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# Women, Sport and Exercise in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Domination, Resistance,  
Accommodation

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# Fiji's women rugby players

## Finding motivation in a 'hostile' environment

*Yoko Kanemasu, James Johnson and Gyozo Molnar*

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### Introduction

Women's rugby appears to be experiencing something of a popularity boom. According to World Rugby (2016a), the international governing body of the game, there was a 17 per cent increase in the player population in 2015. Women's rugby is 'one of the fastest growing team sports in the world' today, played by more than two million girls and women in over 110 countries, making up a significant 25 per cent of the total playing population (World Rugby, 2016a). The increasing participation by girls and women in this conventionally male-dominated sport has been paralleled by a growing body of relevant research literature. In particular, given the conspicuous role rugby has traditionally played in the (re-)construction and display of masculinity (e.g. Sheard and Dunning, 1973; Schacht, 1996; Carle and Nauright, 1999; Anderson and McGuire, 2010), researchers have examined and debated women players' negotiation, accommodation and/or subversion of gender normativity enforced in and through the sport. However, this body of research is set almost exclusively in Western contexts, such as Britain (Gill, 2007), Australia (Carle and Nauright, 1999), France (Joncheray *et al.*, 2014), the United States (Broad, 2001; Chase, 2006; Fallon and Jome, 2007; Ezzell, 2009; Adjepong, 2015) and Canada (Hardy, 2015).

There remains a dearth of knowledge about non-Western women's experience of playing the game, especially in the global South. The gap in the literature is particularly significant because the above-mentioned 'boom' is not a universal phenomenon. Women's rugby continues to struggle to attract players in some communities and societies, including Fiji, where, ironically, rugby is widely celebrated as its 'national sport' and male rugby players extolled as heroes of the nation (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013a, 2013b). Our previous studies (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2017) highlighted powerful patriarchal and hetero-normative socio-cultural settings as key obstacles faced by women rugby players in Fiji, where the game is seen as a pinnacle of masculinism and women rugby players are widely associated with gender/sexual variance. Furthermore, women's participation in sport is shaped by multiple complexities of its socio-cultural milieu. In the case of

Fiji, gender and hetero-normativity is also deeply embedded in indigenous traditionalism and doubly consolidated by its articulation with anti-colonial nationalism. That is, Fijian women rugby players' challenges emanate from the specificities of the post-colonial society in which they pursue the game, as well as rugby's masculinist tradition. Therefore, expanding the scope of the women's rugby literature beyond the West is not only necessary to counter Western-centrism in sport scholarship, but also critical to developing a global as well as more nuanced understanding of women's engagement with the game in its varied contexts and dynamics. To this end, in this chapter we build on our previous research and provide a mixed-method inquiry into Fijian women's experience of and motivations for the game.

Fiji is a Pacific island nation with a population of 869,000, of which 57 per cent is indigenous Fijian and 38 per cent Indo-Fijian (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017). It is classified by the World Bank (2017) as an upper-middle income country, but its economy, which relies largely on tourism and sugar export, has over the years experienced a number of challenges due to persistent political instability (political coups d'état in 1987, 2000 and 2006) and external shocks, among other things. The unemployment rate stands at 7.7 per cent, with youth unemployment (18.2 per cent) being a particularly pressing issue (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Despite consistent gross domestic product growth since 2010 (Ministry of Economy, Fiji, 2017), a prominent Fijian economist estimated in 2014 that as much as 45 per cent of the total population (55 per cent in rural areas) lived in poverty (Narsey, 2014).

As noted previously, Fiji is a profoundly patriarchal society. In the 2015 Gender Gap Index, it was ranked 121st out of 145 countries, a slight improvement from the 122nd ranking of 2014, but a consistent deterioration from 117th in 2013, 113rd in 2012, 109th in 2011 and 108th in 2010 (World Economic Forum, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010). Gender relations in both major ethnic communities remain heavily bound by patriarchal norms, despite a long history of women's rights and liberation activism (Mishra, 2012). An astonishingly high prevalence of gender-based violence<sup>1</sup> is indicative of the severity of the gender inequality and subordination experienced by many women of Fiji. In addition, intense moral and religious objections to non-normative sexuality are found in both major ethnic communities (Johnson and Vithal, 2015). Consequently, gender and sexual non-normativity is often met with severe negative sanctions in families, schools, workplaces and communities (Swami, 2017), despite the current national constitution (Fijian Government, 2014) prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

Women's rugby in Fiji has developed against the backdrop of these formidable economic and socio-cultural circumstances. The origin of the game goes back to the late 1980s, when pioneers began organising themselves with little external support. In 2006, the Fiji Women's Rugby Union (FWRU) was established,<sup>2</sup> to which clubs in Suva (the capital city) and Nadi (the third biggest

city) were affiliated. Much of this development depended on the sacrifice of the players, coaches and supporters who organised and self-financed their activities. Remarkably, without sufficient support or resources, players, especially the women's national team Fijiana, began to achieve major accomplishments a few years ago. In 2012, they qualified for the 2013 IRB Rugby World Cup Sevens by winning all of their matches at the Asian Women's Sevens Championship. In 2013, they won the Bowl at the IRB Rugby World Cup Sevens. In 2014, they qualified for the 2014–2015 World Rugby Women's Sevens Series by again winning all of their matches at the qualifier tournament. In 2016, they became the first women's rugby team from the Pacific region to compete in the Olympics.

These achievements have been paralleled by a boost in institutional as well as public support. Today, the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU) expresses full support for women's rugby and finances and organises national team selections, training camps, tours and other activities, although, as discussed later, the resources allocated to women players still do not match those available to men. There is also a concerted effort by the FRU and World Rugby to introduce the sport to girls. The World Rugby 'Get into Rugby' programme, commenced in Fiji in 2013, has included primary and secondary school girls. The Secondary School Girls Sevens tournament was inaugurated in 2015. In 2017, an under-18 women's national team participated in the Youth Commonwealth Games. Most recently, in 2018, women's competition will be integrated into the Top 8 Skipper Cup Competition, a major domestic tournament, with provincial rugby unions required to include women's teams. Public support has also increased, largely as a result of the Fijiana's Olympic qualification,<sup>3</sup> which prompted an unprecedented amount of media coverage of the squad. As our recent study (Kanemasu and Johnson, 2017) showed, there now appears to be a potentially significant, broad-based positive shift in community attitudes towards the game and its players. Indeed, in 2017, the Fijiana were named among the 70 Inspiring Pacific Women as part of the Pacific Community's (2017) 70th anniversary initiative.

Notwithstanding the seemingly positive outlook, the sport is not experiencing the 'boom' observed elsewhere. Club registration remains low compared with other sports, and the game is not widely played by women. This is noted by a women's rugby website *Scrumqueens*: 'It is, perhaps, surprising to find Fiji so low in the table [of global player numbers] with less than one women [sic] or girl in a 1000 playing rugby – far below most other Pacific [and Western] nations' (Birch, 2016). Even after the Olympics hype, many senior players, due to lack of playing opportunities, are engaging in other, better-resourced/organised sports alongside rugby.

Informed by these historical challenges and recent achievements, this chapter explores Fijian women rugby players' motivations for playing the game against adversities, the key obstacles they currently experience and the factors contributing to their continued involvement in the game. Insights into these can contribute to existing knowledge by examining the sport through the eyes

of women athletes who live very different realities from those shaping much of the literature and providing empirical evidence of practical value to practitioners in Fiji and the Pacific region (and possibly other societies facing similar challenges), especially in the area of policy-making. The study was conducted as part of a larger project<sup>4</sup> funded by Oceania Rugby and undertaken by the first and second authors in partnership with Oceania Rugby and the FRU. We present and analyse relevant findings of the project guided by the following questions:

- 1 How do Fijian women rugby players perceive the current status of the game, especially its challenges?
- 2 What are the players' motivations for overcoming the challenges and playing the game?
- 3 What are the factors that contribute to their continued involvement in the game?

## Methods

We employed a mixed-method approach, consisting of a survey and two focus group discussions undertaken in June 2016. The survey sample ( $n = 70$ ) was drawn from current women rugby players aged 16–35 years, of whom 40 were registered with clubs in Suva and 30 in Nadi. Given that there are an estimated 270 registered senior women players in the country,<sup>5</sup> the survey sample covered over a quarter of the total player population. In all, 96 per cent of the participants were indigenous Fijian, and 4 per cent other ethnicity (e.g. mixed heritage). A total of 51 per cent had been playing rugby for less than a year to three years, 22 per cent four to six years, and 26 per cent more than six years. The research sites were limited to the two cities, where the major clubs are located, and other towns and islands could not be included due to logistical and financial constraints. We sought to enhance the validity of the data by combining convenience sampling with maximum variation sampling: the survey participants were recruited at various rugby fields and gatherings, with a conscious effort to include players from all existing rugby clubs in the two cities. A self-administered questionnaire produced by Oceania Rugby was used as a basis and modified to suit the research questions. The key survey items were general attitude measures associated with rugby. Frequency analysis was employed to determine the frequency of attitude measures and standard regression analysis was employed to determine which attitude measures were the strongest predictors of relevant rugby player behavioural intentions.

The survey was complemented by two focus groups consisting of six current players each, who met for one- to 1.5-hour discussion moderated by the first author. Purposive sampling was employed in recruiting the participants. One group consisted of senior players with leadership roles in their clubs: one such participant was recruited from each of the six clubs affiliated with the FWRU at the time. The other group was composed of other active players with varying



years of rugby experience (from 3.5 years to over ten years): three players each from Suva and Nadi. In all, 11 participants were indigenous Fijian, while one was of mixed ethnic heritage. Efforts were made to provide an interactive setting to encourage participants to speak freely and casually, and provide detailed responses using examples and anecdotes. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and put to qualitative analysis via thematic coding guided by the research questions. Additionally, the data collected through the focus groups was supplemented by the first author's personal observations and information obtained through her informal interaction with members of the women's rugby community.

Throughout the research process, we received advice and assistance from the women's rugby community. We acknowledge our positionalities as dominant group researchers<sup>6</sup> and note that the research design, data collection, interpretation and representation were shaped by our 'researcher voice' – i.e. our academic, personal and socio-cultural values and assumptions, in spite of our efforts to represent the women's voices in a manner grounded in the underpinnings of 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). At the same time, we were 'lay' persons regarding knowledge of the history and complexities of the sport in Fiji and helpless as researchers without the women's guidance and tutelage. FWRU officials, the FRU Women's Rugby Development Officer and other key actors in the community assisted with the data collection, not only because of their personal friendship with the authors,<sup>7</sup> but also because they regarded the study as an opportunity to generate reliable empirical knowledge hitherto lacking in the game. Thus, the survey and the focus group discussions were undertaken as a joint exercise between the women's rugby community and the authors.

In the following sections, we present Fijian women rugby players' experiences and voices in relation to the research questions. The survey and focus group discussion results indicate considerable similarity and consistency, shaping the contours of the game that has depended heavily on both the immense strength and hardships of the small community of women athletes.

## **The state of the game for women: continuing challenges**

### ***Material constraints***

Both the questionnaire and focus group discussion results indicate that despite the recent rise in institutional and public support, women's rugby, seen through the eyes of the players, continues to face challenges in some of the most basic areas. Our earlier research (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017) noted, based on a small qualitative sample, that the players struggled to obtain rugby gear, appropriate diet and other basic necessities. The questionnaire survey in the present study indicates that this is an ongoing and serious issue. While 53 per cent of the survey participants found it 'easy' to afford the costs of the game, a significant minority (21 per

cent) were undecided and more than a quarter (26 per cent) did not think so: close to half the participants had reservations about or struggled to meet the costs. Today, the clubs continue to operate mostly on their own<sup>8</sup> and fundraise to purchase uniforms, pay club/tournament registration fees and finance training sessions and matches. They often struggle to secure consistent playing schedules, fields and other facilities/services. Indeed, the survey results indicate that even more fundamental needs are not fully met: 67 per cent of the participants had good access to toilets and water where they played rugby, but 27 per cent did not. Availability of safe water and sanitary facilities cannot be taken for granted in the two major cities, which suggests that the players in rural areas and outer islands face even greater challenges (see also Chapter 11 in this volume).

Added to this is the question of health and safety. Participants identified a risk not necessarily intrinsic to rugby, but attributed to the structural constraints specific to the game in Fiji: absence of appropriate medical insurance cover. The majority (70 per cent) of the survey participants believed rugby to be safe. This, as explained by the focus group participants, derives from their view that potential physical risks associated with rugby can be managed with appropriate training, basic skills acquisition and fitness, as well as medical insurance. Focus group participants noted that the national squad members were provided with medical insurance that only covered injury incurred during overseas tours,<sup>9</sup> and that no provision was made for other players.<sup>10</sup> To appreciate the risks borne by these players, one only needs to compare their situation with metropolitan clubs and unions. The Australian Rugby Union, for instance, offers registered players medical cover for: playing in official matches; engaging in organised training; travelling to, from or between official matches/training and home/work; staying away from the home district for the purpose of participating in representative/club matches; and engaging in administrative/organised social activities for clubs/the Union (Gow Gates, 2012). By contrast, Fijian women rugby players, many of whom are unemployed, are left to their own devices to deal with injuries and other physical risks of playing the sport. Although men's rugby clubs in Fiji also face financial and material constraints (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2014), they have significantly better access to private-sector and community sponsorships due to the immense popularity of men's rugby in the country.

It should be noted that the survey was undertaken in June 2016, just two months before the Rio Olympics, at the height of positive media coverage of and public attention towards rugby. Behind this nationwide Olympic fervour, however, the women players (especially those not in the national squad) continued to struggle to meet some of the most basic material needs.

### **Socio-cultural constraints**

The focus group participants also highlighted the disapproval and harassment they received from communities, especially men, including male rugby players: 'the culture ... the way their [men's] mentality is, the way Fijian men think'.



This has been an ongoing challenge, which they noted had recently begun to abate yet was still lingering. The participants from Suva in particular gave detailed examples, illustrating the persistence of negativity that flies in the face of the outward fame that the Fijiana have attained as Olympians:

Once I was training with the Fijiana [in 2016, preparing for the Olympics] and this group of guys were on the carrier and they were full shouting, full teasing. I couldn't hear it, but saw the coach shouting back at them. Even the national side [receives such reaction]! We represented their country and even still.

Some also stated that spectator ridicule and jeering during games, which was documented in our earlier work (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017), continued:

We played in the quarter-finals [in a domestic tournament] against [club name] and I brought in this girl, she can run. I just told her, 'Once I pass the ball you just run and score.' This is the main ground at the national stadium and [person name] was the commentator. [When the girl made a mistake] the guy said, 'You were made to stay in the kitchen, why are you at the ground?' All the people just laughed when he said that. He was the commentator, it was loud. I just sat down and said 'Come here my friend, we just lost the game. Don't worry about what they say.'

Vulgar language is used [to abuse women players] in front of other people. Just at the last Marist Sevens [tournament] we experienced that. We were playing in the main ground, and just before that we heard a group from up the pavilion swearing at us, that loud from the stand. It's those kinds of attitudes. For me, it's not new because I have been playing for quite a while, but for the young ones, sometimes it takes away their motivation of wanting to concentrate, [and causes] that feeling of scaredness, you know.

From the perspective of the players, then, the battle against everyday masculinist negative sanctions is far from over, if somewhat eased by the public attention they have won with their recent international successes.

## **Institutional constraints**

The material and socio-cultural constraints are exacerbated by what the focus group participants believed to be an ongoing gender disparity in institutional resource provision. All participants strongly felt that rugby and government bodies provided differential support to women's and men's rugby:

There are people out there who are rallying for us, who are trying to take us to these places, but when it comes to decision makers, it's like there is a

glass ceiling there. We can only go so far until we can break through. So one of the ways we have to do it [breaking gender barriers in rugby] is by doing it ourselves until they realise that they have to take us seriously.

When you are in the national team where you should be up there with the men because both teams are going to the Olympics, the funds that should be going towards women's rugby to develop the team is going elsewhere. You know what I mean, when it should be equal.

In relation to the above quotes, we note that there are a number of FRU and other officials, including the Women's Rugby Development Officer, who have actively assisted the players over the years. This was also acknowledged by the participants who felt that their support had been critical to the growth of the game in Fiji. Nevertheless, emerging from participants' narrative is a sense of the long-standing struggle of having to 'prove themselves' at their own expense and risk health and safety in order to win minimal recognition and support from official bodies, even at a time of a positive transformation in the public perception of the game.

### **Motivations for playing in a 'hostile' environment**

It is not surprising, then, that the player population does not appear to be growing as rapidly as might be expected. Current players continue to face the old obstacles and challenges in their day-to-day rugby pursuits. Yet, these players are remarkably committed to and intensely passionate about the game. Indeed, 100 per cent of the survey participants agreed that they felt inspired by playing rugby, and 90 per cent affirmed that rugby was a major part of their life (7 per cent uncertain and 3 per cent in disagreement). In addition, all but one participant (99 per cent) stated that they would always be involved in rugby in some way (e.g. as a player, volunteer, coach or referee). Focus group participants expressed the same sentiments. As stressed by one participant, she would only stop playing rugby when she 'stopped breathing'. In the words of another participant: 'No matter what they say from the left, from the right, I am doing this'. These responses illustrate the passion and determination that have driven the development of the sport to date.

This poses the question: why are these players so devoted to rugby, even in what appears to be a rather 'hostile' environment? The survey and focus group results provide relevant insights into their motivations. Frequency analysis of the survey results show that the participants' top five reasons for playing rugby are: (1) love of rugby (94 per cent); (2) supportive teammates (89 per cent); (3) support from friends (87 per cent); (4) enjoyment of strong competition (86 per cent); and (5) friends who also play rugby (86 per cent) (see Figure 10.1). Many of these motivations are inter-related and closely parallel the focus group results as discussed below.

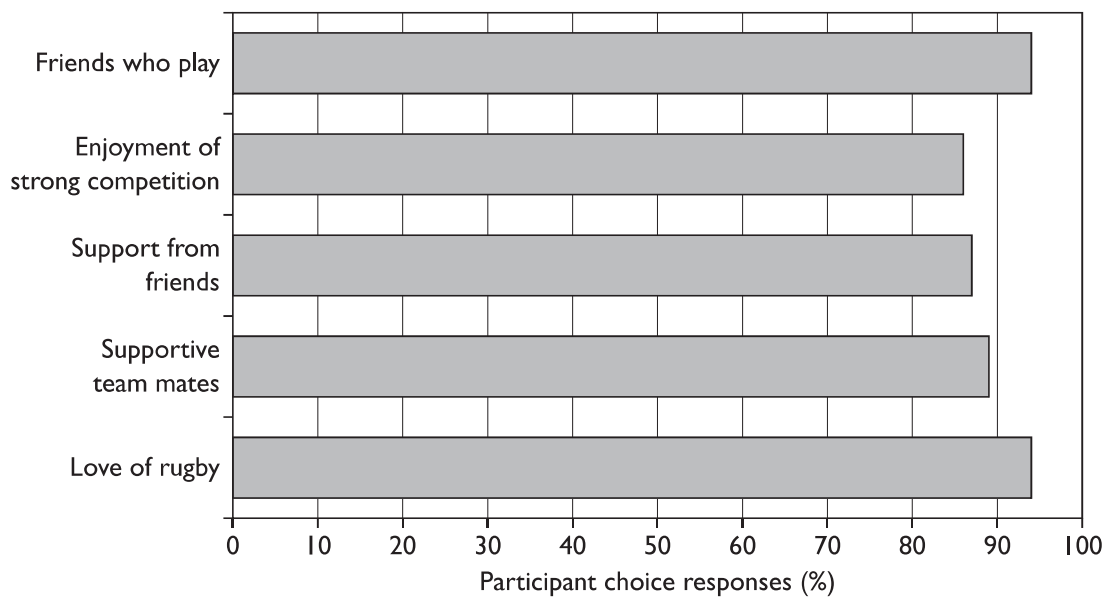


Figure 10.1 Motivations for playing rugby: survey results.

### Love of rugby: physicality and empowerment

Our previous study (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017) suggested that the physicality of the sport serves as a key site for the players' self/gender expression and oppositional agency. This was reiterated by the focus group participants in the present study, who found the physical and combative nature of the game empowering and exhilarating. Asked to select one word that they felt best described rugby, the focus group participants chose words such as: guts, passion, confidence, strength, challenging, exhilarating, tough and rough. One participant elaborated:

I like the contact and even if I got hurt how many times and my family and friends told me, 'Why don't you quit?' I'd play. I'd go and play again. Just getting on to the field, holding the ball and running – There's a different type of feeling when you're in that ground playing with your friends and you playing for each other. It's just confidence.

Another participant noted multiple dimensions of strength, including resistance to masculinism:

For me it's strength. Strength in terms of your physicality, strength in terms of your mentality, strength in terms of you know whatever people may say especially with us being woman playing a male-dominated sport; we have to be quite strong within yourself. Strong for your team mates, Yeah, it's strength.

It is such love of the game, 'enjoyment of strong competition,' and what it represents to them – physical and emotional strength to challenge gender

normativity – that lies at the heart of their perseverance in the face of relentless hardships:

The comments they [spectators and community members] pass, they just drag us down. It's just because of the passion and the love of rugby we just keep on playing. We do not get into those stupid comments that they pass because we know we've got the talents and we can reach where the men have been. Now we can even do the Olympics, the first time for the Fijians to qualify!

### **Rugby 'family'**

Our previous research (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017) also noted the sense of belonging that rugby provides as a key dimension of the game. This again figured prominently in this study. In fact, the three motivations identified by the survey – 'friends who also play rugby', 'supportive team mates' and 'support from friends' – are inter-related and point to the sport as a closely-knit community of women who are a critical source of support for each other. According to the survey results, the majority of the players' friends are also rugby players (63 per cent of the survey participants stated that half or more of their friends played rugby). Similarly, 97 per cent felt a strong bond with their teammates (with only two participants uncertain, and none in disagreement). Indeed, to all, but one participant (99 per cent), rugby teammates were their 'family'. These results collectively indicate that rugby, to these women, provides a critical sense of togetherness that compensates for the absence of institutional, community or family support.

The rugby 'family' may play a particularly important role if players cannot expect support from their own families. Although 91 per cent of the survey participants felt that the people closest to them encouraged their rugby pursuits (6 per cent undecided and 3 per cent in disagreement), these may not necessarily be family members. According to the focus group participants, the family disapproval documented in our previous study (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017) remains for some (but not all) players:

Most of us – Even my family did not agree with me playing rugby at all. At the moment, at our club games we have few parents coming to support, often none at all. It's just the friends [who come to watch/support].

The narrative emerging here is of a small community of women determined to play rugby against all odds, finding strength in their passion for the game and in their mutual support and solidarity. This explains how they have persisted in the context of continuing material and socio-cultural hardships, which has seen them achieve their long-time collective goal of representing their country at the Olympics.

## Keeping the passion alive: predictors for continued involvement

The development of women's rugby in Fiji has, thus, depended almost entirely (at least until recently) on a small number of passionately committed athletes. This suggests that the continued growth of the game hinges critically on the retention of these players as well as new recruitment. Our survey explored the factors contributing to the current players' continued involvement in the sport with two forms of data analysis: (a) participant choice frequency analysis, which identified the factors most often chosen by the participants as major influences on their intention to continue playing rugby; and (b) statistical prediction, which involved standard regression analysis to identify the attitudes/perceptions that were the strongest statistical predictors of continued rugby playing intention.

The participant choice responses are indicated in Figure 10.2. The top five reasons for continuing to play rugby were: (1) family support (93 per cent); (2) having teammates who are like family (86 per cent); (3) supportive teammates (84 per cent); (4) good coaches (83 per cent); and (5) strong competition (80 per cent).

The participant statistical predictions (all based on separate bivariate regressions) are given in Figure 10.3. The top five predictors for the participants to continue to play rugby (in order of statistical strength) were: (1) strong team connection; (2) believing that they were independent; (3) liking competition; (4) being inspired by others; and (5) encouragement from others.

Both sets of findings suggest that the sense of connectedness with each other, which has sustained the players through their struggle of going against the mainstream, is central to their continued involvement in the game. While broader

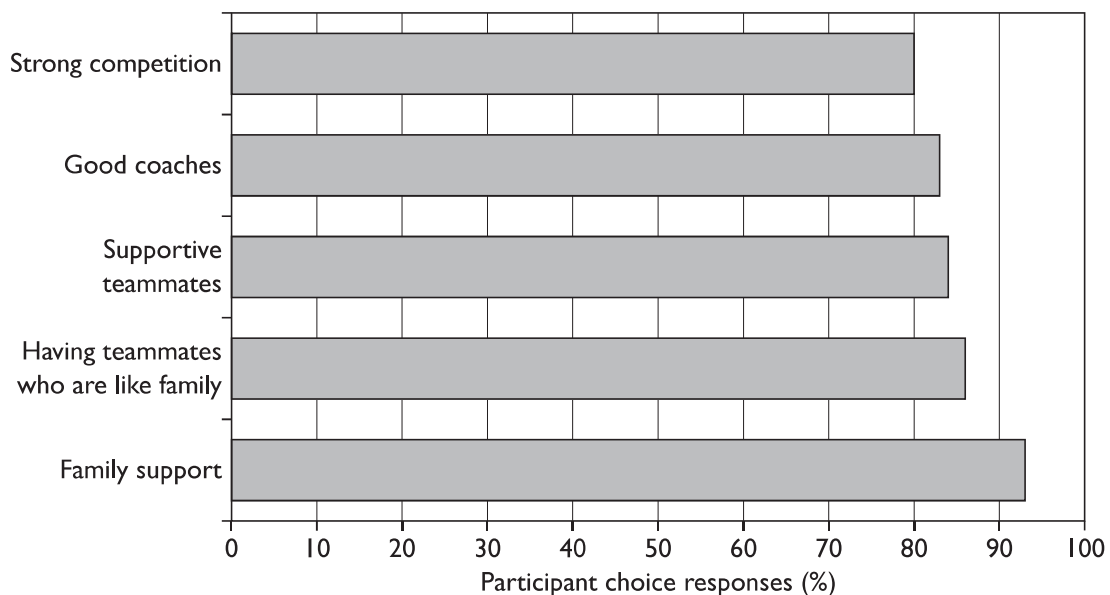


Figure 10.2 Motivations for continued rugby playing intention: survey results.

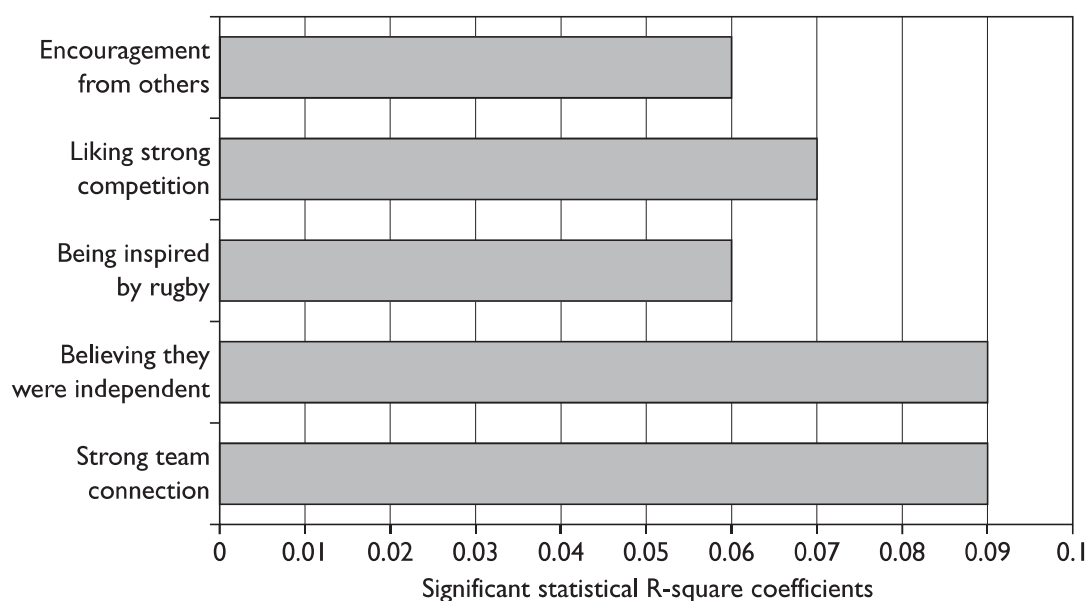


Figure 10.3 Statistical predictors of continued rugby playing intention: survey results.

**Note**

Values represent significant statistical R-square coefficients such that higher values represent greater predictive linear association.

women's rugby literature shows that women athletes elsewhere are also attracted to the camaraderie that the sport fosters (Shockley, 2005; Murray and Howat, 2009), it appears to bear particular importance to Fijian women who play the game against adversities with little external support. The current players will also continue to participate as long as they love the game and its unique qualities. In addition, while many have so far pursued the game without full support from family and the wider community, greater support will most likely motivate them to carry on further.

Conversely, the survey shows that the top five reasons for choosing *not* to continue to play rugby in the future were: (1) poor competition (74 per cent); (2) lack of government support (73 per cent); (3) poor coaches and referees (73 per cent); (4) unsafe, dirty environment (such as washrooms) (70 per cent); and (5) harassment from spectators and male players (66 per cent).

These results show how critical it is to address the question of societal and institutional support. The current players have kept the game going 'on a shoe-string', relying primarily – and in some cases exclusively – on each other for moral, emotional and financial support and encouragement. But, continuous lack of basic provisions, such as consistent playing schedules, appropriate coaching/refereeing and adequate playing environments, may eventually defeat their determination. A continuing sense of isolation – i.e. feeling disapproved of by spectators and male rugby players even when they represent their country on a world stage in its 'national' sport – may also, at some stage, break their spirit,



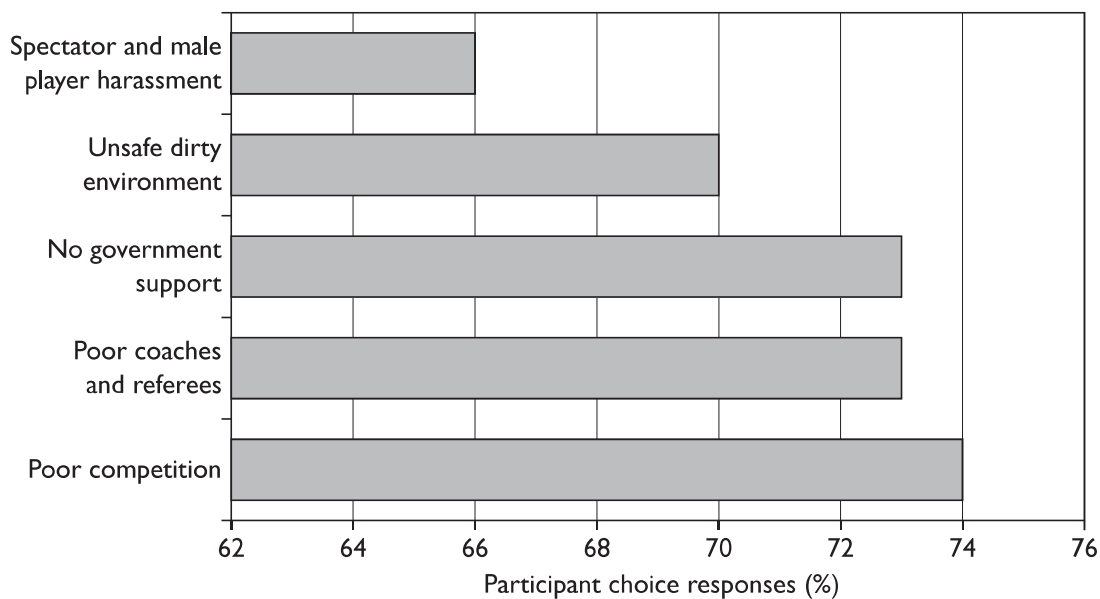


Figure 10.4 Reasons for not choosing to continue to play rugby: survey results.

the consequences of which would be severely detrimental to the future of the sport in Fiji.

These findings are underscored by the focus groups who unanimously stressed that they needed 'a little bit of everything' to continue to play to the best of their ability. Similarly to the survey participants, they stated that they were acutely in need of assistance in relation to medical insurance, community negativity and stigma, consistent game schedules, appropriate coaching and adequate clothing and equipment. Desperate for even marginally increased resources and central support, one participant added: 'You know, they don't have to give us that much; they can give us a little bit'. Their sense of an isolated struggle and cry for societal/institutional recognition was summarised by another participant: 'Give us the opportunity. We want to represent our country, you know. Give us the opportunity so that we get the support from the head guys, so that we can do that [represent the country]'.

### **Against many odds: Fijian women's costs and victories of pursuing rugby**

Sport has been widely discussed as a tool for development, especially by Western institutions ranging from non-governmental organisations to sport federations and development agencies (Levermore, 2008; Nicholls *et al.*, 2010). One may note, however, that sport is also often a manifestation and medium of under-development and inequality in many peripheral (as well as metropolitan) societies, structured by internal disparities based on class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity/'race' and geographical location, among other things. The existing women's rugby literature set in Western contexts focuses primarily on sexism as

the major barrier to women's participation. But in the case of Fiji, women athletes face the realities of the material, socio-economic disparity between metropolitan and peripheral societies as well as entrenched sexism. In a society where 23.9 per cent of young (15–24-year-old) women are unemployed (Asian Development Bank, 2016) and no state unemployment benefits or effective employment services exist, women rugby players bear much of the financial, social and physical costs and risks of playing their 'national' sport.

In this context, pursuing the heavily gendered sport becomes doubly problematic. As noted above, sexism in Fiji is consolidated by its close association with traditionalism and its strong anti-colonial undertones. Gender equality is widely regarded as contradictory to both biblical teachings and indigenous traditions, and women's rights activists as 'alienated from their own societies and corrupted by Western thinking and values' (Slatter, 2011). Even as they tackle this potent amalgamation of patriarchy and traditionalism, women rugby players, on their own, must generate funds to sustain their clubs, obtain basic rugby gear, secure minimum game time and deal with the risks and consequences of injury. Fijian women's rugby pursuits are shaped by such socio-economic and cultural complexities; it is the combination of these that create a 'hostile' environment for Fijian women rugby players. To date, only the most dedicated who are prepared to endure these formidable circumstances have driven the development and success of the sport, finding strength and support in each other. Their recent successes and the shift in the wider public's perception of the game are key victories that illustrate the immense power of their agency. But, they are also precarious victories at significant cost to the players. In essence, the history of women's rugby in Fiji is one of both onerous hardships and hard-won victories, which belies the official rugby discourse celebrating women's recently increasing participation.

## Conclusions

This chapter has presented a mixed-method inquiry into Fijian women's experience of rugby, focusing on the challenges, motivations and factors contributing to their continued involvement in the game. Both the survey and focus group discussions indicate that the women have long played and developed the sport despite insufficient resources and deep-seated societal negativity. Their resolute dedication, rooted in their passion for rugby's physicality and the sense of solidarity and bonding it offers, has led to a series of recent international achievements, including Olympic qualification. Thus, today, there is a visible rise in institutional and public support for the game.

However, our research indicates that, at a time when women's rugby in Fiji is enjoying the greatest public attention and support in its history, a series of challenges continue to constrain the players and the growth of the sport. While the existing women's rugby literature largely focuses on sexism (in Western contexts) as the main obstacle to women's participation, Fijian women rugby

players also face material, socio-economic challenges emanating from the structural constraints of the game in a peripheral society as well as sexism consolidated by indigenous traditionalism. Consequently, the current player population consists of a small number of 'hard-core' women who are so passionate about the sport that they would play it 'no matter what'.

In light of the above, if women's rugby is to expand its player population, it needs to sustain, and reach beyond these 'diehard' players who have been the backbone of the sport. Urgent and significant increases in institutional and societal support are needed to reward current players for their contributions to the development of the sport, retain them for further contributions (such as in mentoring, coaching, refereeing and role model capacities) and recruit new players from wider pools of physically active girls and women. It is to be noted that the majority of the current players also play sports besides rugby, although, as we have seen above, most of them regard rugby as their main passion. Despite the recent positive shift in the public perception of the game, it is possible that their continuing day-to-day struggles could eventually drive them towards other activities/interests that offer the recognition and support that they have not been accorded with in rugby, the sport that has both cost and inspired them immensely.

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## Notes

- 1 According to a study conducted by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (2013), 72 per cent of ever-partnered women have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence from their husband/partner in their lifetime. Many have suffered from all three forms of abuse simultaneously.
- 2 The FWRU is dormant as of November 2017 due to legal ambiguities surrounding its existence.
- 3 Olympic qualification by any athlete in a small and under-resourced country like Fiji is immensely impactful. Prior to the introduction of rugby sevens as an Olympic Game, a total of only 21 athletes had ever participated in the Olympics by actually qualifying, not as wild cards (Pacific Community, 2017).
- 4 This larger project included samples of community gatekeepers (families of women rugby players and school teachers) and athletic young women who played sports other than rugby. The findings of this component of the project can be found in our recent work (Kanemasu and Johnson, 2017).
- 5 This figure was published in 2012 by the then International Rugby Board (2012) (currently World Rugby). No official update of the statistic has been undertaken since.

- 6 The first author is an Asian female, the second a black Western male and the third a white Western male. All are university academics of significantly higher socio-economic status than most of the participants.
- 7 The first and second authors reside in Suva, have regular contact with many women rugby players and have personally assisted FWRU's activities.
- 8 Some clubs have recently become affiliated with men's provincial rugby unions, such as the Suva and Nadi Rugby Unions. These clubs now receive some technical (and in some cases material) support from the provincial unions.
- 9 The FRU provides medical insurance for players who participate in World Rugby-sanctioned tournaments, which is a mandatory requirement for participation (World Rugby, 2016b).
- 10 Although public health care in Fiji is officially free or at very low cost, Fiji's per capita health expenditure is relatively low among Pacific Island countries, and voluntary health insurance coverage is mainly through employer-based schemes (Asia Pacific Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2011). Participants in this study stated that they received only the most basic medical treatment for free at public hospitals and clinics, and that consistent medical care and more specialised treatments such as physiotherapy are only available at a cost, which the majority of women rugby players cannot afford.

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