Indo-Fijian women and sportive activity: a critical race feminism approach

Abstract

There are no reliable statistics about female participation in Fijian sport, yet it is well known by locals (though not widely understood) that engagement in sportive activities is rare among Indo-Fijian girls and women. This paper is the first attempt to explore how and why that is so. That said, there is an important caveat: we are not insisting that sportive activities are an inherent good. Indeed, for some cultural groups, Western-invented competitive sport may be of no interest; similarly, tangential forms of human movement, such as recreational pursuits like cycling or gym sessions, may be just as uninspiring. In that sense, the main thrust of our inquiry is the sportive experiences of Indo-Fijian female athletes, yet we have also sought feedback from those charged with the responsibility of managing sportive programs. These combined perspectives are intended to provide a preliminary entree into the much larger – hitherto unexplored – question of what attitudes, opportunities and constraints are associated with sportive activities for Indo-Fijian girls and women.

The paper adopts a Critical Race Feminism (CRF) framework: the goal was to accentuate females of colour (in this case Indo-Fijian women) by hearing their voices and, with their permission, reporting what they had to say. The paper nonetheless provides an adaptation to CRF theory: it also engaged with individuals – whether women or men – charged with the responsibility of managing sportive activities. In that sense, we were interested in individual agency and experience on the part of athletic Indo-Fijian women, but also wanted to understand how (or if) local sport administrators understood ethnic diversity among female athletes, including – in our case – the involvement (or otherwise) of Indo-Fijian females.

Key Words: Critical Race Feminism, Indo-Fijian Women, Participation, Agency, Marginalisation

Background and Purpose

Women's participation in sport, a heavily gendered social institution and practice, has attracted a large body of research since the 1980s (Kleindienst-Cachay and Heckemeyer, 2008). In a review of feminist/gender studies of sport, Scraton and Flintoff (2013) identify a developmental

pathway from earlier 'women and sport' literature focusing primarily on male dominance (e.g., Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994), to a 'gender and sport' perspective concerned with discourses about femininities and masculinities (e.g., Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 1994). More recently, gendered power relations have been made more complex through heightened attention to identities, differences and embodiment (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003). As Scraton and Flintoff (2013: 96) have commented about this development: it 'has raised fundamental questions about whether it is any longer appropriate to centralise gender relations or whether we need far more complex engagement with the intersections of difference relating to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, class, sexuality, disability, and/or age.'

It is no surprise, then, that researchers now investigate, as in our case, the racialisation *and* gendering of sport through the experiences of women athletes of colour, and often with a focus on the Global South, such as Muslim women in Malaysia (Sofian, Omar-Fauzee & Abd-Latif, 2010), South African women (Clark & Burnett, 2010), South Asian women in the United Kingdom (Ratna, 2011), Indigenous women in Canada (Ferguson et al., 2018), women athletes in Kenya (Njororai, 2016) as well as Indigenous women in Australia (Adair, Stronach and Maxwell, 2018). Despite this emerging body of research, Scraton and Flintoff (2013: 101) note that '[m]uch of the current discourse about women and sport remains ethnocentric … we still know very little about black and minority ethnic women's experiences of sport.' Thus, there are ongoing calls for research into the experiences of 'marginal or under-represented subjects such as [I]ndigenous women or women in the Global South' (Toffoletti and Palmer, 2017: 159)'.

When focusing on Fiji – the country of interest in this paper – there has been a burgeoning body of scholarship about men and masculinity (e.g., Guinness and Besnier, 2016; Presterudstuen, 2010). Male athletes in sports like rugby union and soccer are widely valorised as representatives of their nation. Such men are also typically revered for their displays of masculinity – a trait commonly seen as synonymous with athletic acumen (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013).

In recent years, exploratory studies about Pacific Island female athletes (e.g., Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017; Kanemasu and Johnson, 2017) have also emerged. Their interest has been with women's negotiation of gender norms and hetero-normativity in sport, set against a backdrop of a

postcolonial gender order. Thus far, the focus of that research has been with Indigenous women: the experiences of non-Indigenous women in the Pacific islands is basically a blank canvas. That imbalance seems peculiar as Fiji is a very diverse society, comprised of two main ethnic groups: Indigenous Fijians (iTaukei)[i] (57%), and Fijians of Indian descent (Indo-Fijians) (37%), as well as ethnic minorities like Rotumans, Europeans, Chinese, and people of mixed ethnic and other Pacific Island ancestry (6% in total) (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Indo-Fijian men do feature in sport, most notably in soccer (James, 2015), but there is a conspicuous, locally observable absence of Indo-Fijian women in the sporting sphere. Unfortunately, statistics on grassroots participation in Fiji are scant, and data about the propensity of different ethnic groups to partake do not exist. However, the near invisibility of Indo-Fijian women in sportive[ii] activities has long been reality, as noted by the Indo-Fijian women's rights activist, Shireen Lateef (1987: 7): 'There is a noticeable absence of Indo-Fijian women in sports, politics or public organisations.' At the elite level there are clearer numerical indications. For example, at the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast, of the 96 athletes sent, 48 were women - only one Indo-Fijian[iii] (Oceaniasport.com, 2018). Similarly, of the 216 women listed as 'Top 10 All Time' by Athletics Fiji (n.d.), only four (collectively appearing nine times on the list) are Indo-Fijian.[iv] These figures are significantly disproportionate to the Indo-Fijian share of the country's female population, which accounts for roughly 34% of that total (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Difficulty in connecting with local sporting archetypes is not new for the international Indian diaspora (Burdsey, 2015; Ratna, 2011; Thangaraj 2015). But it does raise questions about how this global trend is impacted by local conditions.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore the experiences of Indo-Fijian women who have partaken in sportive activities, with a particular interest in any enablers or barriers they have faced. Unsurprisingly, we were only able to recruit a very small cohort of athletic Indo-Fijian women. While these physically-active women cannot speak for the wider community of Indo-Fijian women, they offer preliminary insights into the interrelation of gender, ethnicity and identity in the Fijian context. In order to pursue these goals, we adopted a Critical Race Feminism (CRF) lens, an approach that has origins in critical epistemology, melding the pursuit of social justice with the multifaceted nature of

oppression that is orientated towards gender and associated intersectional attributes such as race, ethnicity and class (Wing, 2015).

Research Context

Fiji has a population of about 885,000 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017) and a developing economy that depends mostly on tourism and sugar exports. The majority of Indo-Fijians are descendants of some 60,000 indentured labourers brought from India between 1879 and 1916 by the British colonial government to meet the demands of sugar production (Lal, 2012). Following the termination of the indenture system, many opted to remain in Fiji. While almost all Indigenous Fijians are Christian (an ongoing legacy of colonialism), Indo-Fijians are a complex mix of sub-cultural groupings: Punjabis, Gujarats, South and North Indians, and in terms of religion – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Under colonial rule (1874–1970), Indigenous Fijians were incorporated into a patronage system that upheld the paramountcy of iTaukei interests vis-à-vis those of Indo-Fijians; this was done in exchange for the former's allegiance to British colonial interests (Durutalo, 1986). The colonial government's ethnically compartmentalised development policy and differential treatment of these communities fostered a preoccupation with the two seemingly binary ethno-racial groups, despite intra-ethnic, class-based and regional disparities/conflicts within these groups. That structure was carried into the postcolonial political order, culminating in ethno-nationalist coups d'état in 1987 and 2000, which had severe social, economic and political consequences, including unprecedented levels of violence, with the iTaukei dominated police and military targeting Indo-Fijians and their properties (Trnka, 2008). Reflecting on the 2000 coup, Trnka (2008: 3) has commented:

> Never before and never since has postcolonial Fiji experienced such levels of violence. Much of the civilian violence was directed against Indo-Fijians, their homes, businesses, and properties. It was fuelled by a racialised, anti-Indian rhetoric that promoted images of Indo-Fijians as vulagi, or foreigners, who had usurped the rights of the iTaukei, or Indigenous Fijians, to govern Fiji.

The most recent coup of 2006 was staged by the military, though surprisingly there was a shift from its former role as a guardian of ethno-nationalism to that of multi-ethnic statehood (Fraenkel et al., 2009). That said, Indigenous dominance of executive government was retained. Larson and Aminzade (2007) point out how this scenario – a majority indigenous group successfully maintaining their political dominance – is relatively unusual. They might, however, have acknowledged other cases, such as Malaysia's *bumiputra* (Balasubramaniam, 2007). and Zimbabwe's 'Africa for Africans' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009) in which Indigenous communities have reasserted dominance (albeit sometimes using discriminatory laws and practices). In terms of Fiji, Larson and Aminzade (2007: 825) note that iTaukei groups were able to employ 'discourses of indigeneity to justify redistribution [of political power] along racial lines within the national context'. This has fermented a tradition of ethno-racial separatism in community, social and institutional life. The iTaukei have come to embody a post-colonial ethnocracy which, as Anderson (2016: 1) explains, "means 'government or rule by an ethnic group' or ethnos, and more precisely rule by a particular ethnos in a multi-ethnic situation where there is at least one other significant ethnic group".

In the domain of sport and physical activity, longstanding cultural separation has persisted, with Indigenous Fijians dominating the nation's sporting culture at both high performance and grassroots levels (Prasad, 2013). This is despite official sports policy rhetoric which states that the government will promote 'participation by all in sports and recreational activities, ensuring that all citizens in Fiji receive every opportunity to enrich their lives through quality sport programs' (Naupoto, 2012: 3), sentiments echoed throughout the most recently available annual report from the Fijian Sports Commission (FNSC, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

A CRF perspective derives from Critical Race Theory (CRT), which challenges dominant ideologies that assume objectivity, race neutrality, colour essentialism, meritocracy and equal opportunity (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001). Members of marginalised communities are often muted in the decision-making corridors of government and organisations; CRT seeks to empower and centralise 'the

marginalised voice' (Hylton, 2005: 85). Fiji presents a rather unique case in the context of CRT and the broader sociology of sport literature, much of which explores the experiences of Indigenous persons as marginalised Others (see e.g. Adair, Stronach and Maxwell, 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018).

By contrast, in Fiji, the colonial and postcolonial political trajectory of the country has typically positioned Indo-Fijians as political and socio-cultural subordinates. Starting from the colonial era, most Indo-Fijians were excluded from the hegemonic alliance between the colonial state and the iTaukei chiefs (as well as the non-Indigenous elite and foreign corporate interests) (Durutalo, 1986). Indo-Fijians, while industrious economically industrious and intellectually dynamic, had become marginalised politically. Most importantly, in the context of this paper, within the Indo-Fijian community women were subjugated owing to a patriarchal tradition of gender relations. Hence, as noted by Teaiwa (2008: 127), Indo-Fijian women have constituted 'a group that so far has been even more marginalised than the ([I]ndigenous Fijian) women and the (male) "Indians". The distinct socio-cultural history and positionality of Indo-Fijian women highlights a shortcoming of CRT: this is because their oppression is not only about race. Accordingly, a CRF framework captures how Indo-Fijian women are positioned according to intersectional combinations of gender and race/ethnicity – the prime foci of this paper.

CRF initially emerged in the study of North American law to emphasise the legal concerns of racial/ethnic minority (especially Black) women in Western contexts (Howard, Navarro 2016). Since then, it has spread globally, and now 'contributes to the development of international law, global feminism and postcolonial theory by de-marginalising women of colour in [both] a theoretical and practical sense' (Wing, 2000: 12). To begin, Crenshaw (1989: 140) interrogated the intersection of race and gender in her work highlighting the marginalisation 'of those who are multiply burdened' – in that case the experiences of Black women in North American anti-racism law.. By rejecting the 'single-axis framework', that treats race and gender as mutually exclusive (Crenshaw, 1991), precedents in jurisprudence were formed that further recognised nuance in the lives and identities of marginalised women. Issues affecting (mainly) women such as gendered roles, domestic violence and childcare, were highlighted alongside race to demonstrate the efficacy of considering the inter-relation of race and feminism (Matsuda, 1991; Nash, 2008).

CRF, therefore, pivots from CRT in explicitly rejecting *all* minority essentialism and, in doing so, seeks especially to build understanding around the intersections of race, gender and patriarchy (Wing, 2000). There are parallels with postcolonial feminism in that both frameworks are interested in transformation; therefore, prioritising local voices along with intersections of race, gender and other social attributes. However, by predominantly focusing on colonial oppression, a postcolonial feminist model may unintentionally mask the complexities of socio-cultural and ethno-racial relations *within* postcolonial societies (Tyagi, 2014). CRF is very attuned to situation: it seeks to explore and understand the diverse nature of oppression and the nuanced power dynamics of a given context (Wing 2000). This can, of course, involve comparative research. Wing (2000), for example, employed CRF to examine the marginalisation of very different groups – a Black South African and Palestinian women – both of which were doubly subordinated by their position on the fringes of already marginalised groups. As this paper will show, Indo-Fijian women find themselves in a similar position of double marginalisation in respect of their capacity to engage (should they wish to) in cultural activities outside of what is normative for their circumstances.

Method

This article combines primary data generated separately in two separate projects: first, PhD field research on the role of sport and intergroup relations in Fiji undertaken by the first author (XY). This study examined sport policy and intergroup relations at three levels of organisation – macro, meso and micro. Although that project focused on male athletes, the author was ensconced by the wider gender dynamics of Fijian sport, thus he also took the opportunity to liaise, as appropriate, with female athletes and to explore the attitudes of sport administrators (at different organisational levels) towards physically active women. XY's contribution to the current paper, therefore, is an offshoot of a much larger study. But it was forecast in the recommendations for future research in his PhD thesis.

During XY's field work in Fiji, he was mentored by XX, who had extensive experience in researching sport and society, and resided in Suva. XX had begun exploratory qualitative research into the experiences of athletic Indo-Fijian women (reference provided in the case of publication). Both scholars had conducted qualitative research into sport and power relations in Fiji

using a postcolonial lens. When poring over their respective transcripts from the separate studies, XY and XX conceived an opportunity to bring together findings that had returned similar themes. Both XY and XX had developed an interest in the experiences of Indo-Fijian women and sportive activities – which they realised were undocumented. Together, the qualitative data from the separate studies by XY and XX provided a small, but tantalising, total of 12 Indo-Fijian women respondents. This would be very much exploratory research with very limited and preliminary findings (see Table 1).

The respective 'positions' of the two authors was also a cause for contemplation. Darnell, Chawansky et al. (2016: 12) have called for a 'reflexive sense of humility' in conducting 'outsider' research into sport in the Global South. Acknowledging the positionalities of authors is one step in that complex process. The first on-site researcher (XY) is a white British man with 8 years of experience undertaking fieldwork in sport for development (measured from weeks to months) in places as diverse as Africa, the Middle East and Northern Ireland. This involved extensive practical engagement with women and girls either in (or seeking to be part of) physical activity programs. However, XY was unfamiliar with the Fijian sport and cultural context, so undertook two field work trips in order to develop critical awareness. He invested time in getting to know participants through socialising, training and living with them until he felt that they were relaxed and considered him trustworthy. In this respect 'outsider' status is not a total limitation; such a perspective can help to maintain an element of 'independent' sociological scrutiny, simultaneously building a closeness with the research environment (see: Forsey, 2010).

The second author (XX) has both 'outsider/insider' status in the research. As a foreign-born (non-Fijian), university lecturer in Fiji, she was an outsider to the research participants – whether in terms of culture, ethnicity or status. At the same time, as a non-Western woman of colour who has lived in Fiji for two decades, she shares some of the Indo-Fijian women's experience of racism and gender oppression, which allowed for empathetic discussions with respondents. The third author, XY(1), a white Australian man, was not involved directly in field work, but instead undertook a PhD supervisory role for XY. He has extensive experience in respect of sport and society research involving Indigenous and culturally diverse communities, including gender dynamics therein (sample references to be added in the event of publication). In summary, then, the authors are, to varying

degrees, outsiders seeking to add volume to the voice of marginalised insiders. This is consistent with CRF scholarship where researchers are encouraged to identify with 'the position of groups that had suffered throughout history' (Matsuda, 1987: 325). XY and XX had invited participants 'in' to the research process, inclusive of data analysis, but did so in the interests of listening to and (with permission) broadcasting their (deidentified) voices.

XY's PhD project entailed 47 interviews with respondents at different levels of Fijian sport and society, along with (non) participant observation recoded in a 15,000-word research diary over 10 weeks in the field. Participants included women and men from both Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian communities who worked at: 1) the elite (macro) level – senior managers of major sports organisations/departments; 2) the institutional (meso) level – managers, coaches and school principals; and 3) the community (micro) level – grassroots players, students, sports fans and villagers etc.

During this study, XY became acutely aware of the near absence of Indo-Fijian girls and women from sportive activities. Only three of the Indo-Fijian women interviewed, aged 17, 26 and 65 respectively, regularly participated in sport at least once a week: field hockey, martial arts and lawn bowls. The inclusion of the voices of sports administrators – whether male or female – is a product of XY's study of racialisation, stereotyping and intergroup relations in Fijian sport. These voices provide a wider context into the structural barriers faced by Indo-Fijian women athletes. Our key aim in this paper was to represent athletic Indo-Fijian women's voices through primary reliance on interviews with them to explore their experiences of marginalisation and resistance. However, it is also important that we depict why their voices have been muted.

This is a departure from conventional approaches to CRF, where scholars typically focus solely on the experiences of minority women of colour. However, much like us, Andrews (1999: 25) has pondered 'the transformative potential of critical race feminism'. She posits the importance of *investigating* gender inequality: the voices of oppressed women are a critical element of that story – as they recount experiences of marginalisation and subordination – but so too are the voices of those *responsible* for (in our case) the limited opportunities for Indo-Fijian women to partake in sport (should they wish to). As Andrews (1999: 8) has recommended:

> In order to analyze the existence and causes of inequality, local conditions need to be scrutinized. The peculiarities of each country, premised on its history, geography, culture and economic status, demand that the local inquiry is the preeminent one. In other words, both the investigation of gender equality and an appropriate response requires that we focus on local conditions.

XX's study involved semi-structured interviews with eight physically active Indo-Fijian women aged between 20 and 34 in Suva (Fiji's capital city). Three participants were from Suva and four from another city or island, with one residing in New Zealand (with whom the interview was conducted via FaceTime). Six respondents were university students, while two were university graduates and/or employed at the time of the interview. They regularly (3-4 days a week to every day) engaged in one or more sports and physical activities, including hockey, soccer, netball, volleyball, (seven-a-side and touch) rugby, basketball, tennis, squash, mixed martial arts, kickboxing, powerlifting, *tang soo do*, jogging, and high-intensity workout. Three played in multi-ethnic clubs and/or participated in formal competitions, while three exercised on their own and two played in mixed-gender Indo-Fijian teams at their university. The research process was inspired by a postcolonial feminist sensibility: this recognised the neoliberal power relations at play, and the agency of women in the Global South (e.g. Tyagi, 2014).

In combining the two studies, the authors employed elements of Patton's (1999) advice about triangulation; the use of more than one data source to develop a comprehensive understanding of a case. The current paper, therefore, is a product of what Denzin (1978) has called 'investigator triangulation', combining the frameworks and findings of two researchers with similar aims and approaches, along with 'data source triangulation' – the collection of data from different cohorts, at various levels, to gain multiple perspectives (Carter et al., 2014). The data sets developed by XY and XX, while curated at different times and conditions, came to share a commonality of focus as well as a synonymous approach to qualitative testimony. The research presented here centres on the intersectionality of gender *and* ethno-racial dynamics in the case of Indo-Fijian women and sportive activities. Table 1 summarises the profiles of the participants interviewed in the two projects in

relation to Indo-Fijian women and sportive activity (keeping in mind that XY's PhD thesis had an initial focus on Fijian male athletes and intergroup relations).

Table 1. Interview Participants

Level	Indo-Fijian		Indigenous Fijian	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Micro	0	10	0	0
Meso	2	2	2	1
Macro	0	0	1	1
In sport	2	11	3	1

Participants in both studies were reached through a 'snowball sampling' method (Noy 2008). In study one, the sampling began as purposeful, targeting stakeholders in sport, and then more theoretical as themes emerged; for example, Indo-Fijian sportswomen were recommended by other participants when their absence in the sporting sphere became notable. The sampling in study two initially relied on XX's personal network as well as her previous research, among which two participants agreed to be interviewed for the study. The samples varied in terms of the participants' sporting experience and family backgrounds; this was an unavoidable consequence of the scarcity of Indo-Fijian women who partake in sportive activities. The interviews in both studies were conducted in English, with an interpreter used on two occasions in study one, as in some (rural) locations Hindi is preferred. In both studies, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and put to thematic coding and analysis.

In their respective data collection, both XY and XX aimed at a collaborative co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2017). While the investigators undertook responsibility for the overarching process of interpretation through thematic analysis, the participants were central to validating and re-validating emergent themes in accordance with the principles of constant comparative analysis and co-constructive research (Saldaña, 2012). In the first study, the code of 'Indo-Fijian women in sport' emerged due to their notable absence in sporting spaces around Fiji. This was later developed to 'access to sport' subjected into 'socio-cultural pressure' and 'indigenous hegemony' evidenced in the findings below. XY was able to maintain good relationships

with participants during and after fieldwork through online message apps; this conduit allowed him to discuss and check the emergent themes and receive comments on the direction of the research from local stakeholders. In XX's study, codes such as 'getting into sport/physical activity', 'family reactions', 'peer reactions', 'community reactions', 'double marginalisation', and 'athleticism as resistance' emerged during the data collection. In short, although the coding of the data was not synonymous, there was enough correlation to form the collaborative themes shared below.

Both XY and XX are experienced in field work and qualitative scholarship. In study one, XY lived, ate, trained and socialised with both Indo-Fijian and Indigenous male and female stakeholders in sport during two field trips totalling ten weeks. In study two, XX was already immersed in local culture as a result of long years of residence in Fiji, but her research into women's experiences had also developed through an ongoing affinity and familiarity with the women she spoke with. Following the interviews, XX and her eight respondents collaborated for over a year to organise a highly publicised community outreach event at a local university, which promoted gender equality, cultural diversity and disability inclusion in sport and wider Fijian society. Such processes, while part of XX's routine commitment to community impact in her role at a local university, helped to build trust with the Indo-Fijian women who were part of her research.

This gels with CRF approaches that seek to unbundle the de facto inequalities in research and praxis involving marginalised women by looking to personal accounts that illuminate 'voices from the margins' (Andrews, 2000: 395). This paper therefore involved a constant, if inevitably limited, process of learning from and with Indo-Fijian athletes – who have barely been the subject of serious discussion. With this in mind, and to do justice to the participants, these athletes were invited to speak for themselves about their lived realities, albeit with the protection of pseudonyms.

Results and discussion

The issue of absence

Despite a scarcity of official statistics on Indo-Fijian women's participation in sportive activities, their absence is well known and observable across the country. Yet this has not sparked debate about change. As a male senior sports administrator admitted: '*That's a question … we have not actually*

seriously looked into or considered. Yeah it's a massive problem it's a huge group of people! (Sisu, iTaukei [male]). The athletic Indo-Fijian women who took part in the study lamented that there were very few others like themselves:

> Yes it is very less [sic] from my family I think I am the only girl continuing with sports and I am 20 years old and the rest, like my cousins, my sisters, most of them have families, have home lives (Pritika).

> One in 100 [female] athletes in Zones games [a national school athletics tournament] would be an Indo-Fijian girl (Arti).

As will now be discussed, this paper uncovered several factors behind the widespread absence of Indo-Fijian women in sportive activities: cultural and familial pressures, gendered and racial/racialised stereotypes, and the dominance in Fijian sport and physical activity of indigenous women.

Socio-cultural location

According to several respondents, traditional Indo-Fijian culture is a barrier to women's sport participation: '*I think it's cultural barriers that come into place*' (Samir, Indo-Fijian [man]); *'It's because of our culture'* (Dinesh, Indo-Fijian [man]). These respondents were men, but women were more specific. The patriarchal nature of Indo-Fijian culture forms a barrier, as sportive activities are not a part of the conventional norms that shape Indo-Fijian femininity, within which domesticity, child rearing and home-making are central. As two Indo-Fijian female athletes explained:

> A typical Indian logic is that, basically, you're supposed to stay in the house, doing housework, cooking, basic stuff … That's it. That's your life. That's the thinking that a majority of them [Indo-Fijians] have (Kavita, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

> The majority of Indo-Fijian girls are not allowed by their parents to play sports in PE classes. Parents must sign a consent form … allowing or disallowing their daughters to play sports… Most parents would disallow. In addition to [physical] safety

> concerns, many parents have the traditional belief that girls should stay indoors (Sangeeta, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

For many Indo-Fijian families, then, women engaged in sportive activities does not coalesce with traditional notions of femininity; it is often regarded as deviant. Traditionally male-dominated sports receive greater disapproval, as explained by an Indo-Fijian woman who surreptitiously played soccer: '*It is a male-dominated game; they [my family] wouldn't allow me. So I've kept it a secret*' (Reshmi, Indo-Fijian [woman]). Indeed, all of the Indo-Fijian women interviewed stressed that girls' and women's participation in any sportive activity is commonly discouraged by families. Nisha's comment was typical: '*If I played I get told* "*You train too much, you look bulky and that does not look good. You are a woman and you don't want to look like a man"'* (Nisha, Indo-Fijian [woman]). A lack of role models further compounds pressures to conform to gender norms: *'Even if a younger girl wants to, there are very few inspirations that they can look up to within their community'* (Nisha, Indo-Fijian [woman]). This means that girls/women seeking to take up sportive activities must compete against a lack of convention, which makes participation seem subversive.

An Indo-Fijian woman dedicated to fitness and martial arts commented: '*I'd like to say my family are encouraging, but they really are not.…. So, even though they are really discouraging I did it. They didn't like me buying supplements or workout wear or eating eggs on Tuesdays because we're supposed to be vegetarians'* (Raveena). A prominent women's rights activist, and also an indigenous Fijian woman, spoke frankly of Indo-Fijian familial and community discouragement:

> [A woman playing sport] is about her making a decision on her body. That's quite a threatening thing for parents, and for Indo-Fijian parents that's more threatening because…that translation of you having control of your body the next thing you know you will be having sex with someone, you will be getting pregnant (Vanu).

Indo-Fijian parents can play a large role in the decisions of their daughters. Marrying them into a 'good' family is a priority, though educational development is also encouraged in most families.

Either way, sportive activities are seen as subversive to these aims. As a successful Indo-Fijian female elite athlete stated: '*If I would have got married, a different story, I would not have been what I am today'* (Rana, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

This discouragement is also evident in other contexts, notably in schools, where, as some athletic Indo-Fijian women pointed out, teachers themselves are often discouraging towards Indo-Fijian girls playing sports. Indo-Fijian teachers, on the basis of their cultural upbringing, typically dissuaded girls from partaking in sportive activities. And this was most obvious in Indo-Fijian schools: '*The teachers were not really committed to it [sports]. They used to just keep us [Indo-Fijian girls] inside the classroom. The school I was in, we hardly had outdoor classes*' (Devi, Indo-Fijian [woman]). Arguably, this practice was made more likely by the priority placed on academic success in the Indo-Fijian community: their pride in, and commitment to, education is a key part of their cultural aspirations. This was explained by the Indo-Fijian academic Samir [male]:

> Well if you think about it, this is how important education is to Indians. When we were growing up we were told that you should always make sure your book does not come under your feet: put it in your school bag. If you step on it by accident, you are supposed to lift the book up and touch it to your forehead.

In Fiji's Indo-Fijian community there is indeed a devout commitment to education, which is at least partially shaped by its members' fear of disempowerment: 87% of land in Fiji is inalienable and communally owned by indigenous Fijian kinship units (Frankael and Firth, 2007). The distribution of political power and state resources, such as parliamentary seats, state scholarships, and civil service jobs, has long been ethnically-based and advantaged the iTaukei. Indo-Fijians' pursuit of academic qualifications has thus been fuelled by a sense of insecurity about their socio-political vulnerability. Active Indo-Fijian sportswoman Pritika spoke from such an experience: '*Families say, "Why is she playing? She should be focusing on studies; she won't be playing when she is older." They don't see how sport is going to help you in life'*. All this contributes to a self-fulfilling narrative that feeds gendered and racialised stereotypes that place Indo-Fijians as mentally 'gifted' but physically 'weak',

while conversely, the iTaukei are assumed to be uninterested in academic achievement but physically 'gifted' and powerful (Norton 1990).

All of this works to make Indo-Fijian girls'/women's participation in sportive activities appear deviant in terms of culture, gender and ethnicity. Many young girls are, as a consequence, less likely to seek participation, something that Shivani, an Indo-Fijian School Head [woman], considered problematic:

> It is a problem because, the thing is, they don't develop in that area; hardly any of the Indo-Fijian girls want to play any of the sports. Even when it comes to sports classes many of the Indo-Fijian girls are very hesitant…the iTaukei girls have more strength.

The gendered and ethno-cultural perspectives of school staff and students feed a cyclical dynamic in which Indo-Fijian girls are discouraged, and seemingly de-motivated, from even attempting to participate in school sport. Moreover, those who do choose to participate in sport and/or physical activity (in or outside of school) receive little or no support from families. Only 3 of the 11 athletic Indo-Fijian women we interviewed noted their families as supportive. This trend is comparable to research on Indian women diaspora and sport elsewhere (Babakus and Thompon, 2012; Sawrikar & Muir, 2010), but in Fiji the prominence of iTaukei women in sport makes the absence of Indo-Fijian women more manifest.

Indigenous Hegemony

Previous scholarship has pursued the theme of indigenous hegemony in Fijian sport. The focus has been with discourses and practices of patriarchal hegemony – most noticeable in the self-described national sport of rugby, which has long been a central tenet of iTaukei masculinity (Kanemasu, Molnar, 2013; 2017). What has yet to be unravelled is the ethnocratic nature of sport among Fijian women. Indeed, for Indo-Fijian females there is a dual challenge: sport is normatively a 'male' activity, but when women are involved, it is iTaukei females who claim ascendancy.

For instance, netball is very popular among Fijian females, but at a national level the Fiji Netball Association is dominated by iTaukei women – '*like the female version of the FRU [Fiji Rugby Union]'* (Vanu – iTaukei [woman]). This alone does not mean that Indo-Fijian women are unwelcome. However, the hegemonic discourse – a combination of patriarchy and ethnocracy – works against them. To wit, Indo-Fijians are often labelled as ill-equipped for sport and physical activity, '*a soft kind of people'*, as described by a top sports administrator (Sam, iTaukei [man]). These stereotypes work to distance Indo-Fijians from sport – but Indo-Fijian women even further. As Pritika recalls: '*Even in class 4, my teachers would not allow me to play netball … I was 9. Like they would see us as the weak and delicate ones; that's how they would see us, as not the strong ones.'* This racialised discourse was, she emphasised, variable:

> We do encounter some racist people so when it comes down to playing together there are some people who would team up and play regardless of race and gender but some other people push away the Indians [Indo-Fijians] and the iTaukei just play. Then they say, "You guys can't play!"

Some athletic Indo-Fijian female respondents did receive encouragement from iTaukei athletes: *'[iTaukei] Fijian girls and guys, the majority of them would come up and talk to me, asking me what I'm doing. When they see that I am able to push so much … they compliment me on that*' (Aisha, Indo-Fijian [woman]). But others discussed their experiences of marginalisation in a sport environment dominated by iTaukei. According to a young Indo-Fijian woman who played a team sport:

> 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. There was no personal connection. … I felt like there was a barrier there (Arti, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

Another young Indo-Fijian woman who also played a team sport experienced ridicule and harassment, especially by (both indigenous and Indo-Fijian) men:

> They see you with the [soccer] boots and say, 'Whoa! Going for training, eh?' in a taunting way. I just feel like hiding my boots so that they don't see them. It's discouraging. And if you kick, they laugh (Reshmi, Indo-Fjian [woman]).

A demonstration of these attitudes was witnessed by XY at a girls' under-13s soccer tournament in a rural town. One of the few Indo-Fijian players was sitting as a substitute; when she asked to be put in to the game, the female iTaukei coach replied: '*you can go in when you stop playing like a fairy'* (personal communication, July 16, 2016). Across Fiji, Indo-Fijian women are overwhelmingly absent from sporting spaces, but also from the dominant discourse surrounding sport. In XY's conversations with (iTaukei male) soccer and rugby players, the idea of Indo-Fijian women as sportswomen was laughed at. '*They don't play'* and '*Indian women can't play'* were typical statements that eventually surmised two of the themes developed here.

A senior government official, an iTaukei woman involved with Sports Outreach, complained to XY that Indo-Fijian women were difficult to engage in sport because of their resistance – for socio-cultural reasons – to wearing sport attire. She used the example of volleyball, which requires a t-shirt and skirt, pointing out that Indo-Fijian females were reticent to adorn them. In frustration, she complained: '*There are [clothing] standards that we need to meet'* (Ellen, iTaukei [woman]). This suggests that sport governing bodies could put more thought into how to involve Indo-Fijian women – clothing ought not be a barrier (see: Naupoto 2012). Another senior sports official (iTaukei [male]) was candid:

> There is no work put in to get the Indians [Indo-Fijians] involved, they [outreach programme staff] go to rural areas where the vast majority of the population is iTaukei. We have been in the program for a year now [and] I have seen what it's like and there is no way, there is no form of [cross-cultural] integration that is happening at the moment. It's just … what it is in Fiji (Tevita).

This suggests a crossover between macro and micro perspectives: societal perception and stereotyping of sport as a normatively indigenous space is carried though to actual policy dictating government-funded outreach programs. While, logically, perceptions at the macro level inform decision making that restricts outreach and Indo-Fijian (female and male) access to sport, it informs a self-fulfilling prophecy that can shape and constrain impressions about a group's capabilities in terms of physical activity (Harrison, Azzarito and Burden 2004). As a young Indo-Fijian woman (and former athlete), believed: *'It is that preconceived notion that [Indigenous] Fijians are automatically better at sports than Indians. … It's like people say I can't play sports. So why should I? That attitude needs to change'* (Riya, Indo-Fijian [woman]). This racialised sport discourse was so internalised by Indo-Fijian girls/women that it acts as a powerful deterrent: '*Indian girls are scared. Because there are very few Indian girls, they think "Am I going to fit in?" They're just scared how they will be treated. So that pulls them back*' (Reshmi, Indo-Fijian [woman]). Devi (Indo-Fijian [woman]), for instance, stopped playing netball in high school because:

> It was only [Indigenous] Fijian girls playing [netball], and I thought, 'if I go there, I might not be able to cope with them,' you know. So I did not play in high school. I did not play at all… Because there were no Indian [Indo-Fijian] girls, I thought 'What if they tell me "You don't know how to play" or laugh at me?'

Arti (Indo-Fijian [woman]) felt the same anxiety when she first started playing netball, which was so powerful as to affect her performance:

> I really couldn't perform the best I could because I couldn't be who I wanted to be. The unspoken barrier, the lack of communication, being completely pushed aside, made me even more conscious, even more worried.

Despite these palpable barriers, a small number of Indo-Fijian women have subverted their expected roles and entered into sportive spaces, even though they are overwhelmingly isolated. The powerful agency on display in such instances is where we turn to next.

Indo-Fijian Women and Athletic Agency

Overall, XY and XX interviewed 11 Indo-Fijian girls/women who relentlessly and resolutely claimed athleticism. They engaged in a variety of sports and physical activities, ranging from jogging to mixed martial arts, which runs counter to the racialised and gendered definition of Indo-Fijian women as physically weak and socially inept in sportive contexts. Interestingly, these participants overwhelmingly regarded their commitment to sport/fitness as both a personal pursuit and an act of resistance:

> Yes, I am persistent, I am determined. If I love something, am passionate about something, I will try and achieve it. You put any obstacle, any barrier in the way, if I can't find a way around it, I *will* break through it (Arti, Indo-Fijian [woman] participant emphasis).

> Because you are going against the norm of society, yes, and I like doing that [pursuing fitness]. I don't want girls to be just limited to the house. There are a lot of things they are capable of doing (Raveena, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

> Being a girl, being young, being small, seeing other people think girls are so inferior, saying things like 'Oh, stop being a girl; stop crying! You're so weak!' That's when I realised, 'No, I don't want to be that.' … So I stood up. I proved them wrong (Reshmi, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

In various parts of the world, female athletes have found emotional strength and support from each other when resisting the barriers of masculinist sporting structures (e.g., Shockley, 2005). In the case of Fiji, this has been observed among indigenous women rugby players (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017) who, by playing a sport that is normative to men, have made a statement about their cultural and physical capacities, as well as their love of that game. By contrast, athletic Indo-Fijian women have engaged in what is a solitary struggle because there are so few of them: '*There is no one else. You can't complain to anybody, because everybody treats you the same way*' (Arti, Indo-Fijian

[woman]); '*You have no one to share that [challenges of pursuing sport as an Indo-Fijian woman] with. Who do you want to complain to? Nothing's going to change*' (Reshmi, Indo-Fijian [woman]). Consequently, the strategies they have employed to negotiate barriers and lack of support involved stoic self-reliance and determination:

> Those people who pass comments and all, it doesn't really matter to me. I say to myself, 'If I want to play, I play. I'll be strong. They can't do anything to me. I'll just be strong.' That's how I cope and remain committed (Devi, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

> Sometimes I post some things on Facebook, some gym tips and stuff like that and someone says, 'I don't even want to go to your wall … Every time I go there it's always something to do with the gym.' I stopped posting stuff for a long time. Yeah, it sort of pulls you down, but I don't stop [exercising]. I get quiet, I don't advertise it, but I still keep going (Kavita, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

> We [Indo-Fijians] worry, 'What would people think?' … I face a lot of trouble at home because of that. … Even here [at university] the mentality they have is discouraging. Because of that I just don't think about it anymore. … I don't need anyone to take me seriously because I'm doing this for myself. … You have to develop very hard exterior' (Raveena, Indo-Fijian [woman]).

These women's experiences illustrate resilience and tenacity. Their relentless pursuit of sport and physical activity is an act of expressing their tangible, physical agency in a society where claim to physical power is central to the gender and racial relations that marginalise them. However, only the most determined who are prepared to persevere on their own, without family, peer, community or institutional support, have carved out (often unobtrusive) spaces for such physical agency. Their narratives of commitment are at the same time indicative of the multiple impediments that Indo-Fijian female athletes must negotiate.

Sportive agency and CRF

We contend that there are two key areas for discussion. The first concerns the position of Indo-Fijian women in relation to the socio-cultural and political landscape of Fiji. The second area concerns the utility of CRF and the role of sportive activities therein. We discuss these in turn.

First, our findings indicated multiple barriers to Indo-Fijian women's participation in sportive activities. While participation may not be an inherent good, especially in Indo-Fijian culture, having a discernible *option* to partake is a reasonable expectation – especially in a country, like Fiji, where sport is such a core part of the nation's culture. Sport is not prioritised in many Indo-Fijian families, and, when combined with widely accepted gender norms, Indo-Fijian women are *believed* to be unable and/or ill-suited when it comes to sportive activities. Furthermore, the prevailing sport discourse in Fiji is a product of, and contributes to, a wider historical context of ethnic politics and Indigenous hegemony (Kanemasu, Molnar, 2013b). This is evidenced by the scarcity of Indo-Fijian female athletes, along with the (often) patronising attitudes of athletes, officials, and administrators who construct and organise Fijian sport.

Taken together, these barriers reinforce gendered and racialised stereotypes of Indo-Fijian women as *naturally* 'non-sporting': it has a cyclical dimension wherein their non-participation is expected, maintained and institutionalised. The effect is both real and hard to measure. Yet the ability and determination of some Indo-Fijian women to partake in sportive activities is evident, and they do so in spite of an unwelcome and alienating sporting culture. This marginalisation of Indo-Fijian women in sport feeds back into a wider narrative that equates Indigeneity with physical and political power, placing non-Indigenous women in a subordinate position within postcolonial corporeal politics. (Stephens, Porter, Nettleton and Willis, 2006).

Indo-Fijian women's relationship with sport must be understood in the broader context of Fiji's postcolonial social hierarchies that are deeply shaped by Indigenous and masculine physical power, evidenced by the ethno-nationalist coups, as well as the military overwhelmingly dominated by indigenous men (Teaiwa, 2005). It is an integral part of this gendered/racialised postcolonial order, where 'women and 'Indians" become obvious "others"' (Teaiwa, 2008: 112), with sport therefore not viewed as an option for Indo-Fijian women. There is also evidence to suggest that the prevailing

discourses of indigenous/masculine physical superiority have made their way into government policy, institutionalising and normalising their place in the fabric of Fijian society. This renders formidable the experiences of those Indo-Fijian women who do make it on to the field, court, track etc. – who are often mocked, isolated and forced to develop a '*hard exterior*' (Raveena, Indo-Fijian [woman]). Simultaneously, the perspectives of athletic Indo-Fijian women de-essentialise the lives of this historically marginalised group and give volume to their 'multiplicative identities' (Wing, 2015).

This leads to our second point. Going it alone is not made easy for aspiring Indo-Fijian women athletes, as they must do so from a position of double marginalisation that CRF research shows is shared with women in Palestine and South Africa (Wing, 2000); Muslim women in France (Wing & Smith, 2005); Indigenous peoples from Australia (Adair, Stronach & Maxwell, 2015) and likely many other areas of the globe. Their individual and group identities intersect with numerous ethno-racial, socio-cultural, neo-colonial and neoliberal forces, and work to maintain their positions of layered marginalisation. As intersectionality has become problematised, a 'buzzword' institutionalised to become 'a mantra of liberal multiculturalism' (Nash, 2017:118), it remains all the more important to demonstrate its utility in uncovering enclaves where multiple identity hooks are operationalised in entrenching marginalisation. Here sport can be instrumental, as a sphere of society that is at once blatant and emblematic, mirroring broader economic, socio-cultural and political forces (Houlihan & Malcom, 2015). Investigating the sporting terrain of a given context – from elite squads to local recreational grounds – can reveal patterns and dynamics of exclusion and resistance worthy of attention. For example, in his ethnography into Asian American men, Thangaraj (2015) found that through sport (pickup basketball) he was able to understand the agency of the players in their re-making of South Asian masculinity, this countering broader, racialised discourses about this group in North American culture. In that respect, sport can be a useful analytical field that depicts both local realities and agency which connects to broader socio-cultural forces in pursuit of praxis (see also Bursdsey, 2015; Ratna, 2011).

The combined studies reflected upon in this paper illuminate hopes for change among participants. Notably, two athletic Indo-Fijian women had specific plans for effecting change on the existing sporting structures. Kavita was enrolled in an online gym instructor course so that she could

start a gym in the future, especially to provide Indo-Fijian women with their 'own space' for exploring and pursuing sport and fitness. Sangeeta shared her determination to become a physical education teacher so as to encourage Indo-Fijian girls to play sports, particularly her favourite games of soccer and netball. Indeed, all participants mentioned ideas for change, most centring on reform in approaches to physical education. Furthermore, as noted earlier, following the interviews, five participants took up leading roles in organising a rugby-themed community outreach event with XX, aiming to promote gender equality, cultural diversity and disability inclusion in sport and wider society. In this respect our research is intended to contribute to an emerging counter-hegemonic trajectory by illuminating not only the struggles of athletic Indo-Fijian women athletes, but also their potent agency.

Concluding remarks

This paper has explored the experiences of Indo-Fijian women athletes in sporting spaces and discourses. We have argued that a combination of traditional Indo-Fijian norms of femininity and assumptions of indigenous sporting superiority have resulted in a gendered and racialised discourse about Indo-Fijian women being either culturally or physically 'unfit' for sportive activities. In highlighting these stories we have engaged and adapted a CRF approach that emphasises alternatives to gender essentialism – looking at the nuances and causes of marginalisation (Lewis, 2003; Wing, 2000). This paper asserts that while there is value in 'looking to the bottom' (Matsuda, 1987), it is also important to widen the scholarly gaze to those who wield power and who are responsible for the subordination and marginalisation of women of colour. This exploratory and inherently limited research is intended as a modest, yet effective, contribution towards understanding the struggle and agency of women facing complex and multifarious forms of discrimination in sport and society.

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[i] The term *iTaukei* is a Fijian word that denotes 'Indigenous Fijian' or 'Indigenous landowner.'
[ii] By 'sportive' we refer to sport and physical activity, along with games and recreational athletic activity.
[iii] The methodology we used to guide assessments about ethnic background derive from our knowledge of surnames consistent with the Indo-Fijian community (i.e. Indian surnames are very different to that of iTaukei, Chinese or European). The Indo-Fijian community has a custom of marrying within their cultural group; arranged marriages are still the norm. So, while our determination is based on linguistic evaluation, it is a logical way in which to be confident about Indian ethnic lineage in Fij.
[iv] There have been a handful of elite Indo-Fijian sportswomen who competed regionally and internationally, notably Janki Gaunder (lawn bowls in the 1980s), Hamidan Bibi (lawn tennis in the 1990s), and Leena Pratt (triathlon and ocean swimming in the 2000's).