friana Kwevira's bronze in para-athletics women's F46 javelin) to the great excitement of the nation. The enthralled media had dubbed Pata and Matauatu 'Super Mums'¹ at the time (Daily Post, 2018). As the 2022 Games medallists flew back into the country, the national newspaper *Daily Post* splashed a headline announcing, 'Vanuatu Beach Volleyball Heroes Pata and Toko Arrive Home':

Vanuatu beach volleyball champions Miller Pata and Sherysyn Toko received a tumultuous heroes' welcome when they returned home from Birmingham on Saturday. Families, friends and fans lined up Bauerfield International Airport with flags, and garlands to welcome and celebrate the duo's bronze medal finish. The players, wearing their bronze medals round their necks, were introduced to the ecstatic crowd as 'the greatest beach volleyball players in the South Pacific Region'.

(Natoga, 2022)

What makes this an exceptional success story is that these medals are only the latest of the series of competition successes ni-Vanuatu (indigenous) women beach volleyball players have achieved since the official inception of the game in the country in 2006. A small group of elite athletes has dominated regional competitions: the Oceania Beach Volleyball Championships (gold in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2018 and 2019, silver in 2007, 2010 and 2014), Pacific Games (gold in 2011 and 2019, silver in 2015 and bronze in 2007) and Pacific Mini Games (gold in 2013 and 2017). These athletes have also made their mark outside of the Pacific. In 2013, they became the first Pacific Island team to qualify for the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) World Championships, remarkably finishing ninth. Among many other medals, they won silver at the 2012 and 2015 Asian Beach Volleyball Championships and gold at the 2020 Asian Volleyball Confederation Continental Cup. Most recently, they won their first international circuit gold medal at the 2022 Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour Futures in Lecce, Italy. Pata was named the Most Inspirational Player and Matauatu the Most Improved Player at 2015 FIVB World Tour. As of November 2022, Pata and Toko (Figure 4.1) are ranked 80th and Toko and Majabelle Lawac 158th out of 1,541 pairs from around the world, standing out among the Global North nationals who dominate the top ranks (with the notable exception of Brazilians) (FIVB, 2022).² In a fitting tribute to Pata's long and outstanding career, FIVB (2020) recently described her as 'the gem of the South Pacific'.



Figure 4.1 Miller Pata (left) and Sherysyn Toko at 2020 Asian Beach Volleyball Championships in Udon Thani, Thailand.

Credit: Vanuatu Volleyball Federation and Asian Volleyball Confederation.

These successes are perhaps all the more noteworthy because beach volleyball is not the most likely sport to be associated with ni-Vanuatu women. In Vanuatu (and broader Melanesia), *kastom* ('customary ways' in Bislama) prescribes women's dressing and bodily display to a considerable extent. A long and loose-fitting dress originally introduced by Presbyterian missionaries (the 'Mother Hubbard') is recognised as *aelan dres* (island dress), invested with meanings of 'respectfulness – respect for *kastom*, for one's community and family, for Christianity, and for the nation' (Cummings, 2013, pp. 41–42; see also Bolton, 2007; Brimacombe, 2016; Jolly, 2014). The wearing of trousers by women, by contrast, is 'considered indicative of sexual availability, promiscuity, and *rabis* (dirty or trashy) behaviour' (Cummings, 2008, p. 142). Girls and young women are increasingly seen wearing trousers (long shorts) today, especially in urban areas. But if trousers can incur moral condemnation in the context of 'traditional'³ discourse of bodily display, beach volleyball's two-piece bikini uniform, which has been described by Western critics as the epitome of 'the objectification and "sexploitation" of female athletes' (Sailors, Teetzel and Weaving, 2012, p. 468), can be deeply problematic. The issue attracted international attention when a temporary change to the uniform had to be made at the 2007 South Pacific Games in Samoa due to local concerns that bikinis were offensive to families and spectators (Pacific Islands Report, 2007). Such controversies render beach volleyball a rather unexpected sporting choice by Pacific Island (and in particular Melanesian) women. Indeed, I remember Fijian sport stakeholders excitedly telling me during my previous research in Fiji how successful ni-Vanuatu women beach volleyballers were and how unprecedented it was, especially considering the uniform.

The uniform issue is a reflection of the broader gendered sporting context of the country. Ni-Vanuatu women are situated in a postcolonial socio-cultural milieu where *kastom*, Christianity and modernity intricately combine to engender profound forms of subordination and marginalisation of women (Douglas, 2003), which intersect with sports. Physical activities like walking and gardening are a part of daily life for ni-Vanuatu, the vast majority (78%) of whom live in rural areas despite rapid urbanisation (Kobayashi, Hoye and Nicholson, 2017; Vanuatu National Statistics Office (VNSO), 2020). Sport is a major leisure activity among children and adolescents, and men's soccer in particular attracts nationwide enthusiasm. However, many ni-Vanuatu's sporting activities are informal, consisting of 'self-organised games around the streets and empty lots of their neighbourhood rather than being part of clubs with scheduled training sessions' (Kobayashi, Hoye and Nicholson, 2017, p. 754). Material resources and technical expertise for organised sports are scarce and skewed towards men's sports in the capital city of Port Vila. Women's participation tends to be restricted to urban and suburban areas, although girls may be seen playing informally in rural locations. In a context where women have historically borne the heavy responsibilities of 'all domestic and income generation activities including firewood collection, food preparation and cooking, child

care, cleaning, [and] gardening (vegetables and root crops and animal husbandry)' (Care, 2015), women and girls who do attempt organised sports may drop out due to their workload, lack of family/community support, lack of resources or lack of motivation (Siefken, Schofield and Schulenkorf, 2014). It is therefore highly unconventional for women to pursue sports as full-time elite athletes whose daily schedules, priorities and passions revolve around training and international competitions.

This chapter is dedicated to the small beach volleyball community of the Melanesian nation. It explores the dynamics of the process whereby the young ni-Vanuatu women have claimed the sport under social conditions distinct from, and often immensely more restrictive than, the contexts of athletic pursuits of their Northern competitors. Needless to say, these women's athletic abilities and technical skills are fundamental to their accomplishments on the world stage. At the same time, the narratives of the women and other key actors reveal an enduring collective enterprise, whereby a small team of athletes with outstanding potential, tenacity and commitment has been sustained by families, expatriate sport practitioners and volunteers, local communities, international sporting bodies and donor agencies, coordinated by a devoted team manager who is also the founder of the sport. Behind these women's remarkable feats is a loosely organised coalition of diverse individuals and groups whose resources and powers are aligned to subvert gender and geopolitical disparities to facilitate their athletic pursuits.

Ni-Vanuatu women's agency under entrenched postcolonial patriarchy has been the subject of much discussion by anthropologists, historians and other scholars, mainly with a focus on rural and/or formal political settings (e.g., Bainton and MacDougall, 2021; Barbara and Baker, 2020; Bolton, 2003; Donald, Strachan and Taleo, 2002; Douglas, 1998, 2002; Jolly, 2003, 2012, 2016; Spark, 2017; Taylor, 2008). The present chapter contributes to this literature with reflections arising from a case study in an urban, organised sporting context. It explores the unique collective agency of the beach volleyball community and, in doing so, considers the relevance of regional scholars' work and French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau's (1984) concept of 'tactics'. The chapter is furthermore intended to present a nuanced perspective on 'sport for development' and the role of Northern actors in sports in the Global South, with insights gained from the local-expatriate (South-North) relations played out in Vanuatu beach volleyball.

The study on which this chapter is based is exploratory. To my knowledge, no academic research has been undertaken on Vanuatu beach volleyball, despite the international media attention it has attracted in recent years. Indeed, beach volleyball in general has received rather scant attention in the English-language sociology of sport. Existing research is overwhelmingly in the fields of kinesiology, sports science and sports medicine. Gendered and socio-political dimensions of the sport remain largely unexplored, other than the considerable interest researchers have taken in media representations of women beach volleyballers (Angelini and Billings, 2010; Bissell and

Duke, 2007; Bissell and Smith, 2013; Sailors, Teetzel and Weaving, 2012; Smith and Bissell, 2014; von der Lippe, 2013). There is a near-total absence of relevant social scientific research in non-Western settings, a lacuna this chapter aims to address.

The primary data for this study were collected in 2021 via semi-structured interviews with eight women and two men: six elite beach volleyball players (the entire senior women's team); Vanuatu Volleyball Federation (VVF) President, who is also the team manager and founder of beach volleyball in Vanuatu (Australian female); VVF media and communications volunteer (New Zealand female); a coach who has been variously involved in Vanuatu beach volleyball since 2009 and was based in Canada at the time of the interview (American male); and an assistant coach (ni-Vanuatu male). Due to travel restrictions in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. The athletes were aged between 19 and 32, with a range of 4 to 14 years' beach volleyball experience. With the exception of one who was born in Port Vila, they were originally from other islands and moved to the capital city either to play the sport full-time (two athletes) or as a result of their parents' relocation (four). One athlete had completed secondary education and another was enrolled in a tertiary education programme, while the others had exited formal education after Year 8–12.⁴ It may be noted that the educational attainment of half of Vanuatu's adult population is at the primary level, with a quarter having some secondary education (VNSO, 2021). One athlete was married with children, another lived with her partner and their child, and four were single and lived with their parents and siblings. All were full-time athletes who trained twice a day from Monday to Friday throughout the year and travelled overseas for sustained periods of time for training camps and international competitions.

The data collection coincided with the frantic final stages of the team's preparation for the 2020 Olympic qualifier, as they battled numerous logistical and other complications in the midst of the global pandemic. Nevertheless, VVF went out of their way to accommodate this study by securing a laptop, internet connection and private space (none of which can be taken for granted by many ni-Vanuatu) and setting up Zoom for the athlete participants. The athletes were interviewed between their training sessions and, if initially shy, eager to share their athletic journeys and passions with me. What follows is an account emerging from these women's voices and those of the people who support them, which traces the contours of tactical agency pulled off by a collectivity of athletes, non-athletes, locals and expatriates who share a subversive vision.

Vanuatu: country overview

The Republic of Vanuatu consists of over 80 islands in the south-western Pacific Ocean. The former Franco-British condominium of the New Hebrides became independent in 1980 following much political turmoil and division

as well as a decade of anticolonial struggle (Jolly, 2012, 2020; Rawlings, 2012). The indigenous people, called ni-Vanuatu, are overwhelmingly Melanesian and comprise more than 90% of the national population of 300,000 (VNSO, 2020). Some outlying islands have Polynesian populations, and there are also minority communities of European, Micronesian and Asian descent (Foster and Adams, 2023; Hedditch and Manuel, 2010). With 138 distinct vernacular languages, Vanuatu has the world's highest language density (François, et al., 2015), which is indicative of cultural diversity across its six provinces. English, French and Bislama are the official languages. Bislama, a creole language derived from English, is the lingua franca and the first language of many urban ni-Vanuatu. English is spoken by 82% of urban and 58% of rural dwellers (VNSO, 2021). The vast majority (95%) of the national population is Christian of various denominations, while ancestral and other religions make up small minorities (VNSO, 2021).

Vanuatu has been ranked among the world's 'happiest' nations, measured in terms of sustainable wellbeing (Code, 2020; Happy Planet Index, 2016), yet also contends with complex political and socio-economic challenges. It is a parliamentary democracy with a combined common law system incorporating British, French and customary law (Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute, 2001). Chiefs exercise customary authority within local communities, and the National Council of Chiefs (Malvatumauri) is mandated to advise and consult with the parliament on *kastom* matters, although its decisions are not legally binding (Forsyth, 2009). A highly heterogeneous society with archipelagic geography, legacies of dual colonial rule, 'islandism', clientelism and related challenges, Vanuatu has undergone recurrent political instability and been described as 'one of the most fragmented [countries] in the world' (Veenendaal, 2021, p. 1331; see also Forsyth, 2009; Morgan, 2008). The postcolonial nation saw 21 changes of government between 1991 and 2015 and five changes of prime ministership in a six-month period in 2010–2011 (Barbara and Baker, 2020).

The national economy relies largely on agriculture, tourism and foreign aid, with the informal sector accounting for the income of over 75% of the population (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2018). The great majority of ni-Vanuatu are subsistence agriculturalists living in small rural villages. The national Basic Needs Poverty Line (BNPL) rate was 12.7% in 2010 (VNSO and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Pacific Centre, 2010), which is low relative to some other Pacific Island countries. However, hardship is widely perceived to exist in the form of lack of or limited access to basic services including education, health, good roads and safe drinking water (ADB, 2003). Further, poverty in Vanuatu is not limited to the informal sector: approximately 17% of government and private sector employees in Port Vila lived below the BNPL in 2010 (VNSO and UNDP Pacific Centre, 2010). Socio-economic development challenges are compounded by Vanuatu's vulnerability to natural disasters; it is the world's most at-risk country for natural hazards, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and

tropical cyclones (United Nations University, 2015). Vanuatu graduated from the United Nations' (UN) Least Developed Country Status in 2020 (UN, 2020).

Postcolonial *kastom*-patriarchy

Scholars have noted that cultural diversity, unfinished processes of nation- and state-building, economic informality and other complexities impede prospects for the pursuit of inclusive development in Vanuatu and broader Melanesia (Barbara and Baker, 2020). Women often lack representation in this context. At the national level, only five women have ever been elected to Vanuatu's post-independence parliament, and none since 2012. As of November 2022, Vanuatu is one of the few countries in the world with no female parliamentarian (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). At the municipal council level, a gender quota instituted in 2013 reserves seats for women but is limited to the cities of Port Vila and Luganville⁵ (Baker, 2019). Just 3% of ni-Vanuatu women are in senior/executive government positions (Department of Women's Affairs, 2015), and men occupy more than 60% of both private and public sector jobs (VNSO, 2009). At the community level, entrenched chiefly leadership and the church can be conservative on gender relations (Barbara and Baker, 2020). Many communities operate on a patriarchal basis,⁶ where male village chiefs exercise considerable authority and women tend to be excluded from decision-making processes (Bowman, et al., 2009). Women especially in remote areas are also restricted in their access to health, education, employment and land ownership (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2016). Despite the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1995, Vanuatu was ranked as low as 141st out of 156 countries in the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2021). Its 2022 ranking shows notable improvement, yet is still 111th out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum, 2022).

As observed by Brown (2007, p. 4), '[p]roblems faced by women in Vanuatu could be grouped roughly into two categories: safety and participation'. In addition to barriers to socio-political participation, violence is a significant threat. According to Vanuatu Women's Centre (VWC) (2011, pp. 14–15), the 'use of violence as a form of punishment and discipline is accepted and condoned as a "normal" part of behaviour within many families and communities'. There is high prevalence of violence against women, with 60% of ever-partnered women having experienced physical and/or sexual violence, 68% emotional violence and 69% at least one form of coercive control by a partner (VWC, 2011). The Family Protection Bill, which provides for an offence of domestic violence and civil protection orders in cases of domestic violence, was first drafted in 1997, yet not passed until 2008 because of 'virulent opposition including from the all-male Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs, the Vanuatu Christian Council and a short-lived but powerful male backlash movement based in Luganville' (Jolly, 2016, p. 367).

Cultural and religious norms are often employed to curtail women's political agency to the extent that even locally led action and advocacy can be condemned as a foreign imposition (Baker, 2019). VWC has a long history of providing domestic violence counselling, legal services and community awareness workshops and training since 1992; yet its reliance on donor funding has led to charges of foreign influence (Barbara and Baker, 2020; Jolly, 2000). VWC and (to a less degree) the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW) have been 'accused, by women as well as men, of being "damaged" and therefore anti-men, pro-divorces, and feminist' (Douglas, 2002, p. 22). It was observed in 2002 that '*feminism* and *activist* remain dirty words, laden with connotations of heartless globalisation and irreligion', prompting many ni-Vanuatu women leaders to reject the feminist label (Douglas, 2002, p. 21, emphasis original). Postcolonial patriarchy in Vanuatu has thus been intricately entwined with, and consolidated by, anticolonial nationalism and associated traditionalist discourse.

Kastom played a key role in evoking a distinctive national identity during Vanuatu's independence struggle in the 1970s, and along with Christianity (which had been profoundly indigenised and exempted from association with colonialism), became enshrined in the national constitution and symbols (Bolton, 2003; Jolly, 2012, 2020). As an embodiment of cultural nationalism underpinned by powerful decolonising sentiments, *kastom* has come to signify ancestral values/practices restored and revived from colonial assault (Brown and Nolan, 2008; Jolly, 2012, 2020; Smith, 2021; Tonkinson, 1982). Such (re) construction of *kastom* has entailed an 'essentialisation of culture ... codified and monopolised by men' (Jolly, 2011, p. 201). Since before independence, a parochial conception of *kastom* has often been mobilised in objections to women's socio-political participation (Douglas, 2002). A binary discourse contrasting modernity and *kastom*/Christianity has emerged, whereby 'women, youth, urban life, foreign influence, secularity, and modernity are disparagingly opposed to male authority, village life, indigenous ways, Christianity, and tradition' (Cummings, 2008, p. 135; see also Brimacombe, 2016; Brown, 2007). Rather than a simple continuation of 'tradition', Vanuatu's postcolonial patriarchy emanates from such 'dense, messy set of exchanges, resistances and transformations' (Brown, 2007, p. 3) of customary, colonial and postcolonial practices and relations of power.

The scope for women's collective organising is constrained under this postcolonial patriarchy. Researchers have, however, illuminated the significance of church women's groups as a key medium of collective agency for rural and grassroots women (Bainton and MacDougall, 2021; Dickson-Waiko, 2003). If ostensibly conservative or tame, church groups have served as a protected space where women can 'build solidarity, confidence, and leadership or managerial skills, which can help loosen hegemonic male controls over their bodies and their thinking' (Douglas, 2002, p. 15). Urban and professional women have engaged with formal politics and advocacy, most visibly through VNCW and VWC as umbrella organisations vocal on issues of the status of

women, women in governance, human rights and violence against women (Douglas, 2002). Furthermore, especially in urban areas where kin networks and customary obligations are less extensive, women are increasingly turning to human rights discourse, along with Christian messages of peace and harmony and customary forms of gender justice, to assert individual and collective autonomy (Jolly, 2011; Spark, 2017).

Ni-Vanuatu women's relationship with sport in general and beach volleyball in particular is situated in this context, where *kastom*, nationalism and modernity intersect with barriers to, and opportunities for, their hitherto-unorthodox pursuits, as examined in the rest of this chapter.

The making of Vanuatu beach volleyball

Indoor volleyball (the six-a-side game on hard surface) has always been popular in Vanuatu, played socially and competitively in villages and schools across the islands. As the research participants noted, it is also casually played on the beach, given the proximity and availability of beaches to many: 'I'd say many already have the skills to perform on the beach. In the Pacific, we visit the beach with a ball and play around!' Nevertheless, beach volleyball (two-a-side on sand) as an organised sport did not start in Vanuatu until Debbie Masauvakalo (née Wooster)⁷ arrived as an Australian Youth Ambassador in 2004. As a former elite volleyball player, Masauvakalo's initial aim was to contribute to the development of the indoor game, but she was soon confronted with the lack of resources. She recalls:

Somebody then suggested, 'Why don't you just do beach volleyball? That's less people and less money, and they have lots of beaches'. So I said, 'Okay, that's a good idea'. We started playing beach volleyball with just tent pegs that a hardware shop donated; I was able to get a hardware shop to donate some tent pegs as poles. We had a [makeshift] volleyball court on the beach, and we just played every Saturday.

Masauvakalo was instrumental in setting up the Port Vila Beach Volleyball Association in 2005 and its successful application for Australian funding for the construction of a beach volleyball court. The sport thus began and continued at the recreational level until 2006, when the first national championships were organised for the selection of women's and men's national teams to participate in the 2007 South Pacific Games. Pata (née Elwin), who remains on the senior women's team today, joined the sport at this time. She arrived from her home island for the 2006 national championships at age 18 and never left, having determined to devote herself to the newly introduced sport. Pata and Henriette Iatika won a silver at their first international competition, the 2007 Oceania Beach Volleyball Championships, followed by a bronze at the 2007 South Pacific Games. In the same year, the sport was integrated into VVF (established in 1998 as the national volleyball governing body). Masauvakalo

subsequently extended her Australian Volunteer International contract multiple times to continue her involvement, eventually settling in the country. She has since played a pivotal role in facilitating the growth of the sport as the national team manager, VVF president (since 2015) and mentor to the athletes.

If beach volleyball required relatively less resources than the indoor code, the burden of its development was still immense in an island country without an adequate infrastructural, material or technical base. In addition to the day-to-day requirements of training and games, international competitions and tours incur large costs of flights, accommodation, coaching and event entry fees, given the country's remote location and absence of core funding. To meet these needs, VVF depended on fundraising (ranging from car washing and charity fashion shows to raffling a pig and collecting community donations via a 'wheelbarrow drive'⁸) and devising creative strategies to negotiate the shortages. Securing international technical expertise for the new sport was particularly challenging. As Masauvakalo explains:

There was always a financial battle because we had these coaches but we couldn't afford to pay them a salary. A lot of the time, they were working for free, I was working for free. The girls were getting just allowances, they didn't have a salary. So everybody was just trying to keep the programme and trying to keep the team together.

A key strategy devised to meet the technical expertise needs was to obtain the services of highly experienced international coaches through a variety of funding pathways: the coaches took up their stints as Australian volunteers or funded through the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and FIVB grants. Masauvakalo also exploited her own sporting networks to identify potential coaches as well as procure training camp facilities in Australia and touring arrangements in various international locations. The athletes thus accessed international-standard coaching, training facilities, exposure and experience, normally only available to their Northern counterparts, albeit continuing absence of high performance equipment, sports science/medicine and other resources.

As the sport does not have a club structure, players have been recruited primarily through schools around the country. VVF organises after-school programmes in Port Vila and Luganville, which invite 10-to-16-year-olds to play on a weekly basis. School visits by VVF development officers and the National School Games also serve as high performance pathways to the junior teams coached by ni-Vanuatu assistant coaches. While the elite senior women's team consists of just six athletes, the total player population (yet to be formally surveyed) is estimated at 50–100 including junior players, with girls comprising over 90% of those above the under-14 category. Port Vila remains the centre of the sport, with signs of interest and growth in Luganville and other areas/islands. VVF is a resource-constrained organisation like most other

sports federations in the Pacific, but the senior women's successes have begun to attract major international and local corporate sponsorships, which now allow for their sponsorship salaries and remuneration for volunteer support staff.

The six women athletes began playing beach volleyball at age 11–18, having previously played the indoor game. They were introduced to the sport by a parent/sibling/cousin or scouted by VVF. They recall that the transition to beach volleyball came easily to them, with one adding: 'Actually, my island has beautiful long sandy beaches, so I love playing on the beaches. I love the beach'. As they took up the sport and progressed into the elite team, they embraced it as a central pursuit in their life: 'When I came to beach volleyball, I loved to play. When I play, everything I want is to put all my efforts, everything, into training'. The passion has sustained them through the demands of a full-time athletic career. In addition to the long hours of daily training while they are in Vanuatu, they can be overseas for up to four months at a time on international tours, which caused two athletes to be absent from home on their children's first three birthdays. Long-term absence from family life is a major sacrifice in any social context, but it takes on an added dimension in Vanuatu, where motherhood is invested with profound socio-cultural significance: 'The face of Vanuatu is that of the *mama* (mother) ... who is respectful of both *kastom* and Christian (most often male) authority' (Cummings, 2013, p. 33). The women have negotiated these demands to maintain 'a balance back at home. You've got family, you've got husbands, relationships. But you're trying to go with this big commitment'. This also means that their full-time dedication to the game has been enabled by their families who have provided for their daily needs in the absence of a sustained salaried income and covered their domestic responsibilities while they are overseas. In the process of this formidable quest, the women have accumulated scores of international competition medals – many since they were in the junior national teams. Today, Vanuatu beach volleyball consists of this small group of elite women athletes making a name for their country, doing what the most popular sport in Vanuatu, men's soccer, has yet to do, along with a pool of junior athletes and schoolchildren inspired by them.

Navigating the terrain of postcolonial *kastom*-patriarchy: fostering legitimacy

The glaring shortages of facilities, equipment, expertise and exposure, often taken for granted by Northern national representative athletes, are reflective of the global disparity faced by athletes of Vanuatu as a 'peripheral' nation in the politico-economic and geographical sense. One of the women athletes, who struggled at times to secure bus fares to reach the training venue, was keenly aware of the inequity: Northern athletes 'have all the equipment. For us, it's a small, small team. If you don't have resources, you have to find

something that works. They have funds; they have sponsors, good sponsors; they have facilities. For us, you know, Vanuatu [laughs]'. Given formal employment is not easily attainable and most ni-Vanuatu remain within the informal economy, sport is hardly a career option. Many parents' priority for their children is 'to have a good education, have a good job in the future. In sports, they are not very supportive, because they say that sport is just like a game and will never give you a good job'. One athlete, who had been introduced to the sport by a cousin, shared that the cousin had since dropped out 'because she had school and her parents didn't allow her to come to training'.

These socio-economic pressures are interlaced with gendered barriers. As noted earlier, women who pursue competitive sports are likely to contend with a heavy family workload and associated lack of time and resources, and possibly further impediments such as 'missing support from the husband, the cultural dress codes and insufficient understanding from the neighbourhood or local community' (Siefken, Schofield and Schulenkorf, 2014, p. 33). At the most basic level, as a government official stated in 2012: 'Our customs in the islands is very strong that chiefs don't allow girls or women to wear shorts', although 'today in [Port] Vila and Santo, girls start to wear shorts and play a sport which is very good to see' (Vanuatu Football Federation, 2012). Parents, husbands and boyfriends can constrain women's/girls' access to sports. The athletes explained:

Here in Vanuatu, I can say men, they want men to play sport: 'Ladies, you have to stay at home.' For couples, I can say, they can have challenges. They [men] don't want their wives, girlfriends, to go and play sports.

You know, in Vanuatu, you have kids and you're married, and husbands say no to everything. Women in Vanuatu, they stay at home and do cleaning, gardening, washing.

Despite these gendered expectations, the six athletes receive the active support of their families, with some having especially strong relationships with their fathers. One player was initiated into the sport by her father who had been on the men's national team himself. The moral and practical backing of their families has been essential to these women's devotion to the sport. At the same time, the strong support is maintained through the athletes' daily endeavour: 'I like playing beach volleyball, so that's why I wake up early in the morning and I have to do the things at home and look after my kid and then I can train. I have to do everything at home and then train'. In communities where physical exercise by women is regarded as unimportant or inappropriate and family/communal commitments take precedence over personal pursuits, full-time engagement in a high performance sport can become an arduous quest.

Under these circumstances, it is noteworthy how deftly and discreetly the women athletes and those who support them have fashioned the social

positioning of their sporting pursuit. Individually and collectively, they have found ways to manage barriers and gradually integrate the game into local communities. In Masauvakalo's words:

We were like pioneers; we were starting off something that had never been done before. So we had to make mistakes; we had to learn from them. We were also battling things like uniforms, you know. We had a big struggle because the girls were required to wear small bikinis, and culturally it's inappropriate in Vanuatu or in the Pacific to wear a small bikini.

The bikini uniform – apparently antithetical to the *kastom*-prescribed female dressing epitomised by the island dress (*aelan dres*) – could have delegitimised the sport. Yet, the beach volleyball community has manoeuvred this potentially highly contentious issue with a pragmatic and consistent strategy – by switching between the 'codes' of the two cultural domains and thereby fulfilling the requirements of both. The women wear tops and shorts in Vanuatu and the Pacific Islands region ('It's out of cultural respect to the people, the chiefs, the country') and switch to the bikini at international competitions ('I'm used to it. It's just part of the sport'). They also learned to manage the local media. When the sport first began attracting media attention, the athletes' husbands were shocked to see 'photos of their wives in a bikini on the front page of the newspaper. So that caused problems'. VVF met with media outlets to secure their agreement to use photos not showing the lower halves of the athletes' bodies. Cultivating relationships with media organisations over time resulted in more culturally sensitive coverage. Social media remained beyond their control, but as the athletes gained successes and experience, they became increasingly able to withstand occasional negative sanctions:

Yes, it is an issue because as we all know, our culture, our tradition, don't allow women to be, like, in the bikini. So it's hard sometimes for some of the people of Vanuatu to understand that. But now, they have to understand because we are in civilisation and we are a developed country. Now they have to understand that.

When they [people] saw our photos on the beaches [on social media], they sometimes comment, saying 'This is not our culture. Why are you guys doing this? Why are you guys wearing bikinis?' So we just forget about them. They just say what they want to say. We just leave them. 'This is our uniform. Say whatever you want to say'.

Notably, while the dominant *kastom* discourse may define the bikini uniform as a primary instance of Western imposition, the women have developed a sense of ownership of their bodily display. They recounted how initially 'scared' they had been to wear the uniform, but are now confident and comfortable in it. One regards her athletic body as an embodiment of female

physical agency and sees transformative potential in its bold display: 'As an athlete, I am so proud to show that yes, every woman, if they want their body to look like us, they have to do more sports to have a good healthy body'. Today, the uniform is rarely a subject of negative community attention: 'Now, if they [people] see that [athletes in bikinis] on the poster or newspaper, they'll say, "Okay, this is beach volleyball; they always wear that"'.

Indeed, the sport has acquired mainstream status and is included in nationwide sporting events like the National School Games and the Vanuatu Games. Women beach volleyballers were Vanuatu's flag bearers at the 2013 and 2017 Pacific Mini Games and 2018 and 2022 Commonwealth Games. They were awarded the Women's Team of the Year by the Vanuatu Association of Sports and National Olympic Committee in 2019 (VVF, 2022). When they played the 2020 Olympic qualifier, the leading national newspaper enthused: 'the small Pacific nation is, as always, fully supporting the Vanuatu Volleyball Federation and these athletes, and will no doubt be riding every serve, set and smash with the players [during their matches]' (Daily Post, 2021). A corporate sponsor distributed to community members and junior players message wristbands for the occasion: 'This is for the people of Vanuatu to support the girls for the Tokyo Olympics, so we know "Oh, that's our supporter!"'

This social legitimacy has been fostered through, among other things, the power of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that the women athletes have accumulated – namely, the highly desirable outcomes of their career that outweigh *kastom*-based controversy. A major benefit enjoyed by the beach volleyballers is overseas travel, which is 'a rare privilege' in Vanuatu: 'a significant proportion of Vanuatu's population are classified as urban poor, who struggle to meet their basic needs, let alone travel to foreign nations' (Kobayashi, Nicholson and Hoye, 2011, pp. 47–48). The level of travel experienced by the women is available to few:

Education can make you travel and see other countries, but in sport, it can also make you [do the same]. In Vanuatu, we know that only educated people are travelling and see other countries. For me, it's sport. The countries that I was thinking of – Wow, Europe and all the other countries, I couldn't believe that I was going there, but now I'm seeing these countries.

Added to this is the utmost prestige of representing the country at top-level international competitions – and winning medals too. Scholars have pointed out that cultural nationalism, which took a central place in Vanuatu's decolonisation, may have waned in recent decades due to increasing 'islandism' and a rural-urban divide (see, e.g., Douglas, 2000; Forsyth, 2009). Sport, however, remains a domain that can 'unite many people in a spirit of national pride that is not always evident otherwise ... in the heterogeneous countries of Melanesia' (Newton Cain, 2018). In this regard, women's beach volleyball has brought

Vanuatu the international recognition that no other sport has, generating considerable cultural – and furthermore symbolic – capital:

[Asked if people recognise her] Yes. Every day after training, sometimes we take the bus, sometimes we just walk, and some strangers coming from nowhere, we don't know them, they say 'Hey!! Beach volleyball players!' [with a waiving hand]. We say 'Hi!' [with a waiving hand] [laughs]. The buses and even trucks come and beep, beep, beep, and say 'Hi!' and raise their hands, but we don't know them [laughs].

In 2017 we went to my home island. We went there to represent beach volleyball with a team of UNICEF and the Queen's Baton [for the Queen's Baton Relay] ... When we arrived in the airport and the truck took us, when we started to go straight to the school [event venue], a lot of kids were standing all over, along the road and reached the other end. When they saw me – 'cause some of the kids know me – they just want to get close to me. They want to look closer [laughs]. I was so happy and proud that they know that this is a champion. They see me as a champion. We made them stand around the field and then passed the Queen's Baton. After that, they had to take photos – photo, photo, photo – and I was like, 'Oh my gosh'.

A similarly evocative moment is their return from overseas competitions: 'When they hear "Oh, Vanuatu beach volleyball girls are coming back", everyone is waiting at the airport with flowers and calicos and *lavalavas* [sarongs]'. Calico, as a modern substitute for barkcloth, functions as a customary gift or ceremonial exchange item (see, e.g., Newton Cain, 2022). Together with garlands and *lavalava*, the presentation of gifts by families, friends and supporters to the athletes on their return signifies the degree of socio-cultural legitimacy they have come to claim (see Figure 4.2). It is worth noting that the airport welcome of this kind is common in the Pacific when (usually male) prominent sport teams, such as Fiji's rugby sevens side, return home.

It was indeed the honour of playing for the country and extensive travel that attracted the younger elite athletes to their beach volleyball career: 'I heard about other players travelling a lot and representing our country. So I was very glad to join them'. Thus, if the sport is not associated with financial returns, the social and symbolic value it has acquired renders it a worthwhile pursuit in the public eye, as observed by this male assistant coach:

The time has changed and they see the importance of the sport. Now parents let their kids come and play. We're in the papers and people are seeing that and: 'Okay, that's a great thing, and maybe there is a good chance for our kids to go, train and try to get to that level'. I mean, that's the only sport in Vanuatu that travels and leaves the country. So they're at the top level in sport. Everywhere the girls go: 'Oh those are the girls playing for Vanuatu!' Everywhere we go, they say that.



Figure 4.2 Miller Pata with her children at Bauerfield International Airport upon return from 2022 Commonwealth Games.

Notes: Pata is here welcomed with garlands and calico wrapped around her neck as a customary mark of respect and honour. Her children are in the dress code of their father's island of Tanna.

Credit: Debbie Masauvakalo and Vanuatu Volleyball Federation.

If *kastom*-patriarchy rests on decolonising sentiments and persisting nationalism, the women beach volleyballers have most convincingly captured ni-Vanuatu's postcolonial nationalist aspirations. Combined with the practical rewards of international travel, the sport has come to command a considerable amount of respect in a society where respect constitutes a primary good.

Subversive stars in alignment

Closer examination reveals that there are further dynamics at play in this outstanding journey. The women's rise to national honour and prestige through international successes has been facilitated by a constellation of the athletes themselves, their families, Masauvakalo, expatriate sport practitioners, volunteers, community members, international and national bodies and other actors. As noted above, Masauvakalo has fully mobilised her Australian sporting connections and associated social capital, as well as her

personal sporting experience, passion and resourcefulness. Masauvakalo and VVF have thus secured IOC/FIVB/Australian funding, coaching expertise and international and local volunteers, weaving an elaborate web of support that holds the sport together. As noted by the VVF media and communications volunteer, 'there's always a collection of people from around the world' offering differential skills and resources:

There's probably a high turnover of people that help. But with each wave of help comes a new energy. Rather than becoming the same, something else will flow in and move the space, and therefore, you are constantly propelling forward. You still have your foundation posts, which is probably Debbie [Masauvakalo] and [VVF executive] and the home team, the home crowd. They stay steady, so your foundation stones are laid, and the house gets built around them.

The efficacy of this diverse and resilient network becomes visible especially at times of crises. When the athletes were without a head coach in 2007, Masauvakalo capitalised on her Australian sporting linkages: 'I think one of the benefits has been me being an Australian, having played volleyball and beach volleyball in Australia. I had some connections and relationships. I knew people who could help us. So I reached out to one university'. A training hub in the Gold Coast and an experienced Australian coach, who has since assisted as a 'fall-back coach', were procured this way. Acclaimed American coach Steve Anderson,⁹ who had won Olympic gold and bronze medals as Australian women's national team coach, was subsequently engaged through this personal network and IOC/FIVB support, greatly aiding the athletes' rise to international competitiveness. Most recently, when the elite team desperately needed to continue training for the 2020 Olympic qualifier without a head coach and against many disruptions caused by COVID-19, expatriate professionals – a physiotherapist with a beach volleyball background, a yoga instructor and a CrossFit instructor – came forward to fill technical gaps. A professional media producer/filmmaker offered her skills as a media and communications volunteer. Meditation, breathing and nutrition camps were similarly put together by volunteer specialists. In short, the crisis was managed by 'going into the community, finding different people with skill sets that are here for some reason. It's been community gathering together and saying "Where can we help?"; "We can do this, we can do that"; "Okay, great. Let's do it"'.

International and national bodies, donor agencies, sponsors and local communities have also been woven into this coalition of support. In addition to the IOC and FIVB grants actively utilised to fill resource gaps, the Australian government's Pacific Sports Partnerships supported VVF's Volley4Change, an award-winning¹⁰ community programme promoting 'positive lifestyle changes through playing volleyball' among women, girls and persons with disabilities (Volley4Change, 2021). With its focus on gender equality and disability inclusion (through sitting volleyball), the programme incorporated multiple

institutional actors including the Vanuatu Police, Vanuatu Paralympic Committee, Volleyball Australia and CARE Australia. Most importantly, along with the after-school programme, Volley4Change became the basis of an ongoing engagement with local communities to foster their ownership of the sport and win the support of gatekeepers, especially husbands, partners, families and community leaders. Anderson, who has been closely involved with VVF since 2009, considers this community outreach to be a catalyst whereby 'people started to recognise that it wasn't just volleyball' and that the athletes 'were community leaders. It brought a lot of pride and attention to their ambassadorship. Ni-Vanuatu people had a different sense of pride: "If our women can do this, what does it mean about us?"' Thus, the social legitimacy of the sport is not a simple outcome of the athletes' sporting fame but anchored in unfolding relationships with community members. Taken together, these individual and institutional actors form a critical alliance that has enabled what may be described as unprecedented achievements by a women's sport in the Pacific.

This highly heterogeneous, loosely-organised coalition is held together by a subversive vision shared among key individual actors. The athletes themselves are motivated not only by the immediate rewards of their sporting career but also by what they recognise as significant scope for social change opened up by these rewards. As this young woman explained:

Here in Vanuatu, girls are the ones who always stay at home. Just the boys are allowed to do everything they want to do. But right now, we can see that many girls, many women have good education as well, and also with the sport, you can see, Miller [Pata], she's the strongest woman – she's one of the strongest women in Vanuatu, so I'm very proud of her. I want to be like her and show that yes, women can also do things that men do. I just want to be a role model for young people in Vanuatu and also show them that young girls, they can achieve their dreams; they can do whatever they want to do, not just stopped by the tradition, the parents, or other people. They do what they want.

Aspirations like these resonate with Masauvakalo's own subaltern identity and determination to prove the mainstream wrong. She grew up in Darwin, in the Northern Territory: 'It's a small community. We've always been the underdogs. Like when we go to the Australian championships, we always get beaten. We're always looked upon like: "That's the Northern Territory. They're not good"'. She recognises a parallel with Vanuatu's and the women athletes' experience of global and gender disparities:

definitely, because that's [the Northern Territory] where I was born, and it's [subaltern identity] been bred into me, and I've lived it. I think one of our strongest things is I can have empathy with the girls. I have an understanding of Vanuatu because we have many parallels with the Northern Territory.

This subversive synergy is augmented by others who join the coalition to be part of what they regard as a path-breaking movement. In the media and communications volunteer's words, the beach volleyball community is 'about families and support – and leading the way. I like things that are courageous. It's a good place to inject whatever I can offer'. Anderson's involvement was similarly motivated by the transformative value it held for him. Asked why he chose Vanuatu, following coaching successes in metropolitan locations and having 'made history as the first African American coach to win an Olympic gold medal in beach volleyball' (Liliefeldt, 2021), he explained that it was about 'really paying attention to where I can make the biggest contribution ... Any achievements I make have to be fulfilling; they have to have a purpose and they have to be done in a way that fulfils me. That's why'. The alignment of such transformative visions, energies and wills has been critical to the sport's success as a collective enterprise. One of the athletes aptly summarised this:

Why Vanuatu is strong in beach volleyball? Because of the support. What we are fighting for, what we achieve, our goals and our dreams – They [those who support the athletes] saw that was so important. I think that they're so proud. There's a lot of support and helping us. We support each other and build ourselves up.

Tactical agency and South-North alliance

As anthropologists, historians and others have variously shown, ni-Vanuatu women have always exercised their agency in patriarchal and deeply religious community contexts. Based on her ethnographic work in Aneityum Island, Douglas (1998, 2002) argues that even as indigenous women dutifully attended mission schools in the 19th century and continue today to engage with church women's bodies promoting home economics and welfare, they exercise/d strategic choices to appropriate what may outwardly appear as patriarchal and Christian domestication as foci for female sociality and shared creativity. Douglas (1998, p. 2) refers to this as 'women's constrained agency and circumstantial strategies': ni-Vanuatu women have historically 'advocate[d] a strategy of pursuing small gains with persistence and without overt confrontation' (Douglas 2002, p. 22). Eriksen (2006) discusses 'unexpected agency' in her study of women's involvement in the early development of the church in Ambrym Island. Eriksen reveals that women's geographical movement through marriage contributed crucially to spreading the church, bringing about unexpected transformations in communities where, according to dominant historical narratives, the church met persistent resistance from male leaders. Dyer (2017) presents the concept of 'permitted empowerment' in describing rural women's agency in neighbouring Solomon Islands, where they work towards subtle alterations in community leadership norms even if these arise from a giving of power by

men rather than a taking by women. Barbara and Baker (2020) apply Dyer's concept to a women market vendors' association in Luganville, discussing it as an informal space for collective action and advocacy of safer working conditions and noting that its reluctance to adopt an overtly political agenda may preclude long-term social change.

Much can be gained from these analyses of women's 'constrained agency', 'unexpected agency' and 'permitted empowerment' in indigenous and often rural settings. The narratives of the beach volleyball players and their supporters outlined in this chapter, however, present somewhat different dynamics. The women athletes ventured out of gender-prescribed practices/spaces and, together with Masauvakalo, fostered a collectivity that encompasses highly diverse local and international actors in an urban, modern sporting context. While sharing elements of the forms of agency discussed by previous researchers – especially in terms of effecting change through persuasion rather than confrontation – their pursuit of a full-time beach volleyball career, as epitomised by the bikini uniform, runs counter to the positioning of women under postcolonial *kastom*-patriarchy. They have successfully executed this not only by showing respect (to *kastom* through careful management of their bodily display, working closely with community gatekeepers, etc.) and gaining respect (through the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital) but also by negotiating global and gender disparities through a broad and diverse alliance.

In considering the form of agency these women and their supporters have cultivated, useful insights may be drawn from de Certeau's concept of 'tactics' (de Certeau, 1984; de Certeau, Jameson and Lovitt, 1980). De Certeau distinguishes 'tactics' of the subordinate from 'strategies' of hegemonic powers. In contrast to 'strategies' deployed by hegemonic institutions and structures, which rely primarily on maintaining control over their own territory to battle external targets and threats, 'tactics' are 'an art of the weak' (de Certeau Jameson and Lovitt 1980, p. 6):

A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus ... [I]t must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power. It does not have means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a manoeuvre ... within enemy territory ... It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of the 'opportunities' and depends on them.

(de Certeau, 1984, pp. 36–37, emphasis original)

Tactical agents operate from a position of weakness, in a realm controlled by hegemonic powers, where available choice is severely constrained. The women athletes find themselves under politico-economic and gendered social conditions governed by powerful strategic relations imposed on them and beyond their immediate control. Yet, they may employ a tactic to 'vigilantly

utilise the gaps which the particular combination of circumstances open in the control of the proprietary power. It poaches there. It creates surprises. It is possible for it to be where no one expects it. It is wile' (de Certeau, Jameson and Lovitt, 1980, p. 6). By building alliances with highly heterogeneous actors whenever opportunities arise, by taking advantage of existing situations and circumstances to gather material and technical resources, these women have been able to carve out significant opportunities for themselves. It is what de Certeau, Jameson and Lovitt (1980, p. 7) call 'guerrilla warfare of everyday life'.

The beach volleyball case may not typify a tactic in its purest form, which is 'without any globalising vision, as blind and intuitive as one must be in immediate hand-to-hand combat, ruled by temporal chance and luck' (de Certeau, Jameson and Lovitt, 1980, p. 7). Rather than simply at the mercy of luck and coincidence or altogether without control over the terrain of its operation, the beach volleyball community has consciously, persistently and progressively opened gaps in the geopolitical and gendered power blocs within which it operates. Through careful tactical manoeuvres and alliances, it has incorporated the differential powers and resources of its allies, including those originating from hegemonic structures (such as donor agencies and indigenous normative society). Tactics is nevertheless a useful heuristic device to elucidate the creative, dynamic agency of the beach volleyballers and their supporters, who, from a position of decided marginality, have captured opportunities under conditions not of their own making and scored major advances in their engagement with prevailing global politico-economic and gender relations. In this sense, their agency is not 'unexpected', 'permitted' or 'constrained'; it is tactical.

In addition, the heterogeneous collectivity that has been central to this tactical agency offers a critical glimpse into South-North relations in sporting contexts. In recent decades, 'sport for development' has become a prominent part of the international development agenda. In 2014, the Small Island Developing Nations Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway acknowledged 'the strong capacity of small island developing States in sport' and supported 'the use of sport as a vehicle to foster development, social inclusion and peace, strengthen education, promote health and build life skills, particularly among youth' (UN, 2014). Within the Pacific Islands region, the role of sport in social (and increasingly economic) development has been recognised in various forums (see e.g., Government of Samoa, 2019; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018), stimulating interest among national/regional stakeholders and donor agencies in sport-for-development interventions. Australia has been a key player in this field. A recent example is its AU\$29million Pacific Sports Partnerships programme targeting gender, disability and non-communicable diseases in Pacific Island countries (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2020; Henne, 2017; IOC, 2016).

But much of international sport-for-development literature with a gender focus questions the imposition of neoliberal sport discourse and/or Northern

feminism on the South through Northern-designed/funded sport-for-development programmes (e.g., Chawansky and Schlenker, 2015; Hayhurst, 2013, 2014; Hayhurst, et al., 2016; Hayhurst, et al., 2018; Henne and Pape, 2018; Nicholls, et al., 2010; Saavedra, 2009; Samie, et al., 2015). One of the central arguments emanating from this literature is that the Northern (neo)liberal feminist discourse of empowerment, mobilised in Southern contexts, renders sport participation and gender justice a matter of individual agency, divorcing them from structural inequalities embedded in the processes and effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Henne and Pape (2018) present one of the few existing studies of donor-funded sport-for-development programmes targeting women in Pacific Island countries (see also Henne, 2017; Lucas and Jeanes, 2020). While citing examples of programmes that successfully involved local women in leadership roles, they argue that Northern perspectives ultimately shape the design and governance of these programmes in ways that can limit the inclusion of Pacific Island voices and insights. Relatedly, Kobayashi, Hoye and Nicholson (2017, p. 764), in their study of Vanuatu's sport policy, observe that many 'aid programmes that attempt to develop sport in Vanuatu are donor-defined' with Australia playing a prominent role and that there is 'a danger that international agencies will hide behind the rhetoric of "development for sport" or "development through sport", where sport has been used to further causes to transfer a "top-down" power structure that might magnify asymmetrical North-South relations'. The international and emergent regional literature thus points to continuing colonialism of and through sport in the South, with a donor-centred logic of 'development' serving as a key medium.

Without diminishing the immense value of this literature, the case of Vanuatu beach volleyball invites closer attention to the complexities of sporting practices and actors on the ground that may be overlooked in a 'North vs. South' binary. While the North-South asymmetry of power indelibly marks the international sport system and the conditions for Southern women's engagement with organised sports, the North is not monolithic; it is constituted by its own multiple relations of power. Northern actors with subaltern experience and identity such as Masauvakalo, along with other expatriate professionals like Anderson and volunteers who identify with the transformative cause, may ally with those in the South, generating a potent configuration of local and external resources and wills to facilitate tactical agency. VVF's Volley4Change community programme is supported by Australia's Pacific Sports Partnerships, and Australian funding and volunteers have been integral to the beach volleyball pursuits: in Masauvakalo's words, 'Australia has a big part in the story'. But the story is woven by key actors whose shared transformative vision steers its unfolding. The athletes and their families have cultivated an ongoing, personal relationship with Masauvakalo, who is not a project-based consultant flown in by donors but a locally situated actor embracing the sport as her own subversive project. Likewise, Anderson has worked with the athletes directly and indirectly for over a decade, seeking a role in social change beyond

career success. In this configuration, Northern-derived resources and powers have been tactically appropriated by the subversive project rather than impose a Northern-defined top-down power structure.

This by no means contradicts the critical contributions of the sport-for-development literature. It simply illuminates an instance where athletes, non-athletes, locals and expatriates have uniquely and successfully aligned to stage 'guerrilla warfare of everyday life' against geopolitical and gendered power edifices in a rather spectacular way. The women athletes, ranking among the world's best alongside Northern nationals, and commanding the level of prestige never previously associated with a women's sport in Vanuatu, demonstrate the powerful transformative potential of an authentic, subversive South-North alliance.

Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 caused much disruption to the beach volleyball community. An international coach and two Australian volunteers left, overseas competitions were halted, and all training had to be facilitated within Vanuatu in much of 2020 and 2021. This posed many practical challenges but also enabled the community to renew the synergy that had been so crucial to its success. Earlier in 2019, the national team had attended games in Darwin, Masauvakalo's hometown:

I was so proud because I was able to take the girls to where I'm from. They could see where I'm from. They met my friends. That's one of the reasons why we decided – we've been in this COVID situation – it gives us an opportunity to reconnect with each other. Last year [2020], we went to Miller's home in Torba [Province] so the girls have a deeper understanding of where Miller comes from, how she grew up, her stories, to get a deeper connection ... For our next trip, we're planning on going to Tanna [Island] where one of the other players is from and just get an understanding of her community, her people, her languages. I think that's really strengthened the bond between us.

In addition to enhancing the synergy among the core actors, the suspension of international travel also created an occasion for building, albeit out of necessity, a viable domestic training programme/environment. While the implications of this new development have yet to become clear, it may signify a slight shift in the collective configuration. The development of ni-Vanuatu coaches is a renewed priority for VVF today, with a view to addressing the gaps between the postings of international coaches and eventually achieving self-sufficiency. Older elite athletes are also planning a coaching career as a long-term goal. The broad South-North coalition is likely to remain critically important, but local actors may progressively become autonomous and less dependent on Northern-based facilities and resources.

At the same time, the athletes' and Masauvakalo's immediate goal is Olympic qualification. To date, all ni-Vanuatu Olympians but one¹¹ have been wildcards, and no team has ever qualified (Tokyo 2020, 2021). The beach volleyballers nearly qualified for the 2016 Games by ranking 16th in the world and reached the final qualification stage for the 2020 Games. Clinching Olympic qualification will not only multiply the athletes' cultural and symbolic capital and likely impact on community perceptions of women's sporting pursuits, but also reinforce the interest of Northern actors – sporting bodies and practitioners, donor agencies and corporate sponsors – in involvement with the beach volleyball community. An ever greater range of mainstream and subaltern allies may enter the coalition. Already, as noted by the media and communications volunteer, 'people talk to me and go, "Wow, you're helping the volleyball girls!" They have a very strong ripple effect. Being involved with the volleyball community heightens your engagement, not the other way around. It's a rock-solid place to add value'. Moreover, the coalition may extend to the broader Pacific Islands region. For Anderson, who resumed coaching in Vanuatu in 2022 and facilitated the latest Commonwealth Games medal victory, the long-term mission is to 'help the whole region grow and form a coalition ... to bring all the island nations together and really develop the region. Wouldn't it be something to get two countries from Oceania ranked top 10 in the world?' Future successes of this small sporting community may attract further connections and alliances to carve its path onto new terrains.

In short, the potential trajectories of this collectivity are endless; as already demonstrated, 'it is possible for it to be where no one expects it' (de Certeau, Jameson and Lovitt, 1980, p. 6). Postcolonial *kastom*-patriarchy remains a potent force in the lives of many ni-Vanuatu women and men today. North-South asymmetry, along with Northern-led sport-for-development interventions integral to it, continues to dictate the conditions for and possibilities of many organised sports in the South. Yet, these young women athletes and those who stand by them have shown how the hegemonic structures can be tactically manoeuvred and – when the stars align – made to concede major victories to the subaltern.

Notes

- 1 Pata and Matauatu had three children between them at the time. Pata had had her baby just seven months prior to the competition.
- 2 The only other ranked Pacific Island country and territory teams (as of November 2022) are Solomon Islands at 266th, Guam and Saipan at 507th and Palau at 598th.
- 3 Inverted commas are used here to acknowledge the contested nature of 'tradition' in the Pacific (see, e.g., Keesing, 1989; Thomas, 1992) and to avoid suggesting a static 'tradition vs. modernity' binary. Relevant discussion is presented later in this chapter and especially in Chapter 6.
- 4 Vanuatu's education system consists of primary education (Years 1–6), junior secondary education (Years 7–10) and senior secondary education (Years 11–13).

- 5 Luganville is Vanuatu's second largest city, located in the island of Espiritu Santo. The capital Port Vila, the largest city, is in Efate Island.
- 6 There are also matrilineal communities in some northern and central islands of Vanuatu.
- 7 This participant is named in this chapter with her permission, on the grounds that her pivotal role in the sport makes anonymity virtually impossible.
- 8 In a wheelbarrow drive, a wheelbarrow is pushed through villages and communities to collect donations.
- 9 This participant is named with his permission, on the grounds that his prominent coaching profile makes anonymity virtually impossible.
- 10 The programme received the 2019 IOC Women and Sports Award for Oceania.
- 11 The exception is Francois Latil, who competed in archery in the 2000 Games.

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5 Solomon Islands Women's Soccer

Seizing the Moment for Change

They say it's a boys' game, but not anymore. Today, everything changes.

Introduction

On 12 December 2020, the final match of the Solomon Cup, an annual soccer tournament in Solomon Islands, attracted 23,000 spectators, a record recognised by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) as the world's highest soccer match attendance for that year (Solomon Islands Football Federation (SIFF), 2020). The two-week tournament took place when Solomon Islands was one of the few largely COVID-19-free countries. The games were live-streamed via Facebook and reached a remarkable 1.4 million global viewers hungry for soccer action, while most other countries remained under strict sporting restrictions. As reflected in this episode, Solomon Islanders have a great passion for and a long history of playing soccer,¹ although often overshadowed by international media focus on rugby players in other Pacific Island countries. In FIFA's (2021a) words: 'Solomon Islanders live and breathe football. Five-figure crowds are common-place at the Lawson Tama Stadium – a remarkable achievement with a population of just 100,000 on the main island'. According to the Solomon Islands Football Federation (2021), soccer is officially recognised as the national sport.

The widespread popularity of soccer by no means negates the importance of other sports in the Solomons, where the vast majority of the population is Melanesian, but small Polynesian and Micronesian communities also exist. Rugby has a strong Polynesian following and participation, while volleyball is widely played across the country and has a particularly keen following among Micronesian Solomon Islanders. Netball is vastly popular among girls and women in general, with Western Province notable for its active league. Nevertheless, along with futsal, in which the men's national team has recorded substantial international successes,² soccer claims by far the greatest nationwide attention and participation. High performance soccer has historically been dominated by those from Malaita Province, primarily because Malaitans comprise a large majority of the population of the capital Honiara, where club soccer is concentrated. Some Solomon Islanders may also situate the Malaitan

dominance in popular ethnic discourse, which originates from Malaitans' violent precolonial/colonial resistance to European domination, in particular 'the myth of Malaitan aggressiveness' (Kabutaulaka, 2001, p. 11; see also Allen, 2009).³ Regardless of the ethnic dynamics of the elite player population, recreational soccer is enthusiastically pursued everywhere. One of my research participants vividly described its central place in the community:

Community football is popular everywhere ... You go everywhere, and two common things you see is a church and a football pitch. That's the common community structure in the Solomons, everywhere you go ... During Christmas season, there's football competitions everywhere. A big part of the celebrations has to be football. In Malaita, it's political too – If you want to run for the Parliament, you have to sponsor the biggest prize, and you'll have all the support you need [laughs]!

Another participant, from Choiseul Province, also recalled his childhood memories:

In the village – as I grew up in the village – us boys would go and play [soccer] almost every evening. After doing all the things we need to do in the village, we grab our soccer shoes, which is a very precious thing. It is expensive to own soccer shoes, so we keep them nicely; we look after them. Our soccer shoes, our shin pads, our socks – because they're expensive, we'd keep them. After going to the garden and helping our parents, we would go and play.

The shared passion for soccer has societal significance in the Solomons in more ways than one. According to an administrator I interviewed, 'in terms of nation-building, football really plays a big role in uniting different provinces', particularly in the aftermath of a civil crisis locally referred to as 'the Tensions'. Between 1998 and 2003, long-standing ethnic tension linked to inter-island migration escalated into armed conflict, to the extent that it prompted a peacebuilding intervention by the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017 (Allen, 2012; Dinnen and Allen, 2018; Higgins, 2020). In Mountjoy's (2014, p. 325) assessment, soccer 'rose to national prominence in the early years of the new millennium due to a series of outstanding results abroad' and 'provided a much sought after outlet for a coherent expression of unity, which had been missing amid all the suspicion and turmoil of the previous decade'.

One such outstanding soccer event took place in 2004. When the country was still reeling from the devastating consequences of the Tensions, the men's national team remarkably claimed the second spot in the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) Nations Cup with a dramatic 2–2 draw with an all-star Australian side (FIFA, 2018a), a feat described by Football Australia as 'the biggest result in their history' (Greco, 2017). One of my

research participants recalled that, when a Solomon Islands striker scored the final goal to clinch the draw, the whole nation stopped: Solomon Islanders in all provinces were stuck to their radio (which was and still is the most common mass communication device), and the nation subsequently erupted into a state of frenzy. One may argue that soccer serves as one of the few sites for the construction of a sense of national identity in the face of cultural heterogeneity, entrenched provincialism and political turmoil. While Solomon Islands has 91 different vernacular languages (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office (SINSO), Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) and Pacific Community, 2017), soccer, along with Christianity, may be described as its critical 'common language', intersecting the socio-cultural tapestry of the fragmented postcolonial nation. Even ongoing public controversies and debates over SIFF's operations and efficacy (Mountjoy, 2014) may be seen as a reflection of its prominence as the most powerful sporting organisation and of the constant popular preoccupation with the state of the game.

Much like rugby in Fiji and Samoa (see Chapters 2 and 6, this volume), this 'national' sport has been played and administered overwhelmingly by men. Women's pursuit of the principal masculine game can be highly problematic, given that 'a discourse of "custom" is frequently invoked to silence women's claims for equality, recognition and human rights in contemporary Melanesia' (McDougall, 2014, p. 200). Solomon Islands women have, however, always played soccer. The largely undocumented history of women's soccer as an organised sport goes back at least as far as the 1980s, and women players have had some promising regional competition experience along the way. The national team qualified for the semi-finals at the OFC Women's Nations Cup in 2010. In the same year, the women's under-17 team won a silver medal at the OFC Women's Under-17 World Cup Qualifying Tournament, the first international competition medal won by the women's national team. The national side's most recent accomplishments are finishing third at the 2022 OFC Women's Nations Cup and second at the 2022 Pacific Women's Four Nations Tournament. At the time of writing, the women's game is undergoing noticeable growth and development as a number of critical factors have converged into a catalyst. This chapter focuses on the young women who have followed their passion for soccer, along with some older, professional women who have joined their journey to embrace the sport as a space for community-based transformative action. The chapter explores the ways in which these women have navigated socio-cultural and socio-economic constraints in this journey, the significant advances they have made in recent years and how these have come about as an outcome of their effective and creative appropriation of opportunities that came their way.

Illuminating the agentic practices of women players and administrators is meaningful, not least because Melanesian women tend to be depicted in a manner that is far removed from active pursuit of a physical game like

soccer. Douglas (2005, p. 13) points out that, historically, Melanesian women have been represented stereotypically as 'powerless, downtrodden "beasts of burden" and as the passive victims of indiscriminate male violence. Like all stereotypes, these are caricatures which deny any agency to the persons thus depicted' (see also Hermkens, 2013). In contrast with such representations, the narratives of soccer women of Solomon Islands, of diverse ages, family backgrounds and socio-economic and educational status, reveal them to be competent, skilful agents who have strategically managed normative and socio-economic barriers and actively seized the opportunities presented by recent policy developments in soccer governing bodies. Far from passive victims of 'tradition' and patriarchy, these women have steadily and adeptly advanced their claim on their national sport.

Solomon Islands sports have received scant scholarly attention to date (for exceptions, see Lucas and Jeanes, 2020; Mountjoy, 2014), and there is a glaring lack of research inquiry into women's sports. The forthcoming monograph *Women's football in Oceania* (McGowan, Symons and Kanemasu, 2023), which is the first study of women's soccer histories across the Pacific Islands (along with Australia and New Zealand), offers much-needed exploratory historical knowledge about the game in the Solomons. Other than this volume, the only published study of Solomon Islands women and sport, to my knowledge, is by Dorovolomo et al. (2019) who outline the strategies that Solomon Islands sports practitioners suggest deploying to promote women's sport participation. They report that the strategy the practitioners believe to be the most important is 'changing mind-sets and cultural views on sports that relate to gender, social issues, health and high performance' (Dorovolomo, et al., 2019, p. 191), followed by developing strategic plans and policies for gender parity. Whilst this indicates the urgency of understanding socio-cultural barriers to women's participation, the authors point out that 'research on the cultural connections between women and sports is lacking' in the country (Dorovolomo, et al., 2019, p. 188). This chapter is intended to contribute to building relevant sport research in the Solomons and wider Melanesia.

In addition, the present study draws on, and aims to extend, the substantial body of work that exists on Solomon Islands women's political agency, which anthropologists and other social scientists have examined mainly in rural, religious, electoral and post-conflict peacebuilding spaces (see, e.g., Baker, 2018; Charlesworth, 2008; Cox, 2017; Douglas, 2005; Dyer, 2017; George, 2020; Jolly, 2003; Liki, 2010; McDougall, 2014; Pollard, 2000, 2003, 2005; Rowland, 2016; Scheyvens, 2003; Soaki, 2017). Solomon Islands women's engagement with a contested sporting space like soccer can contribute to this literature a snapshot of urban women's transformative practices through a hitherto-unexamined infrapolitical medium. As argued by Dyer (2017, p. 193) in her work on village gender norms in Western Province: 'women's empowerment must be viewed as a journey that encompasses women's strategic and practical interests relating to agency in a variety of locations'. Insights offered by the soccer women can tangibly

illustrate how Solomon Islands women everywhere, including in sporting spaces, actively and thoughtfully respond to the structural forces that surround them. This chapter is centrally concerned with exploring such agency of urban sporting women, informed by the regional literature as well as the concept of 'stealth feminism' (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003).

The study relies on primary data curated via 18 semi-structured interviews – with 10 club soccer players (including six former/current national representative players), five female administrators, one male administrator, one male community soccer coach and one male regional sport scholar. The interviews were conducted in 2021 via Zoom, due to COVID-19-imposed travel restrictions. The athlete participants were recruited from eight of 10 existing women's soccer clubs in Honiara. They were aged between 20 and late 30s, and a vast majority had an extensive playing career, having taken up futsal or soccer at primary school age. Most were born and bred in the capital, with maternal/paternal Malaitan descent. Four were enrolled in a tertiary programme, two had completed secondary school and four had exited formal education before completing secondary school.⁴ Three were in formal paid employment, four in full-time education, three not in formal employment or education, and one ran her own small business. Two were married with children and the rest single.

Initial contact was made through a local research assistant with a SIFF official, who subsequently went out of her way to support this research by connecting me with participants from a variety of clubs and areas of Honiara, offering the use of the SIFF conference room, an office computer and internet connection for the interviews, and setting up Zoom for each participant. The importance of this support cannot be overstated. Solomon Islands was among the countries with the lowest fixed-broadband penetration in 2016 (with 2%) (United Nations Development Programme, 2021), and just 12% of the population had access to the internet in 2017 (World Bank, 2021b). While most people in Honiara own a mobile phone (SINSO, MHMS and Pacific Community, 2017), mobile data remain prohibitively expensive for many. In addition, connectivity is often unstable even in Honiara. Under these circumstances, the interviews would have been all but impossible without the SIFF officer's facilitation.

The officer's involvement as a gatekeeper undeniably impacted on the sampling, and the use of the gatekeeper facility for the interviews at least partially shaped the context of my conversations and interactions with the participants. Importantly, however, the way the research unfolded is more aptly described as a process of collaboration. The SIFF officer offered the critical assistance primarily because of her keen interest in hitherto-non-existent academic research into the women's game, not because of a desire to control my access. In the midst of her demanding work schedule, she found time to liaise between me and the participants day after day, including on a weekend, to ensure that I was able to talk to players and administrators from multiple clubs and areas of the capital city as I requested. In many ways, her

involvement in the research parallels the broader agentic strategy employed by the soccer women discussed in this chapter, which centres around active networking and seizing opportunities wherever they arise. The participants were equally eager to share their stories. Many told me, often with a little informal speech at the end of their interview, how excited they were that research was being conducted about their beloved game. I was surprised that many even thanked me for my interest: my research, which I thought was a mild nuisance, or worse, an intrusion into their busy soccer season, was warmly welcomed as an opportunity to share their sporting world that meant so much to them.

Liki (2010, p. 5) has importantly observed in relation to women's leadership in the Solomons that: 'claims that the country has a long way to go and that the women there need to be salvaged have dominated scholarly and official policy discourses. However ... there are pockets of beauty and hope'. What follows is an attempt to capture a dimension of these women's world that embodies such beauty and hope.

Solomon Islands: country overview

Solomon Islands consists of nearly 1,000 islands (including six main islands) in the south-western Pacific Ocean. Following early visits by European whalers, traders and labour recruiters as well as the arrival of Christian missionaries, the islands were declared a British Protectorate in 1893 and remained so until independence in 1978 (Bennett, 2002). Between 1942 and 1945, the archipelago (in particular Guadalcanal Island) was the site of some of the most calamitous battles of World War II (Kwai, 2017). Upon independence, the islands became a constitutional monarchy with a Westminster parliamentary system, comprising nine administrative provinces and the Honiara town council in Guadalcanal. The country proclaims an allegiance to *kastom* ('customary ways' in Solomon Islands Pijin) in its constitution and operates a plural legal system whereby state law coexists with customary law (Corrin, 2020). The national population of 721,000 is overwhelmingly Melanesian (95%) with small communities of Polynesians (3%), Micronesians (1%) and those of Chinese, European and other ethnic descent (SINSO, 2009, 2020). English is the official language (spoken by 86% of Honiara residents) and Pijin the lingua franca of the linguistically diverse nation (SINSO, 2009). Christianity is the common faith across the nation, represented by a variety of denominations. Although urban populations are increasing, 74% of Solomon Islanders live in rural locations (SINSO, 2020), where life in hamlets and villages rests on 'complex interplays of kinship and exchange relations, "traditional" and neo-"traditional" governance structures, friendships, membership of Christian churches and myriad claims to customary land' (Dinnen and Allen, 2018, p. 133).

Solomon Islands is classified by the World Bank (2021a) as a small state with high institutional and social fragility. Scholars have long studied its

state- and nation-building challenges (see, e.g., Allen and Dinnen, 2015; Bennett, 2002; Dinnen and Firth, 2008; McDougall, 2015; Wairiu, 2006). Extraordinary linguistic/cultural diversity, geographical fragmentation and the complexities of precolonial and colonial legacies, among other things, have resulted in localism, political divisions and fragile state institutions in the postcolonial period. This complex mix has seriously undermined government capacities for internal security, economic management and essential services such as in health, education, transport and communication (Dinnen, 2008). The 1998–2003 Tensions, '[o]ne of the most serious conflicts in the South Pacific region over the past two decades' (Firth, 2018, p. 5), transpired in this context. It originated from 'the explosive mix of rural-urban migration from Malaita to Guadalcanal, disputes over land ownership in the peri-urban area of the capital Honiara, and an urban population of unemployed youth available for mobilisation into competing militias' (Firth, 2018, p. 5; see also Bennett, 2002; SINSO, MHMS and Pacific Community, 2017). Although a peace agreement was signed between the rival militant groups in 2000, lawlessness persisted, leading to the 2003 deployment of a 2,250-strong RAMSI peacekeeping force, which was not withdrawn until 2017. The conflict had devastating consequences, including 150–200 deaths, the displacement of over 35,000 people, severe damage to the economy and disruptions to primary social services (Allen, 2012; Moser, 2007). The already-high levels of violence against women further escalated, entailing rape, forced marriage, kidnapping and domestic violence, whilst, importantly, women also played key peace-building roles in the communities (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2015; Douglas, 2005; Moser, 2007; Pollard, 2005; UN Women, n.d.). The underlying tensions have since persisted and re-surfaced most recently in 2021 in violent riots in Honiara, triggered by disputes over the government's diplomatic policy (Fraenkel and Smith, 2022).

The Solomon Islands economy relies largely on development assistance and primary commodities, particularly timber. Large-scale logging by foreign companies on customary land has taken place at an unsustainable rate, causing significant environmental damage (Beck, 2020; Kabutaulaka, 2005). With limited formal employment opportunities, 76% of households generate income mainly from subsistence-based, market-orientated activities for cash (ADB, 2018). About 13% of the population lives below the poverty line (SINSO and World Bank, 2015). Although food security is not a major concern in rural areas, considerable cash poverty exists across the country (ADB, 2015). Essential services are not readily accessible to all. Less than a quarter of all households have improved, non-shared toilet facilities, and just over half (55%) of households, mostly in urban areas, have access to electricity (SINSO, MHMS and Pacific Community, 2017). Educational attainment of the adult population is limited to 20% of women and 29% of men having some secondary school education (ADB, 2015). Solomon Islands was included in the United Nations' Least Developed Country category in 1991 and is scheduled to graduate in 2024 (United Nations Economic Analysis and Policy Division, 2021).

Neo-traditional patriarchy: convergence of *kastom*, colonialism and patriarchy

Solomon Islands women play critical roles in family and community life, entrusted with many responsibilities including 'care-giving and reproductive tasks, engagement in church and community activities, food production, animal husbandry, weaving mats and string bags, income generation and the provision of hospitality to visitors' (Rowland, 2016, p. 3; see also Pollard, 2003). They nevertheless experience a high degree of marginalisation and exclusion. Women are nearly twice as likely as men to have no formal education at all (21% versus 12%) and hold just 25% of private-sector wage jobs (ADB, 2015). Seventy-five percent of women (as against 54% of men) are in vulnerable employment, including subsistence work, self-employment and unpaid family work (ADB, 2015). *NGO Shadow Report on the Status of Women in Solomon Islands* (Christian Care Centre, et al., n.d., p. 24) states that women earn 'such low salaries that they are unable to meet even basic expenses. Most women supplement their incomes from formal employment with work in the informal sector such as selling produce from their gardens and selling baked goods'. Women are severely under-represented in national politics and public service leadership. As of November 2022, Solomon Islands ranks 169th out of 187 countries in terms of percentage of women in national parliaments (with 8%) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Women comprise 40% of public servants yet occupy just 5% of senior positions and 22% of mid-level positions (ADB, 2015).

One of the most critical issues confronting Solomon Islands women is violence. Sixty-four percent of ever-partnered women aged 15–49 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence, and 56% have experienced emotional abuse, by a partner (Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), 2009). According to the Pacific Community (SPC, 2009, p. 3), Solomon Islands women 'are more likely to experience severe forms of physical partner violence, such as punching, kicking, or having a weapon used against them, rather than just moderate violence'. The 2014 Family Protection Act criminalises domestic violence and provides legal protection for survivors of domestic violence, but financial constraints and other barriers tend to restrict women's access to justice and formal support services (Christian Care Centre, et al., n.d.).

As in other Pacific Island countries, existing gender relations in the Solomons are far from a simple reflection of 'tradition' or *kastom*. Scholars have noted the value of women's roles historically recognised in the communities as well as customary patriarchal structures, which underwent profound reconfiguration as they meshed with masculinist colonisation processes and interpretations of Christianity (Dyer, 2017; Eves and Lusby, 2018; McDougall, 2014; McKinnon, et al., 2016; Pollard, 2003; Rowland, 2016; Soaki, 2017). Postcolonial social conditions that took shape out of this historical constellation engendered and normalised women's 'confinement to the private sphere, [and] their loss of mobility, public voice, land rights,

traditional positions of power and leadership roles' (Rowland, 2016, p. 3), along with a significant increase in their overall work burden (McKinnon, et al., 2016). That is, 'a new layer of patriarchy' became imposed upon existing, indigenous forms of male domination (McDougall, 2014, p. 199). A further complexity of the dynamics of *kastom* needs to be mentioned. In Solomon Islands, Malaitans in particular have historically deployed *kastom* as an anti-colonial, and subsequently anti-government, political discourse (Akin, 2005). Akin (2005, p. 76) argues that, therefore, the postcolonial governments have, 'understandably, been reluctant to endorse or promote *kastom* too strongly' as a unifying cultural order, compared with other Melanesian states like Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. *Kastom* is thus integral to the politics of the state and ethnicity, that is, to the socio-political trajectory of the nation, and, whilst deeply intersecting postcolonial patriarchy across Melanesia, does not operate in a monolithic manner.⁵

Gender equality is formally endorsed by the national government, which ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 2002. Despite this, notions of women's rights, human rights and feminism have tended to be dismissed in the communities as 'foreign creations' opposed to both *kastom* and Christianity (Liki, 2010, p. 4; see also Cox, 2017; McDougall, 2014; Monson, 2011; Paina, 2005; Pollard, 2003; Soaki, 2017). Paina (2005, p. 55) observed in 2000 that 'gender equality preached by women's organisations in Solomon Islands is sneered upon by Guadalcanal men ... Any women's organisations, apart from the church women's groups have a negative stigma attached to them'. The Solomon Islands National Council of Women, a key advocacy organisation established in 1983, has been criticised by some churches, government officials and women and men who disapprove of challenges to the patriarchal status quo (Rowland, 2016). Other women's organisations have also operated in often-adversarial environments with limited resources (Douglas, 2005).

Nevertheless, it would be grossly inaccurate to suggest that Solomon Islands women are politically passive or inactive. As elsewhere in Melanesia, particularly important are church-based women's groups, whose welfare approach belies the strategic activities they facilitate, such as 'support for logging protests, workshops to affirm the importance of women's roles and develop their confidence, and opportunities for them to travel and expand their knowledge' (Scheyvens, 2003, p. 24). In urban areas, advocacy groups and violence-specific civil society organisations (CSOs) actively engage in awareness-raising, training, counselling and the provision of refuge and legal assistance (Ride and Soaki, 2019). It is indeed important to eschew a static victim ideology that positions Solomon Islands women as trapped in multiple layers of neo-traditional patriarchy and take account of an ongoing process of change (Macintyre, 2017; Pollard, 2000, 2003). Following recent legislative reforms, two women were elected into the parliament in 2019 for the first time since independence (Wiltshire, et al., 2020). Liki (2010; Liki Chan Tung, 2013) identifies an emerging trend of women's entry into

managerial and mid-level public service leadership. At the community level, McDougall (2014, p. 203) observes that:

the constant reiteration of the language of human rights seems to have normalised it ... [P]hrases like 'women's rights' and 'human rights' have entered the lexicon of ordinary villagers in ways that may make the inclusion of women on such things as a chiefs' committee relatively uncontroversial.

Women's soccer has emerged out of such complex and shifting post-colonial social arrangements. Athletes' and administrators' journey in pursuing the game parallels both the ongoing battles and recent victories of Solomon Islands women.

Women's soccer: an undocumented and unyielding history

Solomon Islands women had begun to play soccer socially and informally at least by the 1980s; according to one pioneer athlete, 'perhaps even the 1970s, but on an ad-hoc basis, depending on whatever event they had. Women had been playing football in those years already'. Formal soccer began to be organised in the 1990s. By 1998, there were six women's soccer teams in Honiara, with up to 30 players in each, participating in competitions organised, though not frequently, by SIFF. In 2006, the Women's Football Development Officer post was established by SIFF, and the two women who have since taken this position have played a primary role in the game's development (McGowan, Symons and Kanemasu, 2023). The senior women's national team played their first international games in 2007 at the OFC Women's Nations Cup and the South Pacific Games. They made the semi-finals at the following edition of the OFC Women's Nations Cup in 2010, and the under-17 national team won the silver medal at the same year's OFC Women's Under-17 World Cup Qualifying Tournament. School competitions also began to be organised in Honiara in the 2000s, although often inconsistently. In 2010, the 'Just Play' programme by OFC/SIFF was launched to promote participation by schoolchildren (SIFF, 2016). SIFF subsequently introduced a national championship for under-16s in 2015 and for under-14s in 2020. Most recently, the national side made significant achievements of claiming the third place at the 2022 OFC Women's Nations Cup (Figure 5.1) and the second place, only after Australia, at the 2022 Pacific Women's Four Nations Tournament.

Of particular note is the growth of the game since 2020 in the context of renewed institutional support. In August 2020, SIFF launched the Women's Premier League, the first women's competition of its kind, intended to allow for regular games and national team development towards the 2023 Pacific Games to be hosted by Solomon Islands. Coinciding with the introduction of the League, a number of new clubs were established in Honiara to make up



Figure 5.1 Solomon Islands national team at 2022 OFC Women's Nations Cup.

Credit: Jackie Tran Van/PasifikaSisters.

eight participating teams for the 2020 season and 10 for 2021. All clubs were supported by corporate sponsors secured by SIFF, a remarkable development considering that clubs had previously struggled to meet basic needs through fundraising, self-funding, limited financial support from SIFF and minor sponsorships. Each club must meet the formal organisational requirements set by SIFF and register 25 players for each season. This brings the current player population to approximately 300, including unregistered players who participate in club activities. Two seasons of the League have been successfully completed at the time of writing. As a veteran player noted, this is 'the greatest achievement by far [in women's soccer], because the clubs are now having the support, very strong support from the Federation, and also the support from the stakeholders, especially the sponsors'. In 2021, SIFF followed up with another gesture of commitment: a special fund set up to provide scholarships for 10 high performance athletes to enrol in certificate to degree programmes at local tertiary institutions (Abana, 2021). SIFF's 2019–2022 Development Plan includes the development of a competitive women's team for the 2023 Games as a priority.

The current player population is diverse, except that a large majority (estimated at 80% by an administrator) is of Malaitan descent. Just three out of the 10 existing clubs are 'old' clubs that have been in existence for several years (one of them since at least the 1990s); seven were newly created around the time of the launch of the League. Correspondingly, a minority of

experienced athletes belonging to the 'old' clubs (about 20% of the player population) are today joined by a large number of women who are new to the game or had been playing informally but recently registered with the newly-established clubs. The players also come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Some are currently in secondary or tertiary education; others completed or did not complete secondary school and are in wage employment, self-employed, unemployed or in unpaid family work. Many engage in informal employment of selling cooked food and garden produce on the roadside. The recent expansion and diversity of the player community reflect how women came out in earnest when SIFF made the milestone decision to launch the Premier League. According to a veteran athlete:

Just a few of us have been playing football for a long time. But now, there are lots of new girls coming into football. Yeah, the newcomers. Lots of girls. Because now, the coaches and management of the teams and SIFF are trying to take a different approach to girls.

Another experienced athlete described the eagerness with which women were taking up the game:

Now in the Solomon Islands, young girls are just choosing soccer, because they see a lot of competitions SIFF is organising. Even around the community where I stay, there are many young girls; they love playing soccer. They go for it. In my community, SIFF is organising one competition next week – man, they're crazy about soccer!

These developments are all the more remarkable given the formidable barriers to mobility and public presence women have historically experienced. It is worth noting that prepuberty girls have less restricted access to sports. Notwithstanding the common demarcation of 'netball for girls and football for boys', it is not unacceptable, if unusual, for girl children to play soccer/futsal, even among boys, in both urban and village settings. Some schools also organise girls' soccer/futsal teams. As girls grow older, however, it becomes increasingly problematic for them to continue to play, especially competitively. The primary barrier identified by most of my participants is 'culture':

Our cultural belief is that women should not play soccer. They should be at home doing chores. They belong to chores. These are our cultural barriers. In other provinces too, cultural perceptions are there. They can say 'Oh, it's a waste of time'. There is discrimination, I don't know. Our culture is that women should do chores in the kitchen, women should not wear shorts. Not everyone wears shorts. It's taboo; it's not allowed.

The gendered construction of soccer emanates not only from its enshrined status as the nation's primary 'men's sport' and its physical nature

but also from the associated bodily display and sportswear. Wearing shorts (generally referred to as 'trousers' in Melanesia) is becoming less contentious for urban women but remains an everyday challenge for some. These athletes manage it by wearing soccer shorts underneath a skirt when leaving/arriving home. According to a young woman born and raised in the capital:

Here in Solomon Islands, they are really strict about *kastom*. In our *kastom*, girls don't play in trousers. It's really challenging for girls to do that ... when I leave home, I wear skirts [with shorts underneath], and when I arrive at the field, I take off the skirt and train in my trousers. And when I leave the field, I wear back my skirt and go to home.

Another athlete, who took up soccer after moving to Honiara from another province, shared her first experience of and apprehensions over wearing shorts:

Back in the province, women were not allowed to wear trousers. When we had our first training [in Honiara], I didn't wear trousers; I'd just wear a skirt, shoes, and then train, up until our coach told us: 'Every training time, you should wear trousers'. So that was my first time to wear trousers ... It was really difficult for me. I felt shy when I was in the field, everyone watching me wearing trousers.

Parents, relatives, husbands and boyfriends play a major role in determining whether women can fully commit to the sport. Their views of women's participation are shaped by their 'cultural, traditional perspectives' encompassing dressing norms, often in tandem with the positions taken by their religious denominations. Some parents may also object to their daughters' sport participation due to concerns over its possible impact on their educational outcomes and the perception of sport as a pastime offering no employment opportunities. Reflecting this, my research participants reported that some young players who had newly registered with clubs could not complete a Premier League season because of parental disapproval. One young woman was sent back to her province by her guardians so that she could not participate. Some were stopped by their boyfriends/husbands from continuing. One club official spoke of a highly talented player who had dropped out: 'I said [to her boyfriend] "I think she's gonna make it into the national team!" And that was it. Home. That happens'.

The majority of the athletes I interviewed came from sporting families, where they were encouraged by their father/husband/brothers/sisters who were themselves actively involved in competitive (and often elite) soccer/sports: 'They have full support from their family, starting from the grandmother, grandfather, down to the babies. Whenever there's a game on, you have all these people on the side line just to give support to their team'. But a few participants described

their soccer career as a struggle against negative family sanctions. A former elite player recounted the severe punishments dealt out to her until she became financially independent and moved out of her parental home:

I had a lot of challenges from my own family, ever since I started playing football. I don't have *any* support at all, from my mum, my dad [emphasis original]. When I was still living with my parents, when I was in high school, I recall, every time I went for training, I never asked [for permission]. I just went and attended my training, because if I asked, they wouldn't allow me ... Whenever I got back home very late, they smacked me. But I don't care I got smacked. I enjoyed what I wanted to do. They went to the extreme where they didn't even want to give me food for dinner. I wouldn't have any share for dinner. So I would go hungry sleeping overnight just because of that. And that didn't stop me.

This participant knew a number of other elite players who had been 'smacked' by their families in similar contexts, indicating that active involvement in the sport may subject some women to family violence.

Community sanctions manifest in the form of harsh criticism, jeering and ridiculing 'especially on social media. We have spectators commenting bad stuff, mostly from men'. These also happen at the playing field:

When we are playing football, we come across a lot of challenges, like, people following us, looking at us when we are playing football. They say 'You girls are really not good in football. Girls need to stay at home and work house chores. Girls don't need to play'. They are not supporting what the girls love to do.

Verbal aggression as a punitive sanction focuses primarily on the women's violation of gender roles, namely, deviance from domestic space/activity and transgression of a masculine cultural practice. Although there exists in the Solomons, as elsewhere, an association between women playing 'men's sports' and lesbianism, sexuality generally does not come to the fore in community sanctions, arguably because visibly non-heteronormative players (with short hair and non-binary or masculine demeanour/appearance, for instance) are a small minority, unlike in women's rugby in Fiji (see Chapter 2, this volume). Nevertheless, perceived nonconformity with normative gender expression does attract backlash 'coming from men, and ladies too: "Oh, look at those calf muscles!"; "People say: "You girls playing football, you start to look like boys, dressed like a boy"'.

The socio-cultural constraints are compounded by infrastructural and material barriers. There are shortages of training grounds and equipment in Honiara, to which men's teams routinely have prioritised access. Although corporate sponsors assist the clubs mainly by financing their uniforms, day-to-day basic needs must be met by athletes and clubs themselves. Given the

scarcity of wage employment, most participants highlighted struggles to secure bus fares to attend training. Many walk miles to training venues, minimise other personal expenses to generate bus fares and/or are assisted by their clubs. Clubs continue to turn to fundraising to manage such daily needs.

Indeed, women must secure more than funds to be able to play: they must secure time. Many clubs organise daily training, but, as explained by this male administrator:

Most of the girls have obligations at home, household chores, going to the garden. Girls are busier than boys, staying at home, always having something to do. If they finish washing the clothes, maybe they have to cook. Then maybe after that, they have to clean the house ... In my community, where I come from, girls are always busy. Maybe the only free time they have is in the evening, when they finish up their work.

A young athlete shared her own schedule: 'Melanesian countries, we're not like European countries. After I go to school, I have to be back home early, do some work, help out, before I go out to do my training' on weekdays. On weekends, she attends to the family garden with her sister and sells some of the produce for a cash income, which helps raise bus fares for training. Such responsibilities can be particularly demanding for partnered women: 'it is holding them back. Some partners are [financially] supporting them, and some say "You have to do everything in the house and [only then] you go for training", yeah? Like, orders'.

In light of these social conditions, it is not surprising that organised soccer has been concentrated in Honiara to date, although there are indications of interest and development in the provinces, such as through the 'Just Play' programme for schoolchildren. Young women in the provinces may play games, including futsal competitions commonly held at Christmas time, but infrequently and often without formal clubs, coaches and other institutional support. In addition to distance and shortages of resources like sports fields, transport and equipment, socio-cultural and religious sanctions against women's participation tend to be more entrenched in rural locations. For two of my participants, soccer was not an option until they moved to Honiara: 'I wasn't playing football [in the participant's province] because it is against our culture ... But here, they encourage women's football league, so that's when I started to play'. In this regard, whilst the game is undergoing immense growth, new opportunities are hard won by urban women and have yet to reach many beyond the capital.

Engaging with neo-traditional patriarchy: mobilising competencies and resources

The above outline of the game may present a picture of women athletes being overwhelmingly constrained and contained by neo-traditional patriarchal

sanctions and socio-economic deterrents. Emerging from the players' and administrators' narratives, however, is their active engagement with these structural forces rather than passive victimhood. Indeed, the women have competently navigated the complex social landscape of *kastom*, patriarchy and socio-economics to sustain their commitment to the game. Theirs is an unobtrusive and discreet approach that may outwardly appear as subdued but is in fact effective in fostering gradual, unsuspected change and minimising backlash. Several participants used the expression 'slowly, slowly' to describe efforts and strategies for subtly progressing their cause in the communities and wider society.

This can be seen in the way some women deal with the 'trouser' problem. Unlike other urban women for whom it is not an issue, these women are likely confronted with greater *kastom*-based normative barriers in their everyday life. Yet, rather than acquiesce to these barriers, they find ways to manage them – including, as noted above, putting a skirt on and off over their shorts according to *kastom*-bound and sporting spaces – which help them meet customary obligations without giving up the sport. Similarly, the work burden, which stands in the way of many women's participation, does not simply suppress them. Many participants discussed this ceaseless battle in a manner that situates them as an active subject and not an object of coercion. A pioneer player typically stated that the women struggle to manage the heavy workload, 'but most *fight* to take on the responsibility to do what they love; they want to choose soccer'. In another player's words, the workload 'is a big challenge, but because I love soccer, I have to – yeah – go for it! I have to take the challenge'. Pollard (2003) points out in her study of Solomon Islands women's organisations that, through their extensive family/community roles, women have historically developed organisational capabilities, resourcefulness and resilience that often go unnoticed. The women athletes fully mobilise such competencies to surmount their daily work hurdle.

Similarly, the lack of material resources 'can be hard, but if we don't have the equipment, we just come [together]. We have the ball, then that should be good. At least we have the ball [laughs]'. If there is not even a ball, according to a club official: 'A lot of the girls that I've talked to or the girls in our club ... might roll up coconut husk to make it look like a ball – this is from the stories they share'. The clubs also fundraise and find ways to cover the costs of sports fields, equipment, transport, competition fees and other needs. Again, according to Pollard (2003, p. 44), Solomon Islands women's organisations share a strong tradition of voluntarism and self-financing that has enabled them to 'function and even flourish despite recent armed conflict and the resultant near collapse of the economy and the state'. Creative resourcefulness in the face of adversities similarly characterises the soccer clubs which have devised strategies for mobilising support, as detailed below.

Such dedication is sustained principally by the women's passion for the sport, which many have nurtured since childhood, but also by the collective, social meaning it holds for them. Most importantly, soccer provides a

medium for female sociality and solidarity, where they shield each other from negative sanctions, and older/experienced players and administrators mentor the young/new. Many participants referred to each other as 'soccer (/football) sisters'. For some, this is a vital source of support: 'A few of them come from broken marriages or they have left school early in their life. A lot of them don't have employment. So soccer is really something that makes them feel part of a family, part of something'. In a senior player's assessment:

The girls in the team, they love to play soccer. It's their passion. Even in our families, we get comments like 'You shouldn't go and play. You should just stay home', you know, negative comments about playing. But, when they come to play, they are coming to connect with the friends, to share. Sometimes, coming to the team is more like coming to find happiness there. They have problems or what, they come and share and laugh it out loud. For them, it's more like this sport brings them in to give them peace or give them comfort – yeah, I'd say that.

Notable among recent developments is the entry of new individuals, visions and resources into the women's soccer community and an associated rise of a soccer discourse that offers an alternative framing of the game as a vehicle for community development. A number of women, many of whom are older and in professional occupations, joined the women's soccer community in recent years by starting new clubs or taking up club management, player or supporter roles. Reminiscent of the resourcefulness and voluntarism of the women's organisations observed by Pollard (2003), these women actively capitalise on their personal and professional networks to mobilise resources within and beyond their reach:

It's all voluntary, what we are doing. It's how you bring other people in. Me, personally, I bring other people in, especially women. When I meet them at meetings, I just speak to them about football and invite them in.

We regard ourselves as professionals, so we have some good management skills, which really helps us to know where to tap into and how to ask for support.

NGOs and organisations out there are willing to help to empower women. We just need to organise ourselves and we are able to receive assistance from partners.

They have also enlisted male support through personal networks: 'We want to have more men supporting us because we believe that without their support, we can't achieve what we want. It's the same all over Melanesia'. Most clubs currently have some degree of male involvement, a recent phenomenon that the participants attributed to SIFF's public display of support for the women's game as well as to the men's personal relations with the women facilitating the clubs:

The men are willing to help out the women in coaching. Some clubs, they have their wives involved in the club, so they come on board ... Not all men support women's football, but we are starting to see a change in that. There is slowly, slowly interest in women's football from the men.

Many of these women (and men) embrace soccer as a medium through which to contribute to grassroots community development, especially targeting socially excluded young women. About half of the existing clubs are community-based and draw players from specific settlements and areas. According to the founder of one such club, due to lack of formal education, girls and young women in her community 'just do some small marketing⁶ to support their everyday living ... The children are not going to school because there's not enough finance to support them. So the only way is to live for day-by-day survival'. Echoing the notion of 'sport for development' (Darnell, et al., 2019), these clubs focus on the sport's health and social benefits for women isolated from social networks. But their approach also differs from the Global-North-derived sport-for-development mantra in that they are positioned within, and possess intimate knowledge of, the communities and that their involvement is wholly spontaneous and voluntary, not a product of institutional funding or intervention. As noted by several participants, it is a 'bottom-up' initiative, a localised sport for development.

A club founder reported having received interest that far exceeded the 25-player limit: 'All the women are interested ... we cannot afford to get all the ladies together, but next year, we just have to give other girls a chance. Otherwise, we have to make two teams!' Her club offers social and physical activity opportunities where no community sport, for either women or men, had previously existed. The players now 'have something to go out of their home and be happy [about]. They want to be happy. They want to enjoy life as well. That's what I have seen – I have seen happy faces'. Another club administrator shared: 'Most of the girls in the team, I found that they are in and out of school because of financial difficulties. One or two girls, they just stay at home, like, unemployed'. The club offered them 'an opportunity to go out and play, make friends, mingle with other girls'. According to yet another club official, other than sporting activities, her club was intended to contribute to non-formal education by providing life skills such as letter writing and scholarship application.

Notably, this development focus is not only aimed at maximising the benefits of the sport; it is consciously employed as a persuasive strategy for inducing community (particularly male) support for women's participation. The above club official who discussed the provision of life skills added: 'We go outside of soccer so that families can see we're not only focused on soccer itself but also helping them [women] to gain some sort of knowledge other than that'. Although her club was initially met with scepticism and antagonism from some community members, 'families now actually come out to the field, even on the training days, just to be with them [players] and see

what we're doing ... And slowly, they [players] bring their own cousins, younger sisters – and the story gets out'. Positioning their activity as a form of community work shifts the focus away from contentious gender issues and fosters its socio-cultural legitimacy on the ground. As aptly summarised by another club founder:

There's this stereotyped thinking that football is only for men ... it blocks people's brains from thinking. So maybe drive it from another angle, like, it can create jobs, it can provide opportunities to develop yourself, for making decisions ... Those are the things we say to drive it another way around ... How you talk about it is very important, not to close people's thinking because of our culture.

There is some evidence that these ongoing and recent strategies may be engendering a sense of community ownership of women's teams. Alongside spectator jeering, enthusiastic support from families and friends is seen at the pitch. A male community soccer coach observed that a community may indeed show unreserved support when a women's team is recognised as its own and carrying its name and pride:

If there are organised competitions, communities would back their girls ... We don't want our 'village name' [with air quotes], football women's village team, to lose. The whole village will be there supporting, even though it's girls, even though it's women. I would say the girls' team is the worst ... I've seen women, how passionately they go for their teams. Sometimes, it ends up in a big fight between fans, especially the mothers and supporters! ... When there's no competition, and if you want to do that [play soccer], they [community members] will be like: 'What are you trying to do? You know the village rules'. But when there's a competition, they are like: 'Okay, yeah. We understand you girls have to get yourselves ready'.

The players' inconspicuous yet relentless persistence over the years, the recent expansion of the women's soccer community with new input, networks and resources, the gradual co-optation of men and the emerging, alternative framing of the game, in the context of SIFF's renewed commitment, may be – slowly, slowly – triggering a process of change in the communities.

Subtle strategies: a Pacific stealth feminism

As noted by Rowland (2016, p. 7), several scholars have previously highlighted the 'subtle strategies' employed by Solomon Islands women for achieving practical gains in their lives. Scheyvens's (2003) study of church women's organisations reveals that, despite their conservative appearance of accommodating the patriarchal status-quo, they are an important medium of

women's networking, solidarity building and non-formal education (see also McDougall, 2003; Pollard, 2003; Soaki, 2017). McDougall (2014) discusses rural women's covert advances into community leadership in Western Province. Women's increasing entry into a village chiefs' committee is examined by McDougall not as a radical opposition to patriarchal political structures but as a case of women stepping into roles whose prestige has declined as the locus of politico-economic power shifts beyond the village. In a similar vein, Dyer (2017) describes Western Province village women's approach to community leadership as a case of 'permitted empowerment', whereby women feel that they are able to fill leadership roles if men let them, with male permission. Cox (2017, p. 86) presents a relevant point in discussing a rural kindergarten (again in Western Province) where the female headteacher and her husband sought to induce community acceptance of women's leadership. The kindy curriculum 'gently inserted practices of gender equality into local narratives of development' and thereby served as a 'modest, shrewd and subtle means of working for change' within the community (Cox, 2017, p. 86). In the sphere of national politics, Spark (2014a, p. 1–2) observes a parallel approach among members of the Young Women's Parliamentary Group. The young Solomon Islands women leaders Spark interviewed believed that it was 'necessary to go around the system, rather than engage in oppositional politics' in enhancing women's political participation.

The case of women's soccer presents considerable continuity with the subtle strategies outlined by previous researchers. In the urban sporting context examined in this chapter, women have similarly worked painstakingly and unobtrusively to advance their claim on the deeply gendered national sport by finding ways to elicit community support and minimise opposition. Their approach is well-summarised in an administrator's comment: 'We're always trying to break those barriers for women. We're not trying to force it upon the men to accept women playing football, but we're trying to show that we can do it too and it's not just about football'. If the approach is understated and cautious, it is certainly subversive in its outcomes – i.e., hundreds of women of diverse backgrounds playing vigorously and passionately a hitherto highly contentious sport. The outcome is indeed profoundly radical, given the extent of the challenges the women have surmounted to put on soccer shorts, gain family consent, manage work burdens and secure time and money before they are able to set foot in the pitch. The radicality of the current 'boom' of women's soccer needs to be appreciated in the context where, Soaki (2017, p. 100) argues, 'only a small percentage of women, notably those who have benefited from higher education and are familiar with more cosmopolitan ways of life, question their social position and resist the surveillance of their lives in terms of religion and *kastom*'.

In this respect, the case of women's soccer in Solomon Islands may be understood as a kind of 'stealth feminism', a concept proposed by Heywood and Dworkin (2003) in their discussion of the transformative potential of

sport in the post-feminist West (see also Heywood, 2008). They posit that, in contemporary American society where feminism is dismissed as a 'dated' notion, female athleticism may serve as a key tool for 'third-wave feminism', drawing 'attention to key feminist issues and goals without provoking the knee-jerk social stigmas attached to the word feminist, which has been so maligned and discredited in the popular imagination' (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, p. 51). Solomon Islands women engage with a historically and culturally specific patriarchy. Female athleticism is pursued and contested in the Solomons under conditions vastly different from the American sporting world that has seen the fruits of Title IX and the second wave feminist movement. Solomon Islands women's sporting pursuit may nonetheless be seen as its own version of stealth feminism in that it serves to advance, with stealth and dexterity, unmistakably feminist agendas 'such as equal access to institutions, self-esteem for all women and girls, and an expanded possibility and fluidity within gender roles that embraces difference' (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, p. 51). If 'stealth feminism is a strategic choice in situations where feminism is, or may be, marginalised' (Laliberté, et al., 2017, p. 38), it manifests in a variety of forms in a variety of social and cultural contexts where the scope for articulation of feminist political activism is disputed.

Sport as a stealth feminism has been questioned by feminists who believe that it excludes women not able or willing to use physicality as a political tool and is accessible to only 'privileged classes of women, namely, white, middle-class women from the global north' (Stevenson, 2018, p. 239; see also Caudwell, 2011). Heywood and Dworkin have also been taken to task for allegedly overlooking neoliberal co-optation of physical empowerment narratives, which reduces women's liberation to a matter of individual athletic self-fulfilment (see, e.g., Brennan, 2021). Uncritical assumption of the emancipatory potential of athleticism, as well as imposition of Northern understandings of it on Southern peoples, must certainly be resisted. But one may argue that Southern women's subversive acts can also inform, extend and enrich Northern-derived concepts, thereby challenging a binarism resting on immutable North-South cultural differences and assumption that the South is always an object of Northern imposition. Solomon Islands women's voices and experiences show, not that playing soccer is in itself a ticket to structural equality, but that women everywhere, including in sports fields of the Global South, actively and thoughtfully engage with the structural conditions that confront them and find ways to foster a process of their transformation. In doing so, the soccer women are cultivating a notably diverse athletic community not exclusive to a privileged educated few but encompassing diehard veterans to newcomers of various social positionings. This by no means implies that women have gained unrestricted access, as illustrated by the stories of those who dropped out due to family disapproval and possibly many others who have not played at all despite their interest. Women's empowerment and disempowerment in and through sport 'is an

indication of the cultural struggle being waged in sport' (Theberge, 1987, p. 391). Solomon Islands women's stealth feminism illustrates one way in which such a cultural struggle is waged.

Seizing the moment: sport mega-events and policy impetus

It is important to note that the current growth of the game is an outcome of more than the covert and persuasive effort of the women; it was brought on by their decisive seizing of the opportunities opened up by recent policy developments. A key catalyst is SIFF's explicit position of support, which is in turn shaped by the impetus arising from the 2023 Pacific Games and the broader policy climate in which gender is increasingly a priority for national sporting bodies, OFC and FIFA. According to an administrator, the 2023 Pacific Games, as a regional sport mega-event, is 'pushing us to do more. We're the host country. There is an expectation to perform. I wouldn't say that is the whole reason why. That is one of the reasons why'. That the country's standing in the Games is a matter of national importance has been stressed by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare himself: 'We will invest in the development of our sports people to ensure they are competitive during the Games' (Mackay, 2021). Against this backdrop, sporting bodies' attention has been increasingly drawn to the high-performance potential of women's sports. Six out of Solomon Islands' seven gold medals at the 2015 Pacific Games and three of its four gold medals at the 2019 Games were won by female athletes (in weightlifting and athletics in 2015 and all in weightlifting in 2019). The country's first and only Commonwealth Games medal (a bronze) was won by female weightlifter Jenly Tegu Wini in 2018. This awareness of women's sporting potential is reinforced by the increasing profile of global human rights discourse advocated by CSOs and development agencies operating in the country. As pointed out by the regional sport scholar I interviewed, these 'sent a strong message that the Solomons needed to change the direction in terms of policy, in terms of investing. There has to be more done in terms of women's sports'.

All this policy impetus is further heightened by forthcoming global sport mega-events and international soccer policy developments. In 2021, OFC released *Women's Football Strategy 2027*, its first strategic plan dedicated to the women's game, aligned with the prospect of the Women's World Cup to be co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand in 2023 (FIFA, 2021b; OFC, 2021). OFC's overall goal is specified in this document as having two competitive regional teams participate in the 2027 Women's World Cup. The regional developments correspond to FIFA's own gender policy milestones. The global governing body was not known for strong support for women's participation in its early history (McGowan, Symons and Kanemasu, 2023). Nonetheless, in view of the 'vast untapped opportunities' offered by the women's code, the 2016 FIFA Congress unanimously voted for greater recognition and promotion of women in the game and appointed the governing body's first female

secretary general (FIFA, 2019). *FIFA Women's Football Strategy* launched in 2018 aimed to have women's soccer strategies in 100% of the member associations by 2022 and to double the global female player population from 30 million to 60 million by 2026 (FIFA, 2018b). In 2019, the FIFA president announced US\$500 million funding over four years to that end (Public Broadcasting Service, 2019).

The growth of women's soccer in the Solomons is thus policy-induced in significant ways, with strategic impact emanating from OFC/FIFA. FIFA's immense power and control over member associations and stakeholders (which, in the Global South, are overlaid by geopolitical disparities) have been critically examined by many (e.g., Darby, 2002, 2005; Eick, 2010; Knijnik, Balram and Kanemasu, 2021; Maharaj, 2011; Steinbrink, Haferburg and Ley, 2011). In the Solomon Islands context, Mountjoy (2014, p. 329) draws attention to the power dynamics of SIFF's affiliation with FIFA/OFC, whereby, he argues, the global body imposes its universal development logic on local actors:

SIFF has become adept at using the language of morality, nationhood, and leadership through its stated desire to abide by the aims laid out in FIFA statutes. Typical of these are FIFA slogans such as 'Sport for all', 'For the game. For the world', and 'Build a better future'. This language, I argue, echoes that from the early era of missionisation and throughout the colonial period whereby legitimacy was established through the introduction of education, sport and the dispersal knowledge surrounding moral and physical health.

In Mountjoy's view, this sporting neo-colonialism problematises SIFF's soccer development agenda, as it pursues an externally derived modernisation model at the expense of local knowledges and practices.

This may represent yet another instance of North-South power imbalance in sports. However, it is equally important to point out that Solomon Islands women are far from pawns of the national, regional or global soccer powers. When the policy impetus and SIFF's Pacific Games ambitions converged to open up significant scope for change, Solomon Islands women moved to capitalise on it. They saw that the support shown by SIFF, especially the president himself, was not only driving tangible institutional measures but also likely to build the social acceptability of women's participation. Women in the communities at that point clasped the new-found opportunity to play the sport that many of them had played as children and always wanted to pursue:

They saw the way the men play [soccer] in their communities, and 'I think I wanna do that too.' That's where a lot of them started off from, but as they got older, they didn't have the means to play. So when they heard that women's football had started, they started looking for clubs they

could join. They might just see us training somewhere and they come and hang around. So we ask them, 'Do you want to play?' That's how they jump in and start being part of the club.

Veteran players came forward to reinforce the momentum by mentoring and assisting newcomers to navigate the many challenges of women soccer players: 'I always cheer my girls up. Some of them just started, and I encourage my girls not to give up'. Some even moved from 'old' clubs to new ones to take leadership roles to help sustain them. One of the experienced players I interviewed had visited communities, asking around if anyone wanted to join her club. Similarly, many of the women who joined the game as club founders or in other leadership roles did so to exploit the opening to utilise the sport as a means for transformative work in the communities: 'Looking back on our community ... young ladies have no job, they're just staying in the home. So, when there was an opportunity at SIFF, we had to tap in'. These are instances of women recognising opportunities in the new policy arrangements and decisively capturing them for their own agentic purposes.

Conclusion

Women's soccer in Solomon Islands is today presented with opportunities never seen before in its history. The current growth of the game has its basis in the long history of the players'/administrators' untold struggle and passion, their competencies to negotiate myriad impediments, and more recently, a development-focused, persuasive framing of the game and the enlistment of male champions. Their pursuits have been characterised by a distinct style that is outwardly subtle and understated, yet also persistent and profoundly transformative – a stealth feminism Pacific style. Furthermore, their sporting milieu is presently taking on a new aspect. Impending sport mega-events, the women's game as the latest policy priority and the broadening reach of global gender equality discourse have combined to generate unprecedented levels of institutional support and opportunities. Women – both those who were already passionately involved with or without support and those who had not been part of the game before – have seized this moment to foster change. Individually and collectively working to bring new players, administrators, resources, networks and communities into the game, they have taken advantage of the convergence of favourable factors. The vibrant growth seen today is a culmination of such sustained and strategic acts of diverse women.

It is worth pointing out that, while subtlety has been the hallmark of their style of operation, there are indications that some women may choose to become less subtle in the future. A few young women I interviewed did not speak of seeking 'permitted empowerment'; they claimed their dues, confronted reified *kastom* and invoked modern rights-based discourse in doing so:

Soccer helps us in our communities, so that we can help the new generations to come up, rather than letting the culture stop us from doing what we want to do. Because we are now living in a modern system. We are no longer living all our traditional culture. Now things are changing. Modernisation is taking place in our lives. We can let our future generations live their lives.

Young urban women may be increasingly embracing not only the new policy arrangements but broader human rights advocacy. This resonates with other researchers' observation that 'hopes and aspirations of young women, especially those who have gained education in the last decade, are now finding expression in ways that have no precedent in the Pacific' (Macintyre, 2017, p. 9; see also Pollard, 2000, 2003; Spark, 2014b, 2017). In many Solomon Islands communities today, notions of human rights, if significantly altered in local contexts and often rejected as foreign impositions, 'nonetheless exist as discursive resources in discussions about the appropriate roles of men and women' (McDougall, 2014, p. 214). More and more soccer women (and men who have joined them) may turn to these resources to further their cause.

The stories this chapter has illuminated do not speak for all women in the highly heterogeneous nation. The player population, though rapidly expanding and diversifying, is dominated by urban women. Women outside of Honiara, especially in rural areas with strong attachments to *kastom* and kin relationships, along with urban women faced with greater normative and material constraints, are on the margins of the game. Whether soccer (or any other sport, for that matter) offers those women an agentic medium, and if it does, how it is experienced by them, remains to be told. But the trials and victories of the women who shared their stories here represent one of the 'pockets of beauty and hope' (Liki, 2010, p. 5) in contemporary Solomon Islands as women continue to contest their place under enduring and emerging social conditions. In the sporting context examined here, women have been strategic agents of change as much as they have been marginalised and afflicted. The shift in the country's soccer landscape witnessed today may be a 'game changer' whose full potential is to be revealed hereafter. The women who participated in this study were convinced of this future. As a young national team player said to me simply but emphatically: 'They say it's a boys' game, but not anymore. Today, everything changes'.

Notes

- 1 The term 'soccer' is more widely used than 'football' in Solomon Islands. 'Soccer' will therefore be adopted in this chapter except where 'football' is used by the research participants and in quoted texts.
- 2 The Solomon Islands national team qualified for the FIFA Futsal World Cup in 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2021. It is also a six-time champion of the Oceania Football Confederation Futsal Nations Cup (in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2016 and 2019).

- 3 The majority of the research participants, who were Malaitans, shared the view that Malaitans are more 'active', 'physical' or 'aggressive' than those from the other provinces, to which their prominence in competitive soccer was at least partly attributed.
- 4 Formal education in Solomon Islands consists of six years of primary education and six years of secondary education (followed by variable years of tertiary education).
- 5 Consequently, in this chapter I do not employ the term 'kastom-patriarchy' used in Chapter 4, to acknowledge the specificity of each variant of postcolonial patriarchy and of *kastom* in the Solomons. State appropriation of *kastom* has been less prominent in the Solomons than in Vanuatu, where the centrality of *kastom* 'revival' in the dominant nation-building narrative is manifest in, for instance, the status of the Vanuatu Culture Centre as one of the most potent national institutions (see Alivizatou, 2012).
- 6 'Marketing' here refers to the sale of garden produce or cooked food at a market or on the roadside.

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6 Samoa Women's Rugby

Working with 'Culture'

No matter how socialised, what trends of the world we are going through, the Samoan way, the culture, is still strong, as it was.

Introduction

'Rugby is king in Samoa', as succinctly described by one of the few researchers who have studied sports and women in the Polynesian country (Thorp, 2014, p. 22). Samoa is arguably best known to the world as one of the three leading rugby-playing nations in the Pacific (Horton, 2012). It has been reported that Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, with a combined population of just 1.5 million, account for nearly a quarter of all professional rugby union players (McMorran, 2020). In the 2019 Rugby World Cup (RWC), 42 players of Pacific Island descent represented nations other than those of their birth/background (McMorran, 2020) and over a quarter of the New Zealand squad had Samoan heritage (Airey, 2019). Samoa has played in every men's RWC since its second edition as one of the smallest participating nations. The national team *Manu Samoa* made a spectacular first appearance in the mega event in 1991 by defeating Wales on the opponent's home ground and reaching the quarter-finals. *Te Vaka*, a renowned contemporary Polynesian music group, once sang about the *Manu Samoa*:

<i>Alu le manu le Manu Samoa</i>	[Go the Manu Samoa]
<i>Alu ma le atoa aia</i>	[Go with all your strength]
<i>Alu le manu le Manu Samoa</i>	[Go the Manu Samoa]
<i>Tama tama toa tama toa toa tama</i>	[Our men, our warriors]
<i>Ua e fa'aali i le lalolagi</i>	[You have shown the world]
<i>le lototele mo lou atunu'u</i>	[great courage for your country]
<i>e mafua ai le malosi</i>	[yielding strength]
<i>le malosi ma le mimita</i>	[strength and pride]
<i>E toetiti ae taunu'u</i>	[You nearly succeeded]
<i>le fasiiga o le liona</i>	[in defeating the lion]
<i>e laititi ae maini</i>	[though a small nation, you have a mighty sting]
<i>fa'amaualuga ai le Pasifika</i>	[upholding the name of the Pacific] ¹

The passage 'You nearly succeeded in defeating the lion' likely refers to the Manu Samoa's 2003 RWC match against England, which enthused *The Guardian* commentators to say: 'This is why the Rugby World Cup is a worthwhile exercise. England were given a huge scare tonight. David did not quite slay Goliath, but he made him see stars' (Rookwood and Woodward, 2003). Along with the passionate rendition of postcolonial nationalist sentiments of 'defeating the lion', the song extolls Samoan rugby players, much like their Fijian cousins (Chapter 2, this volume), as 'warriors' showcasing the physical strength and bravery in combat definitive of hegemonic indigenous masculinity. The name Manu Samoa itself derives from a legendary warrior Manusamoa Isamaeli (with the two-word abbreviation also denoting 'bird of Samoa') (Lakapi Samoa, 2021). The warrior motif permeates rugby practices, as in Fiji, most visibly the war dance *siva tau*, which had once been performed before battle and is now staged by the national team prior to international matches.

As notable as the pre-eminence of warrior masculinity is that rugby is entwined with Samoa's village social organisation (Clément, 2014). Given the capital Apia is the only city and over 81% of the population is located in rural areas (Samoa Bureau of Statistics (SBS), 2021b), the village is the main residential setting for most Samoans. Accordingly, the vast majority of men's rugby clubs are based in villages, under the authority of customary chiefs (*matai*). Clubs belong to provincial unions, which are in turn governed by the national union Lakapi Samoa (known as the Samoa Rugby Union until 2020), with *matai* represented in the administration of the clubs and unions (Clément, 2014). Untitled men in the village have historically formed an association called *aumaga*, which serves the village council of chiefs. *Aumaga*'s ceremonial name, *malosi o le nu'u*, literally meaning 'the strength of the village', mandates its roles anchored in physical prowess – providing the village and its families with labour as/when necessary, procuring food through farming and fishing and implementing the village council's decisions (Amosa, 2010). Thus positioned in the village, young men must demonstrate their individual and collective strength (*malosi*), of which playing rugby is an integral part (Clément, 2014). Although rugby is not a formal duty of *aumaga*, most young men are socialised through the sport within the village and aspire to be part of the team representing the village as a service to their community (Clément, 2014; Meleisea, et al., 2015). In Clément's (2014, p. 376) estimation, then, rugby 'takes place in the context of and is surrounded and influenced by *fa'asāmoa*² (the Samoan way of being and doing things)'.

How are Samoan women positioned in this culturally imbued sporting landscape? As this chapter will suggest, the answer to this question is complex and multi-layered. Intriguingly, it is 'commonly claimed that men and women enjoy equal status in Samoan society' because of women's 'traditional' status in *fa'asāmoa* (Samoa Office of the Ombudsman/Samoa National Human Rights Institution (SOO/SNHRI), 2018, p. 218; see also Motusaga, 2016). Samoans and non-Samoans typically make remarks such as: 'You don't see

much suppression of women's voices at all ... mainly because women have a strong cultural position, not just in families, but in village set ups and also nationally' (quoted in Martire, 2014, p. 6). The following sections will show, however, that women's positioning in Samoan society is intricate and mediated by differing roles and status within the village social structure. Notwithstanding claims about Samoan women's 'revered status' (Martire, 2014, p. 6), significant gender disparities exist in the families, communities and wider society, which are reflected in the sporting arena.

Samoa historian Meleisea and colleagues (Meleisea, et al., 2015, p. 31) note that girls and young women are included as the village youth, yet 'regarded as being somewhat peripheral to the core masculine labour and sporting activities of the youth'. They may nevertheless play volleyball with boys and young men and provide 'help' to the youth group's activities (Meleisea, et al., 2015). Volleyball is indeed played socially across the country, and netball is a highly popular 'girls' sport' especially in urban Apia (Schuster and Schoeffel, 2019; Thorp, 2014). Touch rugby is increasingly available to girls as a school sport, and the 'Get Into Rugby' programme by Oceania Rugby, Lakapi Samoa and development agencies invites girls in villages and schools to get a taste of tag rugby (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021). The annual Schools National Rugby Championships include girls' competitions, albeit of a limited scale compared to boys' (see, e.g., Samoa Global News, 2022; von Dincklage, 2021a). English cricket is also being introduced to schools and villages by its national federation (Schuster and Schoeffel, 2019), and *kirikiti* (also referred to as *kilikiti*), its indigenised variety, has historically been a popular recreational sport across Samoa, 'involving whole villages regardless of age or gender' (Khoo, Schulenkorf and Adair, 2016, p. 78; see also Sacks, 2017a,b, 2019).

However, as in many other parts of the Pacific, women beyond school age have few opportunities for active engagement with sport. Access to sport facilities such as gyms and specialised equipment is restricted to urban Apia. Moreover, women manage a heavy family and community workload: 'family takes priority over the individual in all things, and after family there is the commitment to the church and collective village activities' (Schuster and Schoeffel, 2019, p. 118). Relatedly, there are considerable gendered restrictions on movement as 'girls are kept close to their mothers, usually within the household, where they are required to carry out chores, cook for their brothers and family and stay out of harm's way' (SOO/SNHRI, 2018, p. 126). As elsewhere in the region (Chapters 4 and 5, this volume), gendered dressing norms prohibit women from wearing shorts in many villages. Hence, Schuster and Schoeffel (2019, p. 122) argue that 'despite all the policies for sports equity for women and girls ... Samoan culture continues to be a major impediment to women's participation and equity in sports'.

Not surprisingly, then, rugby is played by a growing yet small minority of Samoan women. Besides gendered barriers to sport participation in general,

key impediments derive from constructions of rugby (especially in its full-contact codes, as against touch or tag rugby) as a 'combat sport' epitomising masculine physical aggression outlined above. In my research participants' words, women's participation in the game 'is a no-no to our traditional people', for women are 'the weaker gender (*itupā vaivai*)' and it is customarily inappropriate for them to enter distinctly masculine domains. Against this backdrop, the sport has been pursued by small groups of women across Samoa who have found culturally embedded avenues for circumventing barriers and carving their space in it. This chapter examines some of these barriers and the strategies women have deployed for negotiating and appropriating customary conventions and protocol – that is, the powerful institution of *fa'asamoa* – in inducing family and community support for their contested sporting pursuits.

The chapter also forms a pair with Chapter 2 in that it allows for a comparison between the ways in which Samoan and Fijian women have fashioned their pursuit of the region's most masculinised sport. Samoan women rugby players' approaches to existing gender norms present an intriguing contrast with the highly oppositional nature of Fijian women's rugby practices. This chapter explores how Samoan women, who find themselves in a smaller and ethnically and culturally more 'homogeneous' society than Fiji (Amosa, 2012; Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018), have devised ways of working with, rather than against, the dominant cultural order, which they both reproduce and reconfigure in the process. The comparison invites reflections on 'varieties of patriarchy' (Hunnicut, 2009) that demand differential agentic strategies or 'patriarchal bargains' (Kandiyoti, 1988) from women variously located.

Furthermore, the narratives of Samoan women rugby players and administrators bring into view the duality of culture in relation to social change. In the Pacific Islands region, 'culture' or 'tradition' (commonly used interchangeably to refer to customary heritage) has been invoked in essentialist and ahistorical political discourses by both those who seek to 'preserve' it as an imperative for the decolonisation and nation-building project and those who call it into question as a key impediment to greater social justice for historically marginalised social groups (Jolly, 2016; Mallon, 2010). Despite an extensive scholarly debate over the politics of tradition in the region (see e.g., Feinberg, 1995; Jolly and Thomas, 1992; Linnekin, 1992; Mallon, 2010), sport is rarely discussed as a site of cultural contestation. The experiences of Samoan women rugby players reveal 'culture'/'tradition' to be both a barrier to and an agentic resource for social change, calling for an understanding of differential constructions and uses of culture as indicative of its multifariousness and dynamism in postcolonial Pacific Island contexts.

There exist few empirical studies on women and sports in Samoa. To my knowledge, Schuster and Schoeffel (2019) offer the only published work that examines Samoa's sport policies and socio-cultural and material factors deterring girls'/women's sport participation, based on a survey with secondary

schools, interviews with stakeholders and personal observations. The authors stress the need for winning support from community and national leaders and addressing 'cultural anxieties' over girls'/women's sports through village-based initiatives (Schuster and Schoeffel, 2019, p. 122). The only other existing study is by Thorp (2014), who, in her School for International Training Study Abroad research project, examined the experiences of Samoan women athletes through interviews and surveys with athletes, non-athletes and stakeholders. Her findings parallel those of Schuster and Schoeffel, highlighting the primary significance of *fa'asamoa* as a cultural context for women's engagement with sport as well as an infrastructural deficit constraining (especially rural) women's access to sport. Added to these two studies is the forthcoming monograph on women's soccer in the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand by McGowan, Symons and Kanemasu (2023), which includes Samoa in its scope and provides one of the first detailed historical accounts of the sport in the country. Women's rugby, however, has not received focused attention in published scholarly work to date, in stark contrast to the volume of research that Samoan male rugby players have attracted (see Chapter 1, this volume).

The discussions in this chapter are based on primary data generated through semi-structured interviews with a total of 14 women in 2021: 11 players representing nine women's rugby clubs and three rugby/sport administrators. The interviews, conducted via Zoom due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, were supported by a Samoan research assistant/adviser, who is an athlete and sport administrator herself. She contributed critically to recruiting the participants identified by Lakapi Samoa, hiring a private meeting facility with internet connection in Apia and ensuring that the participants connected with me smoothly via Zoom. Although most Samoans (80% in urban and 72% in rural areas) have internet access at home (SBS, 2021a), securing a space that guaranteed uninterrupted communication and confidentiality was vital to in-depth interviewing in a small locality like Apia.

The players who participated in this study were in the age range of 19–43 and had playing careers of 1.5–20 years. Ten out of these 11 players had been in the national squad. The majority were from or residing in Apia, while five were residing in villages in Upolu (the island in which Apia is located), three were from Savai'i (the other of the country's two main islands) and one was from the small island of Manono. The Savai'i and Manono participants were visiting or temporarily staying in Apia at the time of their interviews. The great majority of the players were single women, with a mix of students, full-time rugby players (affiliated with Lakapi Samoa's high performance academy), those in formal wage employment and self-employment and those not in education or employment. The interviews were conducted in English, except one that was facilitated entirely through a Samoan interpreter. Whilst one Savai'i participant was a little shy about being interviewed by a foreign researcher, the others seemed to relish the opportunity to share their experiences of the game that has attracted little

academic or public attention to date. The participants offered critical insights into the many adversities accompanying their commitment to the game, which may be overlooked by perspectives that assume Samoan women's 'revered status'. They also shared with pride how they manoeuvre these obstacles, not least by thoughtfully and strategically courting agents and institutions of 'tradition'.

Samoa: country overview

Samoa (known as Western Samoa until 1997) is located in the south-eastern Pacific Ocean. The independent state shares the Samoan archipelago with American Samoa and consists of nine islands, including two main islands of Upolu and Savai'i. Following German (1900–1919) and New Zealand (1920–1962) rule and 'the most organised anti-colonial movement in the Pacific' (Mcintyre, 1999, p. 681), Samoa became the first Pacific Island country to achieve independence in 1962. The current population stands at approximately 202,500 (SBS, 2021b) and is overwhelmingly (over 90%) indigenous Samoan, with small communities of other Pacific Island, European and Chinese descent (Central Intelligence Agency, 2005; SBS, 2021b). The country consists of 344 villages where most Samoans live (SBS, 2021b); even Apia's main residential areas are organised into village communities (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2006). Scholars have noted considerable ethnic and linguistic homogeneity in Samoa (Amosa, 2012; Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018; Va'a, 2015). Most Samoans' first language is Samoan (which has formal, colloquial and ceremonial variants), while English is the second official language and the medium of instruction in schools (from Year 7 onwards). Ninety-eight percent of the population is Christian (predominantly the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa, Methodist, Roman Catholic and Mormon), and a constitutional amendment declared Samoa a Christian state in 2017 (Wyeth, 2017). The perceived homogeneity and small geographic and population size of the country, however, belie its historical and extensive engagement with transnationalism. Samoa has one of the Pacific's largest diaspora populations, estimated at 124,400 in 2019 (about 60% of its domestic population), concentrated in New Zealand, Australia, the continental United States and American Samoa (Howes and Surandiran, 2021).

Samoa is a lower-middle-income country according to the World Bank classification (Hamadeh, van Rompaey and Metreau, 2021). The economy depends mostly on public administration, agriculture, development aid and private remittances, as well as an emerging tourism industry. Emigrant remittances are a key source of revenue and made up as much as 24% of the gross domestic product in 2019 (Howes and Surandiran, 2020). Approximately 68% of the labour force is in subsistence agriculture and informal economic activity (SBS, 2020b). Youth unemployment is a significant development challenge: the 2016 census found 58% of women and 25% of men aged 20–24 'not in employment or education' (SBS, 2020b). About twenty-three percent of the

population lived under the national poverty line in 2018 (Asian Development Bank, 2023). Samoa graduated from the United Nations' Least Developed Country category in 2014 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021).

Samoa is one of the only two Pacific Island countries with accredited national human rights institutions as of July 2022 (the other being Fiji³): the Samoa Office of the Ombudsman has 'A' status of being fully compliant with the Paris Principles (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner Human Rights, 2021). Importantly, the island nation also rests on a complex 'mixture of traditionalist hierarchical principles combined with notions of democracy and individual rights' (Siikala, 2014, p. 226). It is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional system incorporating common law and customary law. *Fa'asamoa* remains central to the organisation of social and political life. The customary chiefly system (*fa'amatai*) coexists with a democratic governance process, whereby only *matai*, who are the heads of extended families (*aiga*), are allowed to contest parliamentary seats. Village councils consisting of *matai* are institutionalised by national legislation as local legislative, executive and judicial organs with powers of 'making laws or rules for the village, overseeing the execution and implementation of village development and are also the adjudicator/decision-maker when the rules are infringed or there are disputes' (Ministry and Women, Community and Social Development (MWCSD), 2021, p. 5). The 2017 Village Fono Amendment Act expanded the village councils' authority to include the abilities to order banishment or ostracism and to impose curfews, among other things (Boodoosingh and Schoeffel, 2018). The state relies heavily on the village councils for local governance and the maintenance of law and order in the communities (SNHRI, 2018).

Fa'asamoa and postcolonial patriarchy

Many scholars have highlighted the significance of cultural ethos and practices associated with *fa'asamoa* in the lives of Samoans. Va'a (2015, p. 73) states:

the Samoan people have always shared common cultural beliefs and practices, that is, they shared a common cultural identity and they still do so today. Apart from slight local variations in linguistic and cultural practices and emphasis ... the basic cultural symbols are everywhere the same and understood.

Accordingly, Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009, p. 7) maintains that 'Samoans understand "culture" as everyday, lived *fa'a-Samoa*'. As the core organising principle of social life, *fa'asamoa* manifests in the governance structures of *fa'amatai* at the extended family and village levels outlined above. In daily social interactions, *fa'asamoa* structures divisions of power, status, labour and expectations in kinship relations (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1998). It underpins

the behaviour of individuals as integral members of *aiga*, based on their rank and precedence, as well as on overarching intersubjective values of *tautua* (service), *fa'alavelave* (obligations), *alofa* (compassion, love) and *fa'aaloalo* (respect), among other things (Huffer and So'o, 2005; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009; Va'a, 2009). It is in this sense that scholars stress: 'The Samoan self ... is a relational self' (Tamasese, et al., 2005, p. 306).

The widely circulated notion that women are equal to men in Samoa is grounded in the conventions of *fa'asamoa*. In particular, the brother-sister relationship known as *feagaiga* is often cited as a basis of the claim. In the village structure, situated below the village council are *aumaga* and the women's committee (*komiti*), with the latter consisting of the wives of *matai*, the wives of untitled men and *aualuma*, the association of daughters of the village (Meleisea, et al., 2015; Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018). The two status groups for women in the village are therefore wives and daughters. Historically, daughters, as a sister group to men's *aumaga*, were 'the most prized group in the village', whose sacred power must be protected by brothers who possessed secular power (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2010, p. 149; see also Latai, 2015; Mageo, 1991a). Sisters are positioned in indigenous theology:

as vessels of divinity with powers to attract the supernatural. The brother therefore is required to serve and care for his sister as long as he lives ... [T]he sister has the power to curse him if she is not pleased. Sisters as sacred beings were therefore highly revered and feared.

(Latai, 2015, p. 94)

The well-known proverb '*O le tuafafine ole i'oimata o lona tuagane* (A sister is the pupil of her brother's eye)' represents this sacred covenantal relationship between brother and sister and the former's *tautua* (service) to the latter. Notably, this also means:

a woman's status depends on her social context; in her own family, as a 'sister', she will enjoy a higher status and equal rights to family assets with her brothers, whereas in her husband's family, as a 'wife' (and often living in another village), her status will be lower.

(Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018, p. 17)

Researchers and observers have noted how Christianisation, colonisation and wider social change undermined women's status as daughters of the village and the importance of women's *komiti* in the 20th century (Meleisea, et al., 2015; see also Latai, 2015; SOO/SNHRI, 2018). In the context of the binary gender divisions enforced by missionaries and colonial agents, women became increasingly defined in terms of the subordinate role as wives, which eroded their status as sisters/daughters and consequential members of *aiga*. Furthermore, 'while women were respected as sisters, they tended to be subject

to abuse as wives' (Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018, p. 11). Today, villages are 'organised around separate statuses and roles of men and women in which executive authority is vested in men', and women's *komiti* do not have any formal authority in village matters (Meleisea, et al., 2015, p. 7). Churches tend to espouse patriarchal and heteronormative interpretations of Christianity (Boodoosingh, Beres and Tombs, 2018), and reflecting their immense influence, it is widely accepted that, 'according to the divinely ordained Christian Samoan worldview, authority belongs to men as husbands, fathers, and community and national leaders' (Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018, p. 11). Samoa's postcolonial patriarchy resides in this intricate entanglement of dominant constructions of tradition, religion and modernity.

The gender relations emerging from this context are complex. On the one hand, Samoa's rights record is generally well-respected (United Nations Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tokelau, 2021). Samoa was the first Pacific Island country to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 1992 and has undertaken a number of legislative reforms towards gender parity (Boodoosingh, Beres and Tombs, 2018; Crichton, 2018). It was also the first Pacific Island nation to introduce a parliamentary gender quota (a minimum 10%) in 2013 (Pacific Women in Politics, 2022). The government has made a policy pledge to meet Sustainable Development Goal 5 ('achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls') by 2030 (MWCSD, 2021). Yet, as noted by the Samoa National Human Rights Institution (2018), '[d]espite its Constitution declaring the protection of fundamental rights, dialogues and discussions on human rights as a foreign construct remain a challenge'. It needs to be stressed that *fa'asamoa*, like all cultures, is resilient and in constant flux, not a static, immutable entity. It has been pointed out that the principles of human rights resonate with many practices and philosophies of *fa'asamoa* (SOO/SNHRI, 2015; Va'a, 2009). Nevertheless, popular understandings of human rights tend to situate them in a binary opposition to indigenous cultural heritage. Indeed, the 'proposition that individuals, especially women and children, have "rights" is widely regarded in Samoan society as a threat to the social order ... encouraging disrespect for authority and selfish individualism' (Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018, p. 17).

Women's political representation is limited under the existing customary system. Women comprise just 11% of all *matai* and less than 6% of village-based *matai*⁴ (SOO/SNHRI, 2018). Even fewer partake in decision-making in the village, for 79% of women *matai* do not attend village council meetings, often due to feeling unwelcome in the male-orientated environment. Their absence is commonly justified with reference to *feagaiga*, with the argument that women cannot be present where men jest together because they are required to show utmost respect to each other (Latai, 2015; Meleisea, et al., 2015; Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018). Given that a *matai* title is a prerequisite for contesting national elections, this leads directly to women's low representation at the parliamentary level. As of October 2022, even with the gender quota, women occupy just seven out of 54 parliamentary seats,

placing Samoa 153rd out of 187 countries in female parliamentary representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Although the 2021 general election resulted in the appointment of Fiame Naomi Mata'afa as the country's first female prime minister (following prolonged disputes over the election results), the general conditions for women's political representation are constraining. It must be added, at the same time, that women are more successful in claiming political leadership outside of the customary sphere. This can be seen, for instance, in increasing numbers of women appointed to senior positions in government ministries (Liki Chan Tung, 2013; Liki Chan Tung, Amosa and Taua'a, 2013). Women currently hold 57% of public sector leadership roles, including 30% of chief executive officer positions (MWSCD, 2021).

A significant level of parity has been achieved in education. Girls have consistently exceeded boys in primary and secondary school attainment (MWSCD, 2021), and women are more likely than men to complete higher education (SBS, 2020a). Women in the labour market therefore may hold managerial positions, associate professions and technical occupations (Boodoosingh, Beres and Tombs, 2018). But overall, women's economic activity is skewed to domestic work, with men making up 71% of the 'economically active' population (SBS, 2020a). Men dominate most industries while women slightly outnumber men in education and health occupations, as teaching and nursing professions are conventionally regarded as feminine domains.

Gender-based violence is a significant and ongoing challenge. Violence tends to be condoned in families and communities on cultural and religious grounds and seldom addressed by the village councils (Boodoosingh, 2019; Boodoosingh, Beres and Tombs, 2018). Samoan churches – described as 'the most conservative in the Pacific Islands region' (Schoeffel, Boodoosingh and Percival, 2018, p. 29) – are often silent on the matter. The 2017 Samoa Family Safety Study found that 60% of ever-partnered women had experienced some form of intimate partner violence, a marked increase from 46% in the 2000 Samoa Family Health and Safety Study (SOO/SNHRI, 2018). In the 2018 National Public Inquiry into Family Violence, 86% of the female respondents reported having been subject to kicking, punching, slapping and bodily harm with a hard object (rock, stick, tree trunk, hose etc.) by an intimate partner (SOO/SNHRI, 2018).

Samoa women are thus situated in highly complex socio-cultural locations. Today they experience, alongside the legacies of their special status in the village, multiple forms of inequality and marginalisation endorsed by particular understandings of 'culture' and religion. These directly impact on women's pursuit of rugby, a heavily gendered sport interwoven with cultural conventions and expectations, as examined below.

Women's rugby in Samoa: a brief history

The history of women's rugby in Samoa dates back to the early 1990s or possibly the 1980s, well before Lakapi Samoa affiliated women players and

clubs. In these early days, about eight clubs were in existence in Apia and villages of Upolu and Savai'i. Three tertiary education institutions (the University of the South Pacific, the National University of Samoa and then Samoa Polytechnic⁵) also had women's teams. One of the research participants played for two of these tertiary teams in the mid-1990s. Another participant remembered that these early clubs housed about 30 players each and actively played 15-a-side games, self-funded and outside of the official governing structure. Different participants had slightly different memories, but their consensus is that the then Samoa Rugby Union became involved in the women's game in the late 1990s, with the first women's national team playing a test match with a visiting Japanese team in 2000. In the same year, the national seven-a-side team participated in their first Hong Kong Sevens tournament and made it into the semi-finals. The Manusina (the Samoan name for the white tern bird), as the national side has come to be known, has played in three RWCs, in 2002 (by invitation) when they won the Bowl, in 2006 (by invitation) and in 2014 (by qualification) (Figure 6.1). Some participants observed that women's rugby had at one stage lost its momentum due to fluctuating player numbers, but that, more recently, Lakapi Samoa encouraged participation and 'revived' the game (see also Kearney, 2017). The establishment of the Women's Rugby Development Officer position and the women's high performance academy undoubtedly contributed to this. Much like the gender mainstreaming initiative by the Fiji Rugby Union



Figure 6.1 Manusina against the Netherlands at 2013 Women's European Qualification Tournament.

Notes: The Manusina won the second place at this tournament to qualify for the 2014 World Cup.

Credit: Carlos Delgado; CC-BY-SA.

(Chapter 2, this volume), in 2020, Lakapi Samoa made it mandatory for all provincial unions to enlist women's teams in domestic competitions.

Currently, about 12 clubs are affiliated with Lakapi Samoa, with the majority in and around Apia but also some in rural villages. The registered senior player population was 1,020 in 2020. Of this number, however, just 300 are constantly active in club rugby, as the great majority participate inconsistently. Most of the clubs today play only seven-a-side (and occasionally 10-a-side) games, while some may be combined into 15s teams for an annual tournament at the end of the year. The clubs for which the women I interviewed played were small, with 15 to 20 active players, and one village-based club had just nine or 10. The limited number of committed players may be one of the reasons for the current focus on the abbreviated code, which, in turn, partly explains the fact that the majority of Manusina 15s players have been overseas-based Samoans. The national sevens team was similarly dominated by overseas players in the past, but more recently, the selection has been made entirely from local athletes.

With the integration of the women's game into the provincial rugby structure, the women's clubs are being encouraged to join with men's clubs. This may mean loss of autonomy for the women, but they may also benefit from access to the resources and structures of established men's clubs and provincial unions. The research participants were appreciative of this policy measure, whilst, at the same time, many were aware of limited institutional resource availability where the needs and plans of the more successful men's teams tend to be primary, mirroring the sentiments and experiences of Fijian women rugby players (Chapter 2, this volume). The women's game has a limited playing schedule, and the Manusina and club teams often manage with restricted camp/training time, modest camp/tour allowances and staff consisting minimally of a coach, an assistant coach and a manager: 'And when it comes to camping, we either stay in Lakapi Samoa in the conference room or we stay in a hotel, a community one'. While there is clear evidence of increasing institutional commitment to the women's game in Samoa, as in Fiji, there are resource shortages and associated barriers to be overcome.

Today's player population is diverse, especially as the game becomes incorporated into provincial rugby and increasingly accessible to girls and young women in schools and communities. It may be noted also that active senior players to date have included many early school leavers who are unemployed, lone parents and/or those challenged with family-related struggles. For some, rugby is 'an escape from their problems, their issues and all that's happening. Some of the girls are young and come from broken families, like a dad who drinks every day; mum just goes and does her own thing'. Rugby holds immense personal value for these players, who are prepared to make great sacrifices for it. Regardless of their personal backgrounds, active club players are devoted to the game; one research participant in her 40s had two decades' playing career and was keen to continue. These women had much to share about how their passion for the game has

been received by families and communities and how they have astutely and tactfully managed it, as explored in the next sections.

Revered or renounced?: conflicted status of women rugby players

The social positioning of the rugby women is complex, much like that of Samoan women in general. Many struggles of active rugby players may be hidden from view, and a cursory look may suggest at least a moderate amount of societal support for the women's game. Samoa has been described as 'one of the fastest developing women's rugby nations in the Oceania region' (Rugby Australia, 2021), and a rugby official has highlighted in a media interview a 'widespread acceptance of the women's game across Samoa [that] led to women's versions of strong rugby union tournaments' in recent years (von Dincklage, 2021b). A sports administrator I interviewed offered a similar view:

We get to see a lot of rugby here. We get to see New Zealand girls, Fijian girls, English girls, the growth and wider exposure of women's rugby, and also see a lot of Samoans in the women's Black Ferns.⁶ ... I think the perception has changed quite a bit now. There's a lot more acceptance.

At the same time, family and community reactions to the players are varied. Some of my research participants started playing as children because their father played or coached rugby at elite/professional levels or their brothers (and a sister in one case) were avid rugby players: 'Mum would look for me and I would be playing with my brothers, using a stick. There was no ball, so we used a stick or coconut'. These players felt amply encouraged by their parents and siblings who not only provided moral support but often bore the financial costs of the game such as rugby gear and transport to and from training/games. A young woman from Savai'i had chosen to play rugby full-time because of her parents' steadfast support in the face of a lot of 'bad talk' about her in the village. Some elite players had particularly supportive and inspiring fathers who propelled their career.

Other players had taken up the sport without family influence, due to their love of the game and/or because their schools had offered touch rugby as a sport option for girls. Some of these women persisted in their rugby endeavours against parental disapproval. In fact, in one administrator's view:

Most of the players, they're not allowed by their families or parents to play rugby. So they find ways to make excuses to be away from home during the time of training. So the number of training days for most of the players is two days a week ... That's the problem we have; having the families and parents who stop them from going to training.

Family opposition may partially explain why a large proportion of senior players participate inconsistently. Some athletes' personal experiences

correspond to the above administrator's observation. A pioneer player, who had initially kept her rugby involvement from her parents, recounted their reaction when they found out: 'You must know about the attitude of Samoan parents. My father was swearing and even my mother. "How can you play rugby? It's not a women's sport!" But at least I was already playing the sport I wanted to play'. Some of her friends who had also been caught were punished by their parents and did not return to the game. A teenage player relatively new to the game shared similarly: 'Sometimes I have to play without his [her father's] knowledge. Samoan parents – there's a culture that we have to obey our parents. Sometimes we disobey them and make them angry. Sometimes they beat us up and stop us from playing'. She believes this to be the case not only in villages but 'across the country, because of the cultural stuff'. Another player in her late 20s also had to withstand physical punishment: 'My parents and my brothers would punch me all the time when I was playing and studying. But I let them know that I'm not stopping when they punch me. That [rugby]'s my real talent that God gave me'.

Men's rugby clubs and players also respond variously to their women counterparts. In some clubs with both men's and women's teams, men are firmly supportive and protective of their women teammates. For instance, in domestic tournaments where men's and women's teams play:

I can see that the boys [of the participant's club] support; they cheer for their own women's team. I've never come across a guy saying anything bad. All I hear is like 'Go girls!' They are so supportive. No mean words, no harassment. They respect and protect the girls ... When you get injured or someone high tackles or aggressively tackles you on the field, you can hear the boys calling out to the ref, 'Make the right call!', trying to threaten the poor ref [laughs].

Yet, other men's attitudes may range from indifference to disapproval:

When I am running and they [male players of the participant's club] are, like, laughing, so many words that make me feel that they don't like girls to play rugby. Some of them are like, when we don't win a game, 'It's better for you guys to stay home and don't play'.

Community attitudes are similarly mixed. Some villages support the women's game and host their own women's rugby club (as discussed later in this chapter) or the 'Get Into Rugby' programme. But many villages (estimated at 65–70% by some participants) are opposed to it, compelling those interested in playing to join a club in another village or to opt for a 'women's sport'. Even in villages where the game is formally endorsed by *matai*, families may disapprove of it. Likewise, spectator attitudes are 'inconsistent – Sometimes spectators applaud the girls, sometimes they shout. Some spectators shout at girls and say horrible comments while they are playing'. As elsewhere in the

region (Chapters 2 and 5, this volume), verbal abuse often centres around gender roles, especially women's family responsibilities:

Sometimes, when I play rugby, some of our people, they yell at me and they say, 'You are stupid, you don't have the right to play. Just go home and do laundry and help your family or whatever'. At that time, I was mad. My spirit was down.

Women players have also experienced ridicule from spectators, intended to belittle and delegitimise their claim on the masculine game: 'We could hear men laughing from the stadium. Especially when someone tackles you. It's like a joke to them'; 'The girls' team is like the funny team, a circus team, not coordinated, most likely to lose; our uniforms are too big as they are not customised to fit us individually'. There is much less immediate association between women's rugby and same-sex sexuality in comparison with Fiji (Chapter 2, this volume), arguably because visibly non-heteronormative athletes are a small minority. Still, acts of gender policing keep women athletes conscious of their normative infringement:

At village club level, you don't wanna hear what they said to us. Like, before our game we walk to the stadium ... we can hear them, like: 'That's the macho woman!' and they say all the bullying words to us.

While the ongoing development of the game by Lakapi Samoa and the strong support shown by some families, male players and clubs capture a dimension of the social standing of women rugby players, other families and community members take markedly different approaches to their daughters or women in their villages seeking to play the game actively and competitively. Combined, the existing information presents a highly uneven picture, a mosaic of varied and perhaps conflicting attitudes and experiences.

'Culture' as an impediment

The families and community members who dispute the women's claim on the game do so on several grounds. Above all, perceived deviance from women's designated domestic roles and spaces is at the heart of negative sanctions. Relatedly, the gendered perception of the physicality of full-contact rugby prompts objections to the game as unsuitable and even dangerous for women. Multiple participants referred to a commonly held belief in Samoa that bodily collisions in rugby are harmful to women's breasts and/or cause breast cancer. In addition, women's rugby is believed to lack employment opportunities, unlike the men's game, which is widely recognised as a migration pathway (if only for a few) (Clément, 2014; Kwauk, 2016). Girls and young women are encouraged to prioritise academic attainment (alongside their 'chores'), and cash-strapped families may be reluctant to give

(especially financial) support for their daughters' rugby career, which, in their view, offers no material rewards.

Closer scrutiny reveals that many of these objections are embedded in expectations and conventions associated with *fa'asamoa*. For instance, women's labour roles are integral to the village social structure, whereby women's *komiti* members 'all meet together and they are expected to weave fine mats, do gardening, that kind of stuff. Sports is just not part of that equation'. The notion that women should stay within their domestic roles and spaces and away from the physical, combative game is also underpinned by cultural constructs of the sheltered Samoan daughter. In particular, the participants alluded to the ideas of *feagaiga* in discussing the cultural basis of family/community objections: 'Us, the females, they name us *i'o i mata* [the pupil] of brothers. So the sport is for boys ... Girls are, like, *taupou* here in Samoa, like, princess'. In the case of young unmarried women, this is in turn meshed with 'the cultural ideal that girls should be carefully supervised in the interval between puberty and marriage to ensure they do not lose their virginity, or worse, become pregnant' (Schuster and Schoeffel, 2019, p. 118). Mageo (1991a) explains this ideal with reference to *feagaiga*, and specifically, a sister's obligations to the covenant: 'The definitive elements of the young woman's role are equated with the ideals associated with the sister, who is supposed to be *mamalu* [honourable] which entails the preservation of her family's *mana* [sacred power] and is equated with her virginity' (Mageo, 1991a, p. 358). The Samoan word for 'roaming freely' is *ta'a*, which can also refer to a lover: hence 'the girl who goes *ta'a* frequently is suspected of having one' (Mageo 1991a, p. 356; see also Mageo, 1989). A sport administrator's comment can be understood in this vein:

There's a very strong protective feeling around them [young women] from the families, that girls should not be out wandering around and playing. And even just walking around in shorts, a lot of villages that don't allow it. So you have to wear *lavalava* [sarongs] over your pants to go and play or to walk through the village. So there's a lot of protocol that has to be observed.

Athletes in both town and villages agreed that parents restrict girls and young women from mingling with boys and men lest they should become sexually involved. Young women wishing to commit afternoon or evening hours to rugby training away from home must obtain consent from their parents who are apprehensive about their interaction with male players, coaches and friends ('They always say we should stay home, we shouldn't be joining the boys at the training. They have these ideas that we're going to do some stuff with the boys'). These 'cultural anxieties' (Schuster and Schoeffel, 2019, p. 122) also sometimes result in, according to an administrator, 'the brother beating up the sister because the sister is being out with a rugby boy'. The instances of parental violence noted earlier are also likely grounded in

similar misgivings about the violation of 'our cultural values of keeping that safe distance between females and males'.

Family and community opposition to the game is thus entwined with, and sanctioned by, the dominant discourse of cultural tradition. It was noted earlier that *feagaiga* is regularly cited as a legitimating basis of women's marginalisation in the masculine domain of village decision-making; here, it serves as a primary deterrent to women's active participation in the masculine sport. The extensive reach of this cultural discourse is illuminated by a pioneer player's reflection: 'The culture is still associated with everything. No matter how socialised, what trends of the world we are going through, the Samoan way, the culture, is still strong, as it was'.

'Culture' as an agentic resource

Yet, 'culture' does not only constrain rugby women; it is also a potent enabler. The players and administrators discussed many ways in which they mobilised the dominant cultural discourse and associated practices to secure family and community support for their contested sporting pursuits. In fact, many athletes in town and villages turn *feagaiga* on its head and deploy it as a key persuasive strategy. These women frame their relationship with the men's team of their club in terms of *feagaiga*, treating the men as brothers and in turn being treated as revered sisters. In a veteran Apia-based player's words, male players in her club 'are very supportive of the girls. It's just like the feeling between me and my brothers'. The women fulfil their part of the covenant by showing deference, as explained by another Apia player: 'We do respect them. The Samoan *tamaitai* [woman] is like, the pupil of the eye of the *ali'i* [man]. That's why we are showing respect to them'. She and her teammates do this through 'the way we talk at the time of training, the way we act on the field ... at the time when we are together on the field. We're trying to show ... that "We are respecting you"'. When the covenantal relationship is honoured by both parties, men fulfil their obligation of respecting and protecting the women as sisters. In a village club where a young participant played, 'They always tell us to keep going to training, [that] we don't have to care about what people say about us ... They always treat us like sisters and they always support us'. According to an urban athlete: 'In any tournament where we are mixed with other teams, they [the men in her club] are like: "They are our sisters, don't touch them!" [to other men's teams in the tournament]. They're always like that'.

The women may mobilise *feagaiga* even where the covenantal relationship is not (initially) acknowledged by men. Several participants shared examples of the ways in which they confronted jeering spectators:

If I hear someone shouting, I just walk straight up to him and ... I say to them, 'What if that's your daughter? What if it's your sister? Are you going to shout like that to her?' Then they just go quiet.

Some people look down on girls when they are playing ... Some people say, 'We're wasting our time watching those girls' ... Sometimes I pick a fight with them, 'cause I'm a girl and I'm a player too. When I heard some people saying those words ... I told them to stop; it's not nice to hear those words. Sometimes I tell them, 'What if your sister is playing in that team? What if your daughter is playing in that team? How does it make you feel if someone says those words to you?' That's how I deal with it.

It has been observed in relation to broader gender relations that the power of the covenant is such that 'simply asking "pei oe e leai sou tuafafine?" (As if you don't have a sister?) in the face of unwanted conduct would stop it dead in its tracks. No person with a true understanding of the Fa'asamoa would persist' (SOO/SNHRI, 2018 p. 137). The rugby women have used this power as key leverage in countering masculinist aggression.

In this reciprocal relationship, the women also variously seek to fulfil their obligations as daughters, sisters and members of *aiga*. For instance, many clubs whose players are required to travel to training grounds provide transport, personally attended to by coaches and managers using their own vehicles. Club management ensure that their players are collected and dropped off on a daily basis in order to address parental concerns over their unsupervised movement. Furthermore, in addition to managing all their 'chores' to demonstrate that their passion for rugby does not interfere with their labour roles, the vast majority of the players I interviewed made monetary contributions to their family in any small ways that the game allowed them. Across villages and town, the players routinely offer their share of tournament prize money, training allowances and small monetary rewards some clubs give out to outstanding players after matches, to contribute towards family expenses:

From the beginning when I was in the Manusina squad, I was earning some money from the allowances for us. And that's the money I give to my parents to help with what they need in my family. Also in my club, there's small money I made from the games, and I was giving it back to my parents.

Whenever I play, any money I get, I always give it to my parents first and they will be the ones who will decide what money I can have. I have to give it, even if it is a little bit of money, just a way to show them that I'm doing something for them; I care about them and they care about me as well.

As noted by many observers, 'Samoan principles/institutions ... are intimately linked to the ideas of reciprocity and publicity' (Huffer and So'o, 2005, p. 322). Making financial contributions, even if in small amounts, is a way in which the players tangibly reciprocate their family's support, or, in

cases where support is not a given, induce the family to reciprocate their gesture with support. Such acts of giving are an extension of a customary practice known as *fa'alavelave*, which 'means literally a type of trouble, but means in context the work and expectation to provide for others that also provides for oneself' (Morrison, 2008, p. 243). It is most typically seen in monetary contributions and gifts at major life events like births, weddings and funerals. But acts of *fa'alavelave* are 'not isolated events but dramatic instances of the exchange that is an everyday part of life in a Samoan community' (Mageo, 1991b, p. 414). These allow Samoans to cultivate and maintain their connections with *aiga* and collectively form a reciprocal support network. Remittances, for instance, are thus positioned by overseas Samoans, who can expect to continue to have a home on their return (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009; Morrison, 2008). Importantly, *fa'alavelave* is not simply a duty but essentially an expression of love (*alofa*), respect (*fa'aaloalo*) and *tautua* (service) for the family (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). The rugby players' acts of giving are similarly an obligation of service to the family, a strategy for gaining respect and support from the family and a reciprocal expression of respect and support for the family.

In addition to fulfilling obligations to the family, some rugby women and their supporters have mobilised customary protocol to secure community endorsement: they have approached and formally sought the support of *matai* and village councils. For instance, in a village club on Manono Island, the whole management are originally from the village and now based in Apia who 'came together; they set up a meeting [with the village council] to choose who's going to be the coach, the manager and stuff like that so we can have a rugby club'. The coach is a well-respected former Manu Samoa player, which also made the village elders more receptive. Although women are not allowed to wear shorts in the village, the village council granted special permission for them to do so during training (as long as they put on *lavalava* while walking to/from training). Several other players also stressed the importance of 'the authority from the *pulenu'u*, the [village] mayor, and the high title, the chief, so that they can sign the agreement that they have the women's team'. They explained that the village-based clubs not only carry the approval of the village council but also often consist of coaches, managers and players from within the village, personally known to the community, which helps appease parental concerns over their daughters' sexual propriety.

Even in town, an equivalent strategy may be devised. An experienced player recounted an instance where older leaders of the women's rugby community visited parents to seek permission for their daughters' participation:

Having them go and see our parents, it makes our parents feel good and know 'My daughter is doing something good', seeing that elders are coming over. One of the things about *fa'asamoa* is, no matter how strict your parents are, there are times when they lower their strictness, when

someone from outside walks into their house and asks for permission ... It works most of the time. Our elders came and sat down with the parents and asked them for permission ... If you are an elder and go to visit parents, you must make sure you have the right words to explain and you know how to convince them, because of the culture, *fa'asamoa*.

These elders were figures the 'communities were looking up to', who employed the formal Samoan language to frame the meetings with a sense of ceremonial importance. Customary protocol is highly valued in Samoa as 'the formality and conventional rules of *tu ma aga mamalu a Samoa* (dignified customs and practices of Samoa) relating to custom, tradition, personal dignity and etiquette' (Stewart-Withers, 2011, p. 49). Although the erosion of customary means of communication and forums for exchange has been lamented elsewhere (see, e.g., SOO/SNHRI, 2018), the rugby women's accounts suggest that these may continue in informal forms and can indeed have considerable impact.

Working with 'culture'

The above is an outline of the themes associated with cultural tradition emerging from women athletes' and administrators' narratives. These indicate, notably, that *fa'asamoa* can be both a deterrent and an enabler for the women, illustrating Stewart-Withers' (2011, p. 48) contention that 'although culture can aggravate women's vulnerability, it can also serve as a creative resource'. Here, the dominant discourse and practices of cultural tradition assume something of a duality in relation to social change. Any culture is obviously multifaceted and evolving, not reducible to a dichotomy between conservative and transformative properties. Nevertheless, culture has been mobilised in advancing contrasting political agendas in Samoa, which parallel Samoan women's conflicted status: their marginalisation and 'revered' status have both rested on the legitimating power of *fa'asamoa*. That is to say, 'as a set of cultural practices and values, *fa'a Sāmoa* is regularly contested and reformulated to suit the needs of those who practice it' (Mallon, 2010, p. 365). This underscores the enduring yet dynamic nature of culture in the postcolonial Pacific, where it has been invested with differential meanings and interests. The potency of cultural tradition as a consecrated institution has been captured in the service of decolonisation and post-colonial nationalism; binary opposition of the indigenous/traditional and the Western/modern; estrangement of human rights and gender equality as colonising ideologies; and women's claim to their culturally rightful place in society. In the case of women's rugby in Samoa, the ideals and conventions of *feagaiga* have served as a key site of cultural contestation over women's standing in the game.

Observers may point out that the rugby women's deployment of culture essentially runs counter to their transformative goals. Embracing *feagaiga* as

leverage to gain access to rugby may not directly challenge the positioning of women as 'the weaker gender (*itupā vaivai*)' in need of 'protection'. Women may occupy a corner of the masculine space in return for dutifully upholding the gendered cultural order, which does not amount to a direct attack on the masculinist definitions and practices of rugby. Indeed, these women may appear to be a polar opposite of Fijian women rugby players, who appropriate the masculine expressions of the game and resist heteronormative sanctions in a silent but bold and defiant manner. Yet, all-out resistance may not be the only avenue for social change, and Samoan women's approach to the masculine game may be understood as a carefully constructed agentic strategy that maximises their chances of success under the existing conditions. It is useful to revisit here Hunnicutt's (2009, p. 557) notion of patriarchy as 'hierarchical arrangements that manifest in varieties across history and social space'. Patriarchal varieties 'in their cultural, class-specific, and temporal concreteness', as Kandiyoti (1988, p. 285) argues, 'reveal how men and women resist, accommodate, adapt, and conflict with each other over resources, rights, and responsibilities'. In the case of Samoa, with a small population and perceived cultural homogeneity, the conditions for women's engagement with rugby are deeply structured by dominant understandings and practices of tradition. Rugby has become heavily imbued with gendered village structures and ideals associated with *fa'asamoa* (Clément, 2014). Women's primary agentic strategy, or patriarchal bargain, under these conditions is to work with, rather than against, tradition. Customary conventions and practices like *feagaiga* and *fa'alavelave* are resources immediately available to them in this context. These have facilitated the women's entry into the masculine physical space with a degree of family/community endorsement, which, over time, may become normalised and open up scope for greater transformation.

For instance, while non-heteronormative athletes are currently a small minority, which corresponds to the social invisibility of transmasculine Samoans known as *fa'afatama* (often called 'tomboys' by normative Samoans)⁷ (Kanemasu and Liki, 2020, 2023), several participants envisaged the future expansion of the game to reach them: 'We play rough games. We try to talk to tomboys. We encourage them to come and play with us: "This is your game"'. *Fa'afatama* and other non-heteronormative athletes may well deploy cultural strategies other than that revolves around *feagaiga*. Samoa has two major non-normative gender categories: alongside *fa'afatama* (a more recently recognised and socially marginalised gender category), there are *fa'afafine*, Samoans assigned male at birth whose gendered behaviour is feminine, a highly visible social group widely described as the country's 'third gender'. *Fa'afafine* have been documented to actively embrace the ethos of *tautua* (and implicitly *fa'alavelave*) in cultivating their cultural legitimacy within families and communities (Dolgoy, 2000; Kanemasu and Liki, 2020, 2023). Culture has hence served as a key strategic resource for *fa'afafine*. Whilst it remains to be seen if *fa'afatama* or other

non-heteronormative persons claim rugby in Samoa as they do in Fiji, the corner of the masculine space the rugby women currently occupy may potentially expand into significant subversive territories as they continue to broaden their agentic scopes, capacities and strategies.

Furthermore, Samoan women do not operate solely within the confines of customary protocol and conventions. The participants identified the global human rights movement as an emerging source of influence: 'The message is now being enforced here, that women have the same opportunity with men. I think that's really changed the perception of the majority of our rugby players and the people who watch the game'. The women may increasingly turn to the new discursive and political resources offered by the human rights advocacy of the national government, development agencies and civil society organisations. Samoan women have already made inroads into contested spaces this way, a primary example being the significant numbers of women breaking into civil service leadership mentioned earlier.

Players and administrators are also beginning to position the women's game as an avenue of social and transnational mobility. Of all sports in Samoa, 'when you talk about ways to progress yourself, to find a job in sport, the one that stands out the most is rugby because it provides travel'. As popular as netball is, 'it's really really hard to be selected into the national team, let alone travel overseas to represent the country'. Two young participants had their eyes on opportunities beyond travel, determined to obtain an overseas club contract as a migration pathway. Transnational mobility is presently not a salient feature of the women's game, but it may develop into a new legitimating discourse, given 'Samoans have come to view international professional sports like rugby as a specific form of development education' despite the small number of men who actually attain successful international careers (Kwauk, 2016, p. 645). It may be added that rugby migration is sought after in Samoa particularly because it is regarded as an opportunity for athletes' *tautua* to the family with recognition, prestige and financial contributions (Kwauk, 2016).

In short, culture is not the only site for the women's ongoing quest for change; yet it is a primary one with unique transformative potential. The women have tactfully manoeuvred and utilised compelling 'tradition', which, in the same process, contributes to its subtle and sustained reconfiguration. Today, some women's teams carry their village names, whereby *matai* and the village councils not only excuse or tolerate their claim on the game but actively affirm it. One young player spoke of her village pastor who is also the coach of her village team and 'always encourages me: "Do what you want for your future"'. According to another young woman, *matai* of her village 'always give some words so we can play tough. And that they are there to support us. We have the support of the village *matai*. They always come and give us words that make us play better'. These represent pockets of change in the country's key cultural institutions. Even as they work with culture, the women contribute to its continuous transformation as well as reproduction. Culture is both an opportunity and a challenge, an ever shifting and contested terrain of struggle.

Conclusion

Part of the aim of this chapter has been to make sense of the complexities in the ways Samoan women's engagement with rugby has been received and opposed by families and communities. The women's game may not appear to face the type of widespread and intense family/community antagonism historically observed in Fiji, at least at first glance, corresponding to the established notion of women's special status in Samoa. Yet, the athletes and administrators I interviewed shared their many struggles, which in some cases extended to family violence. The foregoing discussions have shown that the rugby women's conflicted positioning can be understood in the broader context of Samoan women's social status. Whilst women's customary status as daughter/sister accords them a considerable degree of respect and power within *aiga*, it has been progressively eroded and supplanted by binary patriarchal structures through colonisation, Christianisation and related social change. Today, dominant constructions of cultural tradition legitimise women's exclusion from many social spaces and practices, the foremost being the village council, presented as protection of and respect for the revered sister.

Women's active commitment to a heavily gendered game like rugby in this context entails great complexities. On the one hand, as Schuster and Schoeffel (2019, p. 122) contend, 'Samoa culture continues to be a major impediment'. The research participants were in agreement: 'It's the culture, eh, the same with other Pacific Islands. They always have a culture. Our culture here is girls stay at home, do the chores, prepare food, tidy the house, everything, while boys go to the field, play rugby'. *Feagaiga* and associated conventions serve as a primary basis of this constraint. On the other hand, the women have also deployed culture, in particular *feagaiga* and *fa'alavelave*, as a potent persuasive strategy. Turning the power of culture on its head, they have used it to induce support from men in rugby, families and communities. Held accountable for their part in 'culture', family and community members find it harder not to honour it by reciprocating the women's customary gestures.

Cultural tradition tends to be treated in a reified and monolithic manner by those who defend and oppose it. The case of women's rugby in Samoa demonstrates that cultural tradition is both enduring and dynamic; both reproduced and reconfigured. Acclaimed Samoan poet and writer Albert Wendt once expressed deep concerns over the predominance of 'tradition' in representations of Pacific peoples:

I came to feel very uncomfortable with terms such as traditional, folk history, folk art ... Traditional inferred our cultures were/are so tradition-bound they were static and slow to change; that they weren't dynamic and growing and changing; that because they were slow to change and fixed in history they were 'simple and easy to understand'. Traditional also had implications about how we were viewed as people even to the extent that, because we were tradition bound, we behaved out of habit and past

practice and [were] slow to adapt to other ways or change our own ways, that we didn't want to think for ourselves, or were incapable of individual thinking and expression.

(Wendt, 2008, quoted in Mallon, 2010, p. 367)

In their competent and knowledgeable ways, the rugby women of Samoa show that they are no dupes of reified tradition. They work with, work around, and work on (prevailing constructions of) tradition to reclaim and reimagine their place in the social world. Rugby is a particularly contested space for women, a bastion of culturally imbued sporting masculinity, and hence serves as a unique prism through which to appreciate Pacific Island women (and men) as active agents of cultural change as well as reproduction.

Notes

- 1 The lyrics and translation are adapted from those available on Te Vaka's official website (<https://tevaka.com/music>). The song can be heard on the website.
- 2 The term has been variously spelt. In this chapter, I adopt the spelling *fa'asamoa*, in consultation with Samoan friends and colleagues.
- 3 Fiji's Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission has 'B' status in compliance with the Paris Principles.
- 4 Some *matai* title holders do not reside in their village.
- 5 Samoa Polytechnic was integrated into the National University of Samoa in 2006.
- 6 The Black Ferns is the nickname of New Zealand women's rugby union national team.
- 7 More accurately, *fa'afatama* are Samoans who were assigned female at birth and identify as men, or literally, act 'in the manner of a man' (Kanemasu and Liki, 2023, P. 138).

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7 Conclusion

I am who I am and there's nothing you can do about it.

Sport, women and patriarchal varieties in the Pacific

This book has focused on the ways in which women in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu engage with their variously contentious sporting practices. The contestation over these women's athletic quests, as well as their responses to the contestation, is embedded in the specificities of the post-colonial patriarchal formations within which they live. Sport in these Pacific Island societies is intertwined with a web of postcolonial (re)constructions and practices of gender, kinship, 'tradition' and nation, among other things. Sport is integral to the material, symbolic and cultural (re)production of the post-colonial social order, where women's non-normative sporting practices become not just unusual choices but major acts of insubordination.

Drawing on the narratives presented in this volume, some observations may be made in relation to the social dynamics that condition Pacific sport and women's experiences of it. Women's 'controversial' sporting practices examined in this book are most immediately impacted by kinship relations. In all of the sports and physical activities discussed here – Fijian and Samoan women's rugby, Indo-Fijian women's sports and exercise, Solomon Islands women's soccer and ni-Vanuatu women's beach volleyball – family is the overriding barrier *and* enabler. Women's status and labour role in the family and wider community engender practical and normative obstacles to active commitment to sport/exercise of their choice, ranging from lack of time and resources to family/community-level negative sanctions including various forms and degrees of violence. Male family members exercise significant control, to the extent that a Fijian senior sports official interviewed in 2020 identified '[male] siblings, husbands and boyfriends' as the greatest barrier to girls' and women's access to sport. Conversely, family support (especially from parents, spouses and intimate partners) can be a critical resource, as evidenced by the cases of women who have successfully cultivated their playing careers noted in all of the preceding chapters. Emotional, moral and material support from family members and significant others can sustain

women's persistence even when the wider sporting/community/societal environment is constraining or antagonistic. Fathers, in particular, can play a consequential enabling role in young women's active sporting endeavours.

Those women who cannot count on their families count on each other. A particularly prominent case of subaltern camaraderie is found in women's rugby in Fiji, where the clubs and the broader community of rugby women have functioned literally as family, that is, the primary belonging, of players afflicted with disapproval, condemnation or hostility from their natal families. Those who are isolated within the sporting domain, like the small number of Indo-Fijian women who break into competitive or team sports as a marginalised ethnic minority, simply count on themselves by 'going it alone'. Women are differently positioned in familial, community and athlete relations, which create differential everyday conditions for their sporting nonconformity.

Women's familial/community relations vis-a-vis their sporting pursuits are intersected by class, geography, ethnicity and various other social locations. Fijian women rugby players' struggles are exacerbated by their predominantly unemployed, underemployed or informally employed status and associated material deprivation, although the sudden popularity of their sport stimulated by the recent Olympic medal victory may result in a more diverse player base in the future. By contrast, half of the athletic Indo-Fijian women I interviewed were in professional occupations that provided socio-economic means – including cash income, modern urban lifestyle and exposure to health and body aesthetic discourses as motivational/legitimizing resources – to facilitate their often-solitary athletic pursuits. Global political economy cuts across all of the sports discussed in this book. Beach volleyball in Vanuatu is a particularly conspicuous case; firstly for the dearth of material/infrastructural resources, disadvantaged access to high performance coaching and physical distance from competition venues, which persistently stand in the way of athlete/sport development; and secondly for the national team's remarkable feat of negotiating these deficits by fostering a potent, heterogenous coalition of support and ranking among the world's best in the game as a result. In rugby and soccer, which are only semi-professional in the Pacific, women's struggles to secure institutional support are situated in a context where the national unions/federations are marginalised actors in the global sport system, often dependent on government and regional/international governing body grants and corporate sponsorships and under pressure to produce high performance results in the more established men's codes. The 'privileged' men's games are themselves positioned radically differently from professional rugby and (especially) soccer in the core nations operated by far more powerful and affluent clubs and unions/federations (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2014; Mackay and Guinness, 2019; Mountjoy, 2014).

Geographical location within a country also deeply conditions women's relationships with sport and exercise. Of the cases discussed in this book, only rugby in Fiji has made substantial inroads into areas outside of the capital city in terms of formal competitions and structures. The other sports, especially in

the larger nations of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, remain concentrated in the capitals, although there are signs of growth in the provinces and rural villages. The women's voices and experiences captured in this book are therefore situated mostly in the urban social dynamics of the contemporary Pacific, shaped not only by the presence of national sports federations in the capitals but also by relative access to sports facilities, transport, essential services, wage employment and globalising influences (especially the rising human rights, gender equality and sport-for-development discourses and programmes), alongside the hurdles of unemployment, economic informality, poverty, class inequality and associated challenges (Keen and Barbara, 2015; Thomas and Keen, 2017). Considering that the vast majorities of people in Samoa (81%), Solomon Islands (74%) and Vanuatu (78%) and a significant portion in Fiji (44%) live in rural locations (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2020; Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2020), this book has dealt with a small fraction of Pacific women's experiences of sport and exercise. The cases examined here tentatively suggest that urban women may access resources and opportunities for modern organised sport and exercise not available to the masses of rural dwellers.

Perhaps more than any other group of women discussed in this volume, Indo-Fijian women experience ethnicity as a tangible facet of their contested relationship with sport/exercise. Located in a multi-ethnic nation where dominant discourses of sport, and more generally physical power, have become integral to indigenous ethno-nationalism, claiming sport/exercise amounts to confronting entrenched hierarchies of gender and ethnicity at multiple levels – in the family, the community, sporting arenas and broader society. This at least partially accounts for Indo-Fijian women's decidedly minority status in organised sport/exercise. Also in other highly diverse Melanesian countries, ethnicity likely intersects the sporting milieu in significant ways, even though this was largely outside of the scope of the book. Solomon Islands soccer, for instance, constitutes a key medium of nation-building in the midst of volatile domestic politics and ongoing ethnic tensions. The sport in both women's and men's codes at the elite/national representative level, however, is played and administered predominantly by one ethnic group, Malaitans, which defies simplistic notions of its 'unifying' role. Greater understanding of the integrating and fragmenting dynamics of this immensely popular game requires further research.

Cutting across all these social locations is cultural tradition in tandem with religion – *fa'asamoa* in Samoa, *kastom* in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu and *vakavanua* for indigenous Fijians. But 'tradition', as stressed in the preceding chapters, is a product of colonial and postcolonial reconfiguration, far from timeless heritage of the indigenous past. This was examined most closely in the case of Samoa, where 'patriarchy', so long as it denotes binary antagonistic relations, does not capture the complexities of customary social hierarchies, whereby women's positionings in the family and village were differentially

derived from their status as sister or wife, among other things. Nevertheless, in Samoa, as in the other countries considered here, women's customary status has been reconstructed and incorporated into a gender dichotomy concomitant with colonisation processes and particular understandings of Christianity. In Samoa, the combination of women's sanctity in the brother-sister covenant of *feagaiga* and postcolonial reconstructions of *fa'asamoa* underlies their conflicted status in the masculine game of rugby, manifest in notably mixed reactions from families and communities. In the case of Fiji, postcolonial patriarchy for indigenous populations is bound up with warrior militarism, associated primacy of masculine physical power and religious and chiefly authority, making rugby, a modern game closely linked with these institutions, a consecrated symbol of deeply gendered tradition. Further, with (actual or suspected) non-heteronormativity of women players, gender and sexual variance surfaces as a particular preoccupation of this neo-tradition, entailing family, community and societal sanctions of distinctly lesbophobic/gender-phobic and often violent nature. Thus, when women athletes in the preceding chapters spoke of 'tradition' as their central barrier, they signified the power of gendered 'traditionalism' (Lawson and Lawson, 2015, p. 2., emphasis original) – i.e., the rendering of tradition as 'the preserve of the powerful' that invalidates alternative claims (Huffer and So'o, 2005, p. 314).

These observations pertain to 'varieties of patriarchy' (Hunnicut, 2009) in the Pacific Islands. Exploring women's sporting experiences through the lens of patriarchal varieties is useful because it allows for 'grounded, particularised analyses linked with larger, even global, economic and political frameworks' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 501) rather than undifferentiated abstraction of gender oppression with limited analytical utility. In Global South contexts, paying attention to the variability of patriarchy helps moving away from ahistorical essentialism persisting in common notions of 'traditional' patriarchy. In the sociology of sport, growing multicultural/postcolonial/transnational feminist voices and inquiries are paving the way for such a project, to which the studies in the preceding chapters are intended to contribute. Accounting for the multi-scaled relations of power lived by marginalised sporting women in marginalised nations and communities can refine our understanding of sport's multifarious connections with patriarchy. Or, in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003, p. 505) words, 'specifying difference allows us to theorise universal concerns more fully'.

Bargaining with patriarchy in the Pacific

Mapping of patriarchal varieties reveals not only the heterogeneity but also inherent fluidity and indeterminacy of patriarchy as "terrains of power" in which both men and women wield varying types and amounts of power' (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 555). Such a notion of patriarchy invites critical attention to the dynamic interplay between forces of domination and resistance even where patriarchal control appears overwhelming.

As Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, p. 285) states in her seminal work on patriarchal bargain, varieties of patriarchy ‘provide different baselines from which women negotiate and strategise, and each affects the forms and potentialities of their resistance and struggles’. The preceding chapters have shown that postcolonial (hetero)patriarchal varieties in the Pacific are met by a range of agentic strategies deployed by women athletes and administrators. Some of these are more visibly oppositional than others, but all of them are transformative. Fijian women rugby players have defied especially formidable odds. In the face of widespread heteropatriarchal sanctions and (actual or threat of) violent coercion, their primary response has been silent refusal to acquiesce: persistence is resistance, in a literal sense, for these women. Although they do not speak out about their struggle, which renders it a silent resistance, their collective and bold assertion of gender nonconformity on and off the field makes it a very visible resistance. Samoan women have cultivated their space in the same sport in a different manner, by strategically courting normative agents and institutions. Situated in a society with a smaller, more ‘homogeneous’ population, where most people live in village settings, they have opted to invert the logic of *feagaiga*, which is usually the basis of family/community objections to the women’s game, and invoke their status as revered sister to oblige men, families and communities to honour reciprocal respect as demanded by the convention. Overstatement of a ‘homogenous Polynesia vs. diverse Melanesia’ division must be eschewed, considering extensive criticisms over the empirical validity of such simple demarcation and its origin as a colonial construct loaded with Western-centric bias (Tcherkézoff, 2003; Thomas, 1989; Sand, 2002). Nevertheless, among the cases presented here, Samoan women are particularly notable for finding agentic resources in leveraging the power of ‘culture’ to their advantage. The case calls for further inquiry into the nexus between sport, gender and customary heritage, which is yet to be fully examined outside of substantial literature on Muslim women’s engagement with sport (for notable relevant work, see Stronach, Maxwell and Taylor, 2016).

Like cultural tradition, whose complex interrelation with social change figures prominently in the Samoan case, nationalism emerges as a key medium of domination and resistance in the stories of other women, especially ni-Vanuatu beach volleyballers and Fijian rugby players. Postcolonial nationalism, coupled with cultural and religious traditionalism, functions as primary moral legitimation for (hetero)patriarchal repression of women’s sporting nonconformity. But the same nationalism, appropriated through high performance success, can become potent ammunition for women in competitive sports. In Vanuatu, women’s beach volleyball has come to command much respect, that is, a significant amount of cultural and symbolic capital, as the nation’s most successful sport in terms of international competitiveness. In the Fijian case, years of persistence by rugby women has culminated in an Olympic medal and a major victory in disrupting entrenched gendered rugby nationalism. The two cases show that the relationship between postcolonial (hetero)

patriarchy and nationalism is essentially fluid and multifaceted and that sporting nationalism has been captured by Pacific women with varying degrees of success.

Outside of the Pacific, cases of sportswomen's international fame 'bending' gendered sport media narratives have been documented (e.g., Chiang, et al., 2015; McCree, 2011; Tseng, 2016; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). For the Pacific Island nations in ongoing processes of decolonisation in a world premised on 'the belief that the microstates are mere pawns in international relations' (Stringer, 2006, p. 547), sporting success on a global stage emanates particular symbolic and emotive power, which has served different interests and agendas (see, e.g., Cattermole, 2008; Connell, 2018; Guinness and Besnier, 2016; Schieder, 2012). Although nationalism in postcolonial Melanesia is highly problematised by extraordinary cultural heterogeneity, localism/islandism and state fragility (Douglas, 2000; Forsyth, 2009), its continuing significance has been argued by scholars pointing to 'the numbers active in Independence Day celebrations throughout Melanesia and the other indicators of national involvement, such as ... support for sporting teams' (Gardner and Waters, 2013, p. 118). Decolonisation, as 'a crucial historical episode of deep meaning' (Gardner and Waters, 2013, p. 113) in Melanesia and the broader region, where sport serves as a cultural platform for cultivating a tangible sense of national belonging and collective self-esteem, presents key counter-hegemonic scope for sporting women. It remains to be seen whether such cases as Fijian rugby women's recent rise to glory materialise into sustained structural change, or, whether social legitimacy resting on high performance outcomes is essentially limited and conditional. Still, sporting nationalism offers these women one of many avenues for transformative agency.

Women who are not in a position to leverage international sporting fame find agentic resources elsewhere – and can do so with competence. Solomon Islands women have pulled off a soccer boom by discreetly navigating the complex social landscape of *kastom*, patriarchy and material constraints. They have facilitated an unprecedented number of women's entry into the nation's principal masculine game by seizing the opportunities opened up by policy developments, incorporating new networks and resources, enlisting male champions and alternative, development-centred framing of the game that minimises community backlash – executing a 'stealth feminism' of its own kind. Indo-Fijian women turn to a range of strategies, with some taking on gendered/racialised barriers to break into team/competitive sports, others cultivating safe spaces in individual sports/exercise and playing among Indo-Fijians, and yet others exploring athleticism in an unobtrusive and perhaps even disguised manner through recreational activities like walking and dancing. If some of these strategies are subtle and not ostensibly oppositional, they reveal that Pacific Island women are everywhere finding, devising and mobilising strategies to contest their place under social conditions that both constrain and enable them.

Finally, the ni-Vanuatu women's strategy is also significant as it extends well beyond local actors and contexts. The small beach volleyball community

has negotiated the challenges of global disparities and local gender hierarchies by tactically harnessing the skills, resources and powers of a heterogeneity of actors. Northern sport administrators, coaches, volunteers, sporting bodies and donor agencies have been woven into a network of support alongside local actors ranging from families and communities to the police force. The success of this collective enterprise points to the potential of an alliance of Southern and Northern actors cemented by a shared transformative vision – distinct from a Northern institutional intervention in a Southern ‘problem’ questioned by sport-for-development scholars. Existing sport literature on the Global South, notwithstanding its critical contributions, tends to focus primarily on ‘what the North does to the South’, inadvertently depriving the South of its agency (Kanemasu and Dutt, 2022, p. 194). In Vanuatu beach volleyball, Southern agency is asserted in the form of a dynamic, unfolding force that readily transcends the North-South binary.

The mapping above is incomplete. The focus of this book on national-level patriarchal configurations and urban women’s experiences masks multiplicity and variability within communities and nations. Women’s responses discussed above are also only the most salient instances emerging from the research participants’ narratives. Strategies that are not investigated in detail here and/or may assume greater prominence in the future include rights-based activism informed by the rise of civil society organisation advocacy across the region. Indications of such developments can be observed in Fijian and Samoan rugby and Solomon Islands soccer, where some athletes are beginning to employ discourses of (variously understood and envisioned) human rights and gender equality in asserting their sporting claim. The possible shift signifies that ‘patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle’ (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). In addition, while the studies in this book were centred around competitive team sports, the case of athletic Indo-Fijian women suggests that recreational and individual sports and physical activities may offer considerably different agentic avenues for women variously positioned in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, geography and other social matrices. These and many other dynamics of Pacific women’s relationships with sport remain to be explored. Nevertheless, the insights offered by the women in this book outline, if tentatively, the range of ways in which Pacific sporting women may engage with the power of postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy.

Bargaining as a war of position

While the women’s strategies vary widely, from silent-but-all-out resistance to a Pacific-style stealth feminism, a Southern-Northern collective and mobilisation of the power of culture, they each hold out transformative meanings, outcomes and potentials. Fijian rugby players’ latest victory in their struggle forcefully reveals that even a seemingly all-powerful hegemonic order is constantly challenged/defended, inherently dynamic and potentially

precarious. Their silent, dogged resistance is in fact eloquent in asserting, in the words of a pioneer rugby player, 'I am who I am and there's nothing you can do about it'. Other women who shared their stories in this book variously make the same assertion, by persistently claiming their space in the sports field, in the gym, on the sand court and elsewhere – by capturing contested sporting spaces.

It is important to stress the transformative nature of these practices and strategies in part because existing discussion of patriarchal bargain in non-Western contexts tends to emphasise women's compliance with patriarchal power (Gallagher, 2007). Many studies (e.g., Aboulhassan and Brumley 2019; Chaudhuri, Morah and Yingling, 2014; Gu, 2019; James-Hawkins, Qutteina and Yount, 2017; Kim and Vang, 2020) highlight how, in bargaining with patriarchy in Middle Eastern, South and East Asian and other cultural settings, 'women submit to specific gender rules that disadvantage them, strategising to gain social or economic benefits while unknowingly recreating the system of patriarchy' (Aboulhassan and Brumley 2019, p. 641). In this interpretation of patriarchal bargain, the scope for agency is restricted to manoeuvring within existing circumstances, essentially a 'bartering of power and personhood for material security and protection in a world where these are essential for survival' (Jackson, 2009, p. 124; see also Kawarazuka, Locke and Seeley, 2019). This likely derives from one of Kandiyoti's (1988) own examples, what she describes as 'classic patriarchy', characteristic of South and East Asia and the Middle East. Under classical patriarchy, young brides' labour and reproductive powers are appropriated by extended family households headed by fathers-in-law until their deprivation and hardship are eventually superseded by the control and authority they gain over their daughters-in-law. The cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their dependence on adult sons as old-age security encourage them to accommodate the existing form of patriarchy; to seek 'protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety' (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 283). The existing literature amply documents instances of such bargaining within marriage and kinship, including a Pacific Island case of older Indo-Fijian immigrant women in Canada, who, due to their socially and financially precarious positions in the new country, turn to an interpersonal strategy of grandmothering to maximise their security within the family, while unintentionally reproducing their dependence (Shankar and Northcott, 2009).

These studies illuminate the extent and effect of specific patriarchal varieties and women's abilities to cope with vulnerability under such conditions. To further our understanding of women's responses to dominant power, however, it is crucial to also recognise their transformative outcomes and potentials. Exclusive attention to patriarchal bargains in the form of coping strategies risks casting women, especially in non-Western 'classic' or neo-traditional patriarchal settings, in a passive light and giving a false appearance of perpetuity and fixity to the existing relations and structures of power. I follow Kawarazuka, Locke and Seeley (2019, p. 387) in contending that

‘theorisation of “bargaining with patriarchy” needs to move beyond seeing the architecture of patriarchy as a “given” or non-negotiable constraint’. A ‘stronger conceptualisation’ of patriarchal bargain allows for investigating the limits as well as the reach of dominant power (Kawarazuka, Locke and Seeley, 2019, p. 385). Importantly, Kandiyoti’s (1988, p. 286) own conceptualisation is by no means deterministic: whilst women (and men) may accommodate ‘set rules and scripts regulating gender relations’, she stresses, these ‘may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated’ in bargaining processes.

The Pacific Islands region collectively presents a picture of entrenched patriarchy, measured by alarmingly high prevalence of gender-based violence, some of the world’s lowest female parliamentary representation and other often-cited indices of gender inequality. Yet, unbeknown to the media, policymakers and commentators who may overlook Pacific sportswomen except as a target of intervention or when they achieve exceptional competition success, these women daily work on, against and through dominant discourses and practices to claim the sport/exercise of their passion. The women presented in this book are active agents in a quest of more than survival or making the most of oppressive circumstances. Their quest is about more than self-preservation or maximisation of immediate interests within the confines of insurmountable patriarchy. It is about effecting a process of change.

Moving beyond the notion of ‘bargaining as survival’ also encourages us to critically examine the assumption, noted in Chapter 1, of speaking out, or overt political action, as the primary medium of feminist agency and resistance. Most typically in (neo)liberal feminist discourses espousing personal choice and responsibility, ‘women who cannot speak out are seen as disempowered, unable to act and to effect change’ (Parpart, 2010, p. 15). Pacific women’s limited political representation, in this vein, may be regarded as a reflection of their voicelessness. Whilst women’s participation in public decision-making is crucial to their sovereignty and the region indeed has a long and vibrant history of women’s political organising (see, e.g., Alver, 2021; Pacific Community, 2017; Underhill-Sem, 2019), Pacific women outside of the formal political arena are not voiceless. The sporting women’s varied assertions of transformative agency call into question the notion of ‘frontal attack’ on dominant power as the primary or most effective pathway for social change. Sport in the Pacific constitutes a consequential site of embodied politics.

In fact, the cases presented in this book may be considered with reference to counter-hegemonic struggle as conceptualised by Antonio Gramsci. In discussing socialist revolutionary strategies in early 20th-century Western Europe, Gramsci (1971, pp. 12, 238–239) deemed a ‘war of position’, or a protracted struggle directed at hegemonic institutions of ‘civil society’ (‘the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”’), as more relevant than a dramatic ‘war of manoeuvre’, or frontal attack on the state (which he believed was appropriate for Eastern Europe, where civil society was underdeveloped and the state formed the basis of bourgeois rule) (see also Egan, 2014, 2016;

Stoddart, 2007). Where direct frontal assault on dominant power is likely to fail, Gramsci (1971, p. 348–349) argued, it is through ‘cultural battle’ of engendering and diffusing an alternative ‘conception of the world’ that subaltern groups may instigate social transformation.

Although Gramsci’s work was concerned with historically and geographically specific revolutionary movements, his treatment of counter-hegemony as a war of position has been drawn on by numerous scholars investigating the range and dynamics of subaltern political strategies in a variety of historical and contemporary contexts (e.g., Ali, 2015; Butko, 2004; Egan, 2016; Harris, 2018; Meek, 2011; Mirshak, 2023; Takriti, 2019). Its relevance in understanding Pacific women’s infrapolitical practices lies especially in its explication of counter-hegemony as a process played out in concrete, everyday social and cultural practices. Gramsci (1971, pp. 198, 200) stressed the significance of ‘spontaneous movements’ of the subaltern (‘Spontaneous in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience’), because these ‘movements of the broader popular strata make possible the coming to power of the most progressive subaltern class’. The Pacific sporting women’s struggle is (currently) not framed by formal (feminist) politics but waged as a cultural battle of appropriating elements of hegemonic discourses of nationalism, ‘tradition’, health, community development, etc., and incorporating differential actors and resources, which is essentially aimed at forging a new ‘conception of the world’. Hegemony/counter-hegemony, according to Gramsci, takes shape precisely out of such ongoing processes of differentiation, alliance and negotiation that induce broad societal consent. In Vanuatu, women’s beach volleyball has become normalised to the extent that such a new conception of the sport may be said to be emerging. Fijian women rugby players are making considerable advances towards such a goal, even if they are likely to continue to meet hegemonic pushback. Elsewhere, the record number of Solomon Islands women entering the soccer pitch, Samoan rugby women gaining a degree of family/community endorsement and Indo-Fijian women occupying diverse athletic spaces indicate that, hidden behind the outwardly unchallenged hegemonic order, subtle cultural shifts may be under way. Additionally, as noted earlier, the women’s strategies do not necessarily remain confined to infrapolitics. They may be beginning to articulate, to varying degrees, with human rights and feminist advocacy, which may generate new scope and potential for their struggle: the ‘unity between “spontaneity” and “conscious leadership” ... is precisely the real political action of the subaltern’, for ‘[b]etween the two there is a “quantitative” difference of degree, not one of quality’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 198–199).

This does not diminish the subjugation and injustice the sporting women have contended with. The pains and tribulations they shared, often with emotion, in their narratives are a powerful reminder that their struggle is not some tactical game. Their struggle is sometimes indeed about survival (such as in the case of Fijian rugby players in social isolation and material deprivation). It is

sometimes indeed about coping, when immediate familial/social/material conditions prevent them from claiming the sport of their desire (such as in the case of some athletic Indo-Fijian women) or claiming it in the manner they desire, not restrained or obstructed by the myriad barriers they described as their daily battle. This makes it doubly significant that they have more than survived or made the most of their circumstances. They have strategised to bargain with the hegemonic sporting order to occupy its gendered spaces and persistently expanded them, thereby progressively disrupting its coherence and power. Behind nonconfrontational bargains with powerful (hetero)patriarchy transpires a relentless war of position. Bargaining here offers a medium of counter-hegemony, a ceaseless push for social change through new socio-political consensus. With their infrapolitics of resistance and persuasion, sporting women of the Pacific are, 'slowly, slowly' (to borrow Solomon Islands soccer women's and men's expression), chipping away at the (hetero)patriarchal power bloc.

In closing

As noted in Chapter 1, this book is a collection of snapshots, rather than a panoramic overview, of Pacific Island women's sporting experiences through the lens of patriarchy, agency, resistance, feminism, cultural tradition and other selected conceptual tools. Acknowledging this specific angle and scope of the book, my aim has been to present empirical, localised analyses of the ways in which the socio-political trajectories of Pacific Island communities and nations shape and are shaped by gendered relations of power in the sporting arena. Pacific women are positioned in particular configurations of post-colonial (hetero)patriarchy and particular locations of kinship, class, ethnicity, geography and other axes of power. These constitute the terrains of their sporting struggle, underlying both the uniqueness of and the continuity between the cases studied in the preceding chapters. Insights drawn from their experiences have been presented here to form a basis of Pacific feminist sport research and to extend the broader feminist/critical sport scholarship. The sociology of sport is today increasingly informed and enriched by multiple voices speaking from multiple locations. The voices from the Pacific offer a glimpse into women's immense struggles – and immense competencies and advances – in negotiating, manoeuvring, disrupting and subverting what may outwardly appear to be insurmountable hegemonic power. While academics begin to catch up with the lives and practices of women in different geographical and structural locations, Pacific Island women go on waging their cultural battles against any odds, claiming their spaces in sport and beyond as they have always done.

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