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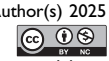
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Towards south-south comparative feminist inquiry: 'Patriarchal varieties' and women's subversive strategies in/through sports in Fiji and Brazil

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Abstract

Research into women's sporting experiences in the Global South has grown significantly in recent decades, with North-South asymmetries as an overarching reference point. The present article is an exploratory attempt to shift the focus of inquiry in this literature by considering the value of feminist South-South comparison. Guided by Gwen Hunnicutt's theorisation of 'varieties of patriarchy', we examine the historical and socio-political dynamics of two very different postcolonial societies, Fiji and Brazil, and how these impact the subversive strategies and resources available to women in pursuing sports against (hetero)patriarchal barriers. Our case studies of women's rugby in Fiji and women's football in Brazil reveal that Fijian and Brazilian women claim their nation's most privileged masculine sport in considerably differential contexts and with differential approaches. Fijian women rugby players engage in counter-hegemonic struggle marked by an 'implicit' feminism largely outside of formal political activism, while Brazilian women footballers have practiced an 'explicit' sporting feminism, increasingly aligned with the country's successful feminist movements. The difference is considered through the prism of (hetero)patriarchal configurations mediating the conditions and potentials of Fijian/Brazilian women's sporting practices, with particular attention to four interrelated points of comparison: cultural traditionalism, violence, political activism and nationalism. We conclude that comparative analysis of Southern

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regions can contribute meaningfully to feminist sport scholarship by shedding light on how sports intersect with various forms and spaces of gendered power dynamics.

Keywords
football, rugby, Global South, postcolonial, traditionalism, political activism, nationalism, gender-based violence

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a significant growth of research into women's sporting experiences in the Global South. Increasingly taking issue with deep-seated Northern/Western-centrism in sport literature, researchers have investigated the multiplicity, complexity and variability of women's relationships with sport in global locations previously accorded marginal attention. Existing scholarship includes a growing number of journal articles and book chapters (see Ratna, 2018), alongside monographs and edited volumes dedicated to Southern regions, such as those on Africa (Bale and Sikes, 2015; Jones, 2005), Latin America (Biram, 2024; De D'Amico et al., 2016), Asia and the Pacific (De D'Amico et al., 2021; Kanemasu, 2023; Molnar et al., 2019). The trend is particularly evident in sport-for-development literature (Graeff et al., 2024; Hayhurst et al., 2021; Zipp et al., 2023). Paralleling the rise of 'sport for development' as an international development agenda, scholars have extensively studied the impacts and challenges of, and power relations underlying, Northern-funded/designed sports programmes targeting Southern women and girls. Combined, these studies have been instrumental in exposing and disrupting the geopolitics of sporting relations and knowledge production, thereby building the foundation of postcolonial feminist sport scholarship.

The primary reference point of this body of work has tended to be Northern/Western hegemony. Studying Southern women's experiences of sport has served as a lens through which to probe 'what the North does to the South' in/through sports and epistemic violence. As Toffoletti et al. (2018: 193) explain, the central focus of the growing literature in this field has been to capture 'multiple voices that bring to attention the Global North relations of marginalisation, subordination and exclusion that have contributed to the epistemological and ontological erasure of alternative ways of knowing or intellectualising the Global South'. This decolonising project is ongoing and still has a substantial way to go. Ratna's (2018) review of gender, 'race' and sport literature between 2000 and 2015 showed that a third of relevant publications concerned African American women, another third South Asian and/or Muslim women in diasporic and other locations and a final third women of colour from across the Global North and South. Hence, 'despite the expansive terrain of the Global South', Ratna (2018: 199) observed, 'very little is known about the lives, differences and sporting engagements of women from across these geographic locations'.

Whilst joining these researchers in the continuous push for uncovering subjugated voices and knowledges, we explore in the present article the benefit of shifting the focus of the inquiry somewhat, of moving beyond the 'inclusion' of the South in feminist sport literature and the primary focus on North-South dichotomies. In the following

discussion, we consider what the specificities of the conditions of women's sporting practices in varied global locations can tell us about the complex interface between sport, postcoloniality and gendered relations of power. In particular, we adopt a viewpoint, that, in place of (or in addition to) positioning Southern women's sporting experiences against Northern hegemony, compares the historical and socio-political dynamics of two very different postcolonial societies, Fiji and Brazil, and examines how these may mediate the strategies deployed by women to exert sporting agency in the face of hetero-patriarchal barriers. This exercise is embedded in our view that, while critical inquiry into North-South asymmetries must continue, it must also address the danger of reifying diffuse categories of "South" and "North" as well as the binarism between them. In addition, we believe that critical South-South comparison can uniquely contribute to feminist sport scholarship by offering insights into what women's subversive agency means and consists of under differential social conditions and how varied historical and socio-political trajectories of postcolonial societies impact the agentic resources available to women. In this regard, our discussion responds to Ratna's (2018: 197) call:

> When even the so-called "critical" scholarship about women of colour and sport, mostly speaks to cultural tropes of difference, the possibility of recovering alternative knowledges becomes limited…. I urge contemporary researchers to theoretically reconsider, and to re-frame, their analysis of difference.

In aiming to engage with difference more rigorously, this article also aligns with Connell's (2014) critique of broader feminist scholarship. While contemporary feminist literature devotes substantial attention to global contexts and differences, it remains challenged, Connell (2014: 522) argues, by 'two flawed approaches': persisting epistemological Eurocentrism and a 'mosaic epistemology' that limits possibilities for cross-fertilisation. One of the consequences of this lack of engagement with difference is a homogenised construction of the South. Persard (2021: 15) recently expressed deep concerns over 'a certain kind of romanticised pre-colonialism that is ahistorical, erasing difference in the name of radical feminist solidarity' and failing to account for multiple inter-group and intra-group relations of domination.

It is against this background that we propose a comparative approach to postcolonial feminist sport scholarship as a pathway to deriving analytical insights from intra-South differences. Conceptually, this attempt is guided by Gwen Hunnicutt's (2009) widely known theorisation of 'varieties of patriarchy'. Hunnicutt (2009: 557) refines the notion of patriarchy by positioning it as 'hierarchical arrangements that manifest in varieties across history and social space'. Hunnicutt (2009: 558) eschews 'universalising theorising' and shows how specific configurations of patriarchy correlate with the forms and frequencies of violence directed at women in different locations and contexts. Her treatment of patriarchy is aimed at developing a tool for nuanced analysis of violence against women; but more broadly, she stresses the need for 'mapping varieties of patriarchy' – that is, for feminist scholarship to account for 'a range of different patriarchal manifestations among cultures and clans' overlapping with hierarchies of 'race'/ethnicity, class and other axes of power (Hunnicutt, 2009: 554, 568). Closely related to this is Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) study of 'patriarchal bargain', which underscores that women's

responses to male dominance vary widely according to the opportunities available under each variant of patriarchy. Like Hunnicutt, Kandiyoti (1988: 285) cites cross-cultural examples to reveal how patriarchal varieties 'provide different baselines from which women negotiate and strategise, and each affects the forms and potentialities of their resistance and struggles'. Such a focus on patriarchal configurations, 'rather than on an unqualified notion of patriarchy, offers better prospects for the detailed analysis of processes of transformation' (Kandiyoti, 1988: 285). By situating Southern women's sporting experiences within this conceptual framework, we examine how complex, shifting and variable power arrangements under postcolonial conditions interact with both (hetero)patriarchy and women's resistance to it in/through sport. Specifically, we ask:

- What are the historically specific postcolonial 'varieties of (hetero)patriarchy' under which Fijian and Brazilian women pursue masculinised sports of rugby (in Fiji) and football (in Brazil)?
- How do these 'varieties of (hetero)patriarchy' impact the strategies for manoeuvre/resistance Fijian and Brazilian women employ in pursuing their sports against (hetero)patriarchal barriers?
- What insights can we draw from these cases in relation to the interface between (hetero)patriarchy, resistance and sport under postcolonial conditions?

Existing studies of women's rugby in Fiji and women's football in Brazil provide important information relevant to these questions. Although women's rugby was seldom studied until recently in the Pacific, research literature is now developing around Fijian women's experience of the game in the small island nation's unique sociocultural and political milieu (e.g. Besnier and Brownell, 2016; Kanemasu, 2022, 2023; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2017; Vuli, 2022). This emergent literature highlights heteronormativity – legitimised through widespread indigenous nationalism and religious traditionalism – as a key driver of societal hostility towards women players. It also documents the strategies players employ to navigate such antagonism. As detailed in the following sections, foremost among these is collective and unspoken dissent, contrasting with the militant resistance often documented in Western contexts (e.g. Broad, 2001). Brazil, on the other hand, has a rich history of women's sports and football scholarship. Authors have provided detailed documentary and historical analysis of the social inception of women's sport and physical activity since the 19th century (e.g. Mourão, 2000). The ongoing historical invisibility of women footballers in the country has been highlighted by Goellner (2005). Furthermore, Brazilian researchers have produced ethnographic studies of the vigour and resistance of women's football communities in the 20th (Rigo et al., 2008) and 21st centuries (Knijnik, 2013), as well as multiple social markers that intersect to further oppress women footballers (Martins et al., 2021; Moraes et al., 2024).

Methodologically, our inquiry adopts a comparative case study approach, which entails examining the particularities and complexities of phenomena across dissimilar units for heuristic purposes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017; Gerring, 2007). We present the cases below by weaving historical and documentary analysis, which draws on the existing literature outlined above, with key insights from our own ongoing research on these

sports. The first author is a sociologist who has lived in Fiji for nearly three decades, where she has studied women's rugby since 2012. This research is complemented by her personal friendships with players and administrators, fostered through participation in club activities and fundraising (Kanemasu, 2023; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2020). The second author is an education scholar originally from Brazil, where his research training was focused on women's football and other sports. He has since developed a longstanding research programme and activism in South American women's football, leading to academic and media publications as well as professional training for women coaches and managers (Knijnik, 2013). As researchers from/positioned in these countries, we intend our discussion to contribute to feminist sport scholarship originating from within Southern regions. Simultaneously, we acknowledge that, despite our long-term personal/research engagement with the sporting communities discussed here, we are outsiders as non-players and expatriate/White university academics, and that our representations and interpretations of women's sporting journeys are inevitably framed by our researcher voice.

In the next section, we present brief profiles of Fiji and Brazil and consider the postcolonial varieties of (hetero)patriarchy observable in these societies. We then examine Fijian/Brazilian women athletes' pursuit of rugby/football and the kinds of resources and strategies they mobilise in negotiating/resisting (hetero)patriarchal barriers. Particular attention is given to Fijian women's silent yet relentless acts of subversion and Brazilian women's more explicit political actions and frontal attacks on patriarchal power. Our aim here is not only to contrast the two cases but especially to begin to account for their difference through the prism of patriarchal configurations mediating the conditions and potentials of Fijian/Brazilian women's sporting practices. We acknowledge that this is an exploratory exercise that does not follow a standard empirical research format. The discussion also relies on broad overviews of the sports, encompassing grassroots to elite-level participation, despite distinct dynamics present at each level. What follows is intended as an invitation to further inquiries in search of fuller understandings of the heterogeneous and historically specific forms, meanings, dynamics and impacts of women's sporting agency.

Fiji and Brazil: Postcolonial varieties of patriarchy

Fiji: Traditionalism, violence and heteropatriarchy

The Republic of Fiji is a small island nation in the south-western Pacific. The former British colony (1874–1970) has a population of 864,000, mainly indigenous Fijians (62.0%) and Indo-Fijians (largely the descendants of colonial indentured labourers from India) (34.2%) (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Indigenous Fijians are Christians and predominantly Methodist, while the majority of Indo-Fijians are Hindus with minority Muslims, Christians and Sikhs (Naidu, 2013). Ethnically divisive colonial rule was followed by intensifying politicisation of ethnicity in the post-independence era, whereby Indigenous nationalism and identity politics tended to mask intra-ethnic, class-based and regional disparities. A consequence of this is recurrent political instability, most conspicuously coups d'état in 1987, 2000 and 2006 (Naidu, 2019). Although Fiji

is an upper-middle-income country, 29.9% of Fijians lived below the national poverty line in 2019 (Asian Development Bank, 2024).

Indigenous nationalism is bound up with cultural and religious traditionalism. Customary chiefly rule, reconfigured and entrenched under British colonialism, retains significant influence over the indigenous populations (Newland, 2016). Christian faith, which is profoundly indigenised and exempted from association with colonialism, is regarded as fundamental to indigenous 'Fijianness'. Indeed, a powerful discourse of 'the Fijian way of life' (*vakavanua*) centres on 'tradition' represented by the unity of chiefs (*ratu*), land (*vanua*) and church (*lotu*) (Lawson and Lawson, 2015). A deeply political as well as cultural discourse, it has provided the basis for calls for indigenous political paramountcy over non-indigenous citizens and for the denunciation of gender activism, as discussed below.

Equally notable about Fiji's postcolonial social condition is its highly militarised culture (Halapua, 2003; Teaiwa, 2005). Prevailing notions of precolonial martial tradition, indigenous masculinity, spirituality and chiefly authority foreground (gendered and racialised) physical power in the nation's social and political life. Most indicative of this is the 99%-indigenous-male military force (Naidu, 2019), whose physical and political might was spectacularly asserted in the 1987 and 2006 coups it instigated. Its primary cultural equivalent is the game of rugby, which is played and administered overwhelmingly by indigenous men and replete with metaphors of war (Teaiwa, 2005). Given the nation's high international profile in men's rugby (Olympic gold medals in rugby sevens in 2016 and 2020 and a silver in 2024), the game serves as a conspicuous embodiment of indigenous masculine corporeal prowess as well as a coveted pathway for young men's transnational mobility and substantial income (Schieder, 2024).

Out of this convergence of cultural/religious traditionalism, militarism, masculine ideals, and the centrality of corporeal power emerges a particular variant of postcolonial heteropatriarchy. Indigenous gender relations underwent alterations through Christianisation and colonisation, represented today by 'norms of the patriarchal Methodist family, including adult heterosexuality and the obedience of wives and children to husbands' (Newland, 2016: 113). Women (and men) who question this orthodoxy are castigated as anti-Fijian on account of a supposed 'dichotomy between "traditional" and "Western" ways … in which Western values, practices, and institutions often become a major focus of traditionalist criticisms' (Lawson, 1993: 2). Non-heteronormativity is similarly and often vehemently condemned on cultural and religious grounds (George, 2008), notwithstanding its existence across Fiji and the broader Pacific (see Besnier and Alexeyeff, 2014). Women's non-heteronormativity tends to be regarded as even more problematic than men's. Not surprisingly, then, official gender policies and the realities of gender relations have been conflicting. Fiji scores relatively well in terms of legal frameworks for gender equality (UNICEF, n.d.). Yet, the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index ranks Fiji as low as 121st out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum, 2024), and gender inequality is widespread in socioeconomic and political domains. Furthermore, the prevalence of gender-based violence in Fiji (and the broader Pacific) is among the highest in the world. Sixty-four per cent of Fijian women – more than double the global prevalence of 30% – have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), 2013). Non-heteronormative

Fijians also face risks of systematic bullying and physical and sexual violence (Fiji National Civil Society Joint Submission, 2014).

Fiji's postcolonial heteropatriarchy is thus entwined with cultural/religious traditionalism and often violently sanctioned. Despite long-standing gender advocacy in the country (see George, 2012), open protest is generally uncommon at grassroots levels, which researchers and activists attribute to a '"culture of silence" that condemns women's assertiveness as disrespectful to those with traditional power' (Leckie, 2016: 189). Such potency of traditionalism, in both authorising heteropatriarchy and containing overt resistance to it, may be explained at least partly by the fact that it works in tandem with anti-imperialist, nationalist sentiments. 'Tradition', set against Western imposition and threat to indigenous sovereignty, commands all the more moral, cultural and political legitimacy (see Lawson, 1993). The heteropatriarchy that has become entrenched in postcolonial Fiji is therefore far from a simple legacy of indigenous tradition; it emanates from complex entanglements and reconfigurations of customary, colonial and postcolonial practices and relations of power that coalesce into a 'traditional*ism*' (Lawson and Lawson, 2015: 2, emphasis original).

Brazil: A history of multi-layered patriarchy and resistance

Brazil is the largest country in South America and the fifth largest in the world. The former Portuguese colony (1530s–1822) has a large and highly heterogeneous population estimated at more than 203 million (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), 2024). Over half (55.5%) of Brazilians today identify as blacks or browns (*pardos*), 43.4% white and 0.6% indigenous, while there are more than 200 self-defined categories with which Brazilians may describe the degree of their blackness or whiteness (Sterling, 2010). The large proportion of black and *pardo* Brazilians is a direct consequence of centuries of African slavery. For more than 300 years (1559–1888), Brazil's economy was heavily dependent on African slaves. Rich white farmers were the owners of the slaves and perpetrators of torture and sexual violence towards them, which was common at the time (Viana, 2023). This history of violent slavery left deep social marks on Afro-Brazilian communities. The 2022 census confirmed that 41.3% of black women lived below the poverty line (earning less than US$6.85 daily), as against the overall poverty rate of 31.6% (IBGE, 2024).

Given the nation's significant size and heterogeneity, it is not possible to identify a singular patriarchy (*patriarcado*) in Brazil. Rather, Brazilian patriarchy is deeply intersected by 'race' and social class and has been reconstituted through successive state administrations (Caulfield and Schettini, 2017). One may nevertheless speak of diffuse patriarchal orthodoxy as a legacy of the Spanish/Portuguese conquest of Latin America; a gender discourse that valorises hyper-masculinity persists 'in the core of Brazilian society' (de Souza, 2020: 296). Patriarchal family ideals centred around masculine authority, if constantly challenged and reconfigured, continue to form the basis of communities and condition the public ambience of society (Dessen and Torres, 2019). Indeed, these have historically become integral to a hegemonic construct of 'Brazilianness' (*brasilidade*) (Caulfield and Schettini, 2017). Notably, poor Afro-Brazilian women bear the brunt of gender/ethnic/class hierarchies; they are the

lowest paid in the most menial jobs and are at particular risk of violence and sexual exploitation (Caulfield and Schettini, 2017; Sterling, 2010).

It is against this background of multi-layered struggles that several feminist movements have developed within different Brazilian social sectors. As early as the 1940s, working-class women organised themselves in social movements to fight against rising prices of essential items (Kreuz, 2018). During the most recent and prolonged military dictatorship (1964–1985) when all major civil society organisations (CSOs) such as workers' and students' unions were banned, working-class women, whose majority are black, fought for daycare centres and against the inflation of basic items, demonstrating on the streets (Kreuz, 2018).

Feminist movements have also been at the forefront of the struggle against gender-based violence. A recent report shows that 33.4% of Brazilian women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner (World Bank, 2023). In the face of pervasive violence, feminist movements have pushed for legislation and policies that criminalise it and support survivors. During the early 1980s, as civil society was reborn and momentum for redemocratisation grew, feminist movements fought the dictatorship patriarchal mentality and advocated citizenship rights for all, including girls and women (Pasinato and Santos, 2008). In São Paulo, feminist groups were instrumental in the creation of the first police station specialised in crimes against women in 1985 (Blay, 2016), following a new bill that required all crimes against women to be investigated and all police officers serving this station to be women. This model of specialised police station spread across the country and resulted in about 400 others (Pasinato and Santos, 2008).

The period of left-leaning governments from 2003 onwards saw further progress toward gender equality (Caulfield and Schettini, 2017). One of the world's most advanced legal instruments against gender-based violence was promulgated in 2006. Known as the Maria da Penha Law (named after Maria da Penha Maia Fernandes, who survived two murder attempts by her husband), this landmark legislation provided for special police, courts, reporting mechanisms and protective measures for women and family members (Lima et al., 2016). Other milestones followed; Brazil's first female president (Dilma Rousseff) took office in 2011, and the legalisation of same-sex marriage came into effect in 2013 (Caulfield and Schettini, 2017).

Despite setbacks in the subsequent years (e.g. Prusa and Picanço, 2019), in 2023, Brazil was ranked 57th out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index as one of the least gender unequal countries in the world (Zimmermann, 2024), a significant outcome of the decades of unrelenting lobbying and advocacy by 'the largest, most radical, most diverse, and most politically influential of Latin America's feminist movements' (Sternback et al., 1992: 414).

Women's subversive strategies in/through sport in the Global South

Having briefly outlined the dynamics of postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy in Fiji and Brazil, we now consider the ways in which women negotiate and/or resist barriers arising from these (hetero)patriarchal varieties in pursuing the sports of their passion.

Fiji women's rugby: Silent counter-hegemony

Fiji's postcolonial heteropatriarchy, authorised by powerful traditionalism and often enforced with violent sanctions, constrains women's participation in sports: 'traditional' cultural norms prescribe physical stillness for women as against dynamism for men. Among the most controversial games is rugby, which, since its introduction in the late 19th century, has epitomised indigenous corporeal masculinism (Presterudstuen, 2010). From traditionalist perspectives, women's claim on this sport amounts to grievous dissent to *vakavanua*, especially when they are non-heteronormative. Fijian women rugby players are almost all indigenous and tend to be transmasculine or otherwise gender-nonconforming and/or with same-sex orientation[1]; although few are open about their sexuality, many adopt an unapologetically masculine appearance (e.g. short hair, masculine/non-binary clothing and demeanour). This renders their sporting claim doubly contentious, for it defies both the gender binarism and heterosexism enshrined through the game (Kanemasu, 2023).

For much of its early history, women's rugby received little institutional or community support (Kanemasu, 2023). Though affiliation with the Fiji Rugby Union was made by 1997, it was not until the 2010s that women became tangibly integrated into the official rugby governing structure. The national team, the Fijiana, played their first international fifteen-a-side match in 2016. Women were not included in provincial-level fixture competitions, the core of the domestic game, until 2018. Greater institutional/community support in recent years corresponds to a series of international competition successes the Fijiana have achieved: a bronze medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, a silver at the 2022 Commonwealth Games and the 2022/2023 Super Rugby Women's titles. Above all, the 2020 Olympic bronze – Fiji's third Olympic medal and the first by Pacific Island women in any team sport – had a dramatic effect of turning public opinion around. Today, leading players are familiar faces in the local media, and young women are increasingly taking up the sport to follow in the Fijiana's footsteps.

Behind what may appear to the outside world as a relatively uncomplicated success story, however, was a long and onerous struggle by the rugby women, who are a conspicuous presence in a society that allows transmasculine females even less social visibility and space than transfeminine males. Over the years, their collective display of gender (and assumed sexual) variance has incurred an array of family/community-level backlash (Kanemasu, 2023). Until recently, many were prevented from playing the game, and a substantial number were beaten by family members and/or turned out of their homes for their defiance. Some were assaulted in public spaces by community members who disapproved of their masculine appearance/sporting choice. Spectator violence in the form of genderphobic/lesbophobic jeering was widespread. In addition, family/community ostracism meant that many players did not have educational/vocational qualifications or wage employment and lived with severe material hardships. To date, women's rugby clubs are without sustained corporate sponsorship and rely on fundraising to meet basic needs. Such overwhelming adversities have forced many women out of the sport.

The women who have stayed have defied these formidable odds in a seemingly passive, yet relentless and transformative manner. In Fiji (as in the broader Pacific), speaking of gender-based violence is regarded as culturally inappropriate. It is therefore

uncommon for women rugby players to openly protest against the antagonism and punitive violence they suffer. They have responded instead with a tacit refusal to acquiesce: they have silently and resolutely refused to give up the game, apologise for it, or abandon their gender expressions or intimate relations. This may be deemed covert resistance due to its tacit nature, but it is equally overt as they visibly and collectively persist with their rugby pursuit and gender nonconformity. Refusal, as anthropologists have amply shown, embodies 'disavowals, rejections and manoeuvrings with and away from diffuse and mediated forms of power' (Prasse-Freeman, 2022: 102).

Furthermore, even as they outwardly swallow retributions in silence, the women have worked steadily at reconfiguring the dominant discourse around the game by leveraging the power of rugby nationalism. Rugby fervour in Fiji is heightened by a sense of physical and politico-economic marginality that Fijians have felt about their postcolonial nation. The Olympic medal was celebrated as a historic accomplishment all the more because rugby excellence, for the small island nation, symbolises battling and winning against myriad odds in a world of disparities. Women players' dogged determination and the eventual success of the highest order exert considerable persuasive power in this context. Thus, while postcolonial nationalism coupled with cultural/religious traditionalism functions as primary moral legitimation of heteropatriarchy, the same nationalism, appropriated through prized international sporting success, turns into potent subversive ammunition. Within Western culture, silence is 'generally deplored, because it is taken to be a result and a symbol of passivity and powerlessness' (Gal, 1989: 1). Fijian women rugby players disrupt such voice-agency vs. silence-oppression binarism by waging a silent counterhegemonic battle with tenacity and considerable success.

Brazilian women's football: The making of football feminism

Football arrived in Brazil in the late 19th century and rapidly became integrated into its urbanisation process (Bellos, 2014). Although women's teams flourished throughout the first decades of the 20th century (Goellner, 2005), rising eugenic discourse led to concerns among scientists, doctors and politicians over the alleged effects of aggressive sports on women's bodies. In 1941, a decree was enacted to ban women from football and a range of other 'harmful' sports (Capucim e Silva and Bonfim, 2022). It did not take long for the flourishing scene of women's football everywhere to disappear, and for public sporting facilities to become male preserves.

During the period known as 'Estado Novo' (1937–1945), football became entrenched in national identity (Prates and de Carvalho, 2016). This period was characterised by the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, a populist politician who capitalised on the sport to propagate ideals of the 'new Brazilian man'. Extolled as a symbol of national union and patriotism, men's football exploded across the nation, while the women's game remained forbidden. The national team (known as the Seleção) became a global force between the late 1950s and the 1970s, winning three World Cups in these decades and consolidating the nexus between football and gendered nationalism (Knijnik, 2024).

For women footballers, the times of prohibition (1941–1979) were also times of transgression. As much as the authorities tried to enforce the ban, they encountered resistance, as women found ways of playing football in several parts of the country (Capucim e Silva

and Bonfim, 2022). Futsal tournaments were organised between teams from different cities, and political deals were made so that women could play a few matches in suburban fields (Capucim e Silva and Bonfim, 2022). The ban was finally lifted in 1979 during the country's redemocratisation process. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, women's football re-emerged as part of broader opposition to the heteronormative and patriarchal values of the dictatorship (Haag, 2023). The 'Free Elections Now!' movement took over the country, supported by football stars (Knijnik, 2024). Feminist groups started a women's football league in São Paulo and promoted matches at professional stadiums watched by thousands of spectators (Capucim e Silva and Bonfim, 2022).

The 1980s and 1990s were decades of growth for women's football. The national team, the Seleção Feminina, played their first official match in 1986 and joined the Brazilian Football Federation (CBF) in 1988. They went on to become the best team in South America, winning eight out of the nine *Copa América Feminina* to date, three Pan American Games gold medals and three Olympic silvers (in 2004, 2008 and 2024). Also significant is the rise of superstars like Marta Vieira da Silva, who have shown that Brazilian women can 'enter the realm of national iconography' through football fame (Wood, 2018: 578). These decades, however, also saw growing genderphobic/lesbophobic stereotyping of women footballers as ultra-masculine tomboys and lesbians (Goellner, 2005). Non-heteronormativity among players was condemned and suppressed by mainstream football bodies for decades. The São Paulo Football Federation's 2001 tournament, for instance, advocated 'football and aesthetics' and only allowed young women who fit racialised constructions of 'heterosexiness', like long blond hair and light skin (Knijnik, 2023). The sociality of the women's football community nonetheless provided a safe space for non-conforming athletes and amplified the visibility of non-heteronormative expressions in sport (Kessler, 2020).

In 2004, after winning an Olympic silver, the Seleção Feminina leaders wrote to the CBF president demanding better working conditions, which marked a moment of heightened political consciousness among the players (Knijnik, 2013). What may be described as a football feminist movement emerged. The Guerreiras Project (n.d.) started in the early 2010s as a grassroots campaign by a collective of athletes, academics, activists and artists to raise questions around gender justice within and beyond football. In 2016, the National Group for the Development of Women's Football was formed with an agenda of 11 actions, such as the inclusion of women in all decision-making positions at the CBF, to be implemented by the national body (Barreto Januario, 2019). This large group, consisting of players, coaches, academics, activists and managers,[2] was the result of decades of football feminist activism (de Almeida, 2019), which culminated in the 2016 appointment of the Seleção Feminina's longest-serving captain, Aline Pellegrino, as CBF Coordinator of Women's Competitions (Biram, 2023). In 2020, the CBF drew international media attention with its announcement of equal pay and prize money for the women's and men's national teams (Cavallaro, 2023). Most recently, Brazil successfully bid to host the 2027 Women's FIFA World Cup.

It is important to highlight that, as in other spheres of Brazilian society, intersectional issues are at play within the game. Existing research shows most women players to be black (or brown) and of lower socioeconomic status (Martins et al., 2021). Knijnik (2013) reveals that many players struggle to make ends meet and manage their basic

needs by working as cleaners or with casual jobs (see also Moraes et al., 2024). The history of Brazil's women's football is, then, a history of open defiance, significant victories and continuing struggles.

Comparative analysis

The above two case studies present considerably different journeys of women pursuing male-dominated sports. Both Fijian and Brazilian women defy many odds to stake their claim on their nation's most privileged masculine sport, but they do so in differential contexts and with differential approaches. Most evidently, Fijian rugby players' counter-hegemonic struggle is marked by an implicit feminism pursued largely outside of formal political activism,[3] whereas Brazilian footballers have engaged in an explicit sporting feminism which is recently and increasingly aligned with the country's successful feminist movements. In this section, we attempt to unpack some of these differences in light of the specificities of the postcolonial conditions under which Fijian and Brazilian women pursue their sports. We are here guided by Hunnicutt's (2009: 568) position that '[v]arieties of patriarchy must be understood holistically … in terms of interlocking structures of domination' and in a way 'that allows for variation in degrees, types, and dimensions of dominance, power, and resistance'. Our discussion is structured by four interrelated points of comparison: cultural traditionalism, violence, political activism and nationalism.

Cultural traditionalism

Comparison of the two cases accentuates the tacit nature of Fijian women's resistance, which may be attributed at least in part to the power of the prevailing narrative of cultural tradition. A small population consisting of (mostly) two distinct ethnic groups,[4] under postcolonial conditions where ethnicity has become highly politicised (much more than class, for instance), magnifies the significance of cultural tradition for indigenous Fijians. Heteropatriarchy, positioned as an integral part of consecrated tradition to be protected from colonial assault and foreign threat, becomes harder to challenge openly. Furthermore, rugby, more than any other modern sport in Fiji, has been indigenised to the extent that it is widely perceived to embody indigenous cultural essence (Besnier and Brownell, 2016; Sugden, 2024). Indigenous Fijian women's claim on the game is hence multiply negated by the heteropatriarchy–tradition–rugby complex, which constrains the scope for direct confrontation.

In comparison, Brazil is a vast and heterogeneous nation with diverse and overlapping ethnic/cultural 'traditions'. Although patriarchal culture permeates Brazilian society and especially the conservative ideals of Brazilianness, it is not articulated with a specific anti-colonial ethnic discourse. Indeed, Brazil's long history of slavery and substantial European settlement renders colonialism a matter of internal, as well as external, relations (Frank, 1992), unlike Fiji's experience of colonisation as (primarily) external control, against which indigenous tradition has been diametrically positioned (though such distinction is also blurred by indigenised Christianity). These social conditions allow for no single sacrosanct cultural orthodoxy, of which football may serve as a sporting

expression in the way rugby does in Fiji. The multi-ethnic composition of the Brazilian (women's and men's) football population reflects how the game cuts across the ethno-cultural tapestry of the vast and varied nation. This does not make women footballers' struggles any less arduous or challenging, but it does imply that Fiji rugby and Brazilian football, two profoundly gendered 'national' sports, are embedded in considerably different ethno-cultural dynamics shaping the terrains of women athletes' struggles.

Violence

Violence as a manifestation and means of patriarchal power also configures Fijian and Brazilian women's sporting resistance differently. Fiji's traditionalist narrative endorses not only heteropatriarchy but also violence as its defence against opposition. In a social context where militarism and martialism are affirmed as part of indigenous heritage, 'the use of violence as a form of discipline and conflict resolution is normalised' (FWCC, 2013: 70). This further limits the room for head-on resistance and reproduces the 'culture of silence'. Women rugby players, many of whom have personal experience of genderphobic/lesbophobic abuse, must carefully balance their resistance with considerations of pervasive violence and risks to their safety and immediate interests. They accordingly seek agentic resources elsewhere, in 'collective embodied silence' (Parpart, 2020: 321). The absence of public and formally-articulated resistance is a strategic choice that maximises their chances of success under the existing circumstances: they turn to an incremental counter-hegemonic battle over rugby nationalism while silently but unapologetically appropriating the game and its masculine expressions.

Brazilian women have had their own battles against violence. Of note is the fact that the public outcry and women's/feminist mobilising that culminated in the Maria da Penha Law had broader effects beyond a legal milestone in combatting domestic violence. Maria da Penha's fight for justice became a symbol of revitalised feminist movements emerging from the decades of military dictatorship (Barsted et al., 2019). It opened up room for gender equity debates in terrains like leisure and sport, which had been on the margins of the mainstream feminist agenda (Unbehaum, 2010) (although, importantly, feminist resistance was never new to women footballers as discussed earlier, even if football was new to mainstream feminists). The growing campaign against domestic violence, in the context of broader processes of redemocratisation across Latin America, fostered gender consciousness among grassroots women and a resurgence of popular feminisms (Masson and Beaulieu Bastien, 2021) – a historical conjuncture ripe for women footballers' more open demand for equity and possibly greater (if insufficient and uneven) institutional receptiveness. Perhaps also relevant is the rise of 'sport for development' as an international development agenda, which prompted international agencies like UN Women to co-opt FIFA and football governing bodies in violence prevention programming[5] (e.g. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and UN Women, 2023; UN Women, 2023). Reflective of this climate, the Seleção Feminina played an international match in 2023 wearing jerseys supporting a campaign against gender-based violence as a CBF/sponsor initiative (Neoenergia, 2023). Gender-based violence thus surfaced as a critical focus of the public, feminist and institutional agendas, of which football has become a part, bringing the game closer into the fold of organised advocacy.

Political activism

It is not surprising, given the above, that Fiji's women athletes make relatively less use of feminist/gender activism, which is often regarded as antithetical to 'tradition'. Although human rights discourse is gaining ground, feminism has been described as a 'dirty word' in the Pacific Islands region (Newton Cain and Bjornum, 2018), where women's political representation levels are among the lowest in the world. Women presently make up just 9% of the parliamentarians in Fiji, ranked 166th out of 182 countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). It must be stressed that feminist/women's organisations in Fiji (and the broader Pacific) have a long history of working with communities (George, 2012); at the same time, they have historically tended to be steered by women with greater access to economic, cultural and social capital – i.e. educated, professional (and in some cases chiefly) women. Importantly, this does not mean that grassroots women are voiceless or politically inactive. They do individually and collectively resist gender/ethnic/class hierarchies, but often covertly and through informal acts (Leckie, 2016): mundane, everyday practices, including sport, become a key medium of infrapolitics in this context.

Brazilian women have had different journeys into political activism (see Quartim de Moraes, 2020). Perhaps the most relevant to our discussion is the nation's (and broader Latin America's) tradition of community-based women's organising, which grew into popular feminisms encompassing trade union women, black women, peasant women and other grassroots women. Since the late 1980s, these have become 'a stronghold of organising for Brazilian feminist and women's movements' (Lebon, 2014: 148; see also Masson and Beaulieu Bastien, 2021). Grassroots organising was indeed critical to the creation of women's police stations and the campaign against domestic violence discussed above. The prominence of such grassroots activism, anchored in the lives and struggles of women of the popular sectors, may render feminism a more accessible agentic resource for sporting women in Brazil. It is worth noting that the Guerreiras Project (n.d.) mentioned in the case study deploys noticeably feminist language, referring to 'the significance of empowerment, possibilities for resistance, and social justice' as its core concerns.

Nationalism

The two cases also point to some commonalities. In particular, sporting nationalism offers women in both societies an important avenue for subversion and transformative agency. Fijian women rugby players' strategy for change is to leverage the power of postcolonial nationalism by scoring international successes and 'putting Fiji on the world map' – a phrase commonly used by Fijians in describing the national significance of the game. Football in Brazil equally commands symbolic power in the national imaginary, which makes it a consequential site of contestation over sporting nationalism. Besides claiming multiple mega-event medals, Brazilian women are among the first female football stars to have emerged in the 21st century. Above all, Marta, the top scorer in the (women's as well as men's) World Cup history, has become 'a potent symbol of a woman footballer becoming widely acclaimed as representative of the nation' (Wood, 2018: 577).

In Fiji and Brazil, rugby and football have respectively played a central role in the (re) construction of the nation; they serve as a principal sporting medium of gendered (and in Fiji's case indigenous) nationalism (Bellos, 2014; Guinness and Besnier, 2016). Indeed, nations and nationalisms globally have been found to be profoundly gendered (Banerjee, 2003; Sinha, 2021), and sport symbolism is deeply implicated in gendered nation-making (Broch, 2016; Knoppers and Anthonissen, 2003). In the Global South, gendered sporting nationalism is further fuelled by anti-colonial/anti-imperialist narratives of sporting glory as a symbolic resistance to Western/Northern power (Beckles and Stoddart, 1995; Darby, 2000). But masculine monopoly of sporting nationalism can be broken by outstanding female athletes, as documented in existing literature (Chiang et al., 2015; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). Brazilian women footballers and Fijian women rugby players may be considered prime examples here, with their national teams ranked among the world's best alongside Northern counterparts (Brazil ranked 8th out of 194 countries in the August 2024 FIFA ranking and Fiji 14th out of 64 countries in the September 2024 World Rugby ranking). Moreover, the Brazilian women's silver medal at the recent Paris Olympics, for which the men's team failed to qualify, and the 2027 Women's World Cup host status present an unprecedented opportunity for decoupling sporting nationalism and patriarchy.

However, while counter-hegemony attained through high-performance success may be dramatic, it can also be sporadic and precarious. The Fijiana, after losing all their games at the Paris Olympics to the disappointment of the nation anticipating a medal, immediately became a target of intense and often misogynistic criticisms on social media, reminiscent of the societal backlash of the previous years. The women are likely to continue to press on silently and relentlessly as they have done for decades, with their eyes on the next counter-hegemonic opportunity. In the case of Brazil, it is to be seen if/how women footballers' more extensive engagement with feminism mediates their ability to exploit the alignment of favourable factors at hand. The transformative potential of the 2027 mega-event lies in generating out of its hype and visibility sustained shifts in gender discourses and practices within community/institutional sporting spaces; feminist advocacy may contribute to actualising this potential. Conversely, the mega-event could (incidentally) strengthen football feminism with its immense publicity, renewing the interest of mainstream women's/feminist movements in involvement in the game. The two cases suggest that the relationship between patriarchy and nationalism under postcolonial conditions is fluid and multifaceted and that sporting nationalism has been captured by Fijian and Brazilian women with varying possibilities and degrees of success.

Conclusion

The foregoing has compared women's pursuit of hyper-masculine sports in two postcolonial societies – rugby in Fiji and football in Brazil. The primary aim of this discussion was to explore the analytical value of feminist South-South comparison as an attempt to gain contextually grounded insights into Southern women's sporting practices that are not always available if exclusively framed by North-South asymmetries. The comparison presented here, though preliminary and indeed cursory, invites reflections on 'varieties

of patriarchy' (Hunnicutt, 2009). Fijian and Brazilian women are situated in specific power dynamics where both men and women hold different types and degrees of power (Hunnicutt, 2009). In Fiji, powerful postcolonial heteropatriarchy, high prevalence of violence and legitimating discourses of cultural/religious traditionalism and indigenous nationalism, among other things, shape the room for manoeuvre for women rugby players. Understanding the configuration of this 'terrain of power' is important because it reveals not only the severity of the barriers the athletes must struggle against but also how a community of marginalised women, even under the most entrenched heteropatriarchal conditions, find ways to negotiate and surmount them. Grassroots Pacific Island women, especially in policy domains, tend to be treated as victims of patriarchy and tradition in need of 'empowerment' and 'intervention'. Without diminishing the significance of gender justice interventions by governments, CSOs and development agencies, our discussion underscores these women's ability to cultivate and mobilise resources for transformative purposes. In Brazil, the centuries of slavery, decades of dictatorship, reigns of conservative administrations and other socio-historical specificities produced an often-authoritarian, multi-layered patriarchy deeply intersected by 'race', class, etc., but this also triggered myriad currents of defiance. The history of repression and autocracy, and equally of resistance and redemocratisation, stimulated a synergy between women's football and feminism. Obviously, not all or perhaps even the majority of women footballers in the vast nation engage with activism. But the organised, public actions players have taken to challenge patriarchal power in/through football, at times in direct alliance with feminist activists, signify the scope they have carved out for more open battle. The 'football feminism' we described above organically grew out of Brazil's socio-political soil, its specific 'terrain of power', possibly aided by the increasing integration of the game into international agency and feminist movement agendas.

Fijian and Brazilian women athletes' experiences are complex, diverse and by no means given comprehensive treatment here. Nevertheless, our aim was to identify, as a heuristic device, key variations in the dynamics of postcolonial (hetero)patriarchy and women's resistance. It was for this purpose that we considered the socio-political settings within which women pursue sports in Fiji and Brazil, as well as the 'implicit' and the more 'explicit' feminisms of Fijian and Brazilian women athletes. The comparative focus on cultural tradition, gender-based violence, political activism and nationalism directed our attention to how these interact with sport differently (or similarly) in Fiji and Brazil. We have suggested that the two nations' demographic, ethnic and class dynamics, modalities of colonial rule and post-independence socio-political trajectories, along with many other factors, intricately combine to constrain or enable certain agentic/subversive practices and strategies. Political activism and sporting nationalism, for instance, hold out different (and in some ways common) transformative utility and potential for Fijian and Brazilian women athletes. Sport and activism interact under historically specific postcolonial conditions to constitute a site of formal politics or infrapolitics for these women; so do sport and nationalism to form a powerful site of repression or subversion.

Patriarchal varieties, as stressed by Kandiyoti (1988), shape the ways women actively or passively resist oppression. Mapping of patriarchal varieties thus reveals not only the

heterogeneity but also the inherent fluidity and indeterminacy of patriarchy. Comparison of such case studies demands critical attention to the shifting and varied interplay between forces of domination and resistance. In Global South contexts, such an exercise, in our view, can help challenge ahistorical essentialism that persists in common notions of Southern patriarchy. While the growing body of Southern sport research has done much to this end, it can be augmented with the mapping of multiple interrelations between postcoloniality, patriarchy and resistance in/through sport. Disregarding these and their analytical significance risks casting Southern women in an undifferentiated light and without due attention to the processes and potentials of social change. Indeed, critical engagement with this task can more than amplify Southern perspectives and knowledges; it is a necessary project of broader feminist sport scholarship to elucidate sport's connections with gendered relations of power in their many forms and spaces. A South-South comparison was attempted here as an exploration of a pathway towards such critical knowledge building.

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Notes

1. They commonly refer to themselves and each other as 'women'/'girls', and few (at least explicitly) identify as transgender or nonbinary. Some are also cisgender/heterosexual. They are therefore referred to as 'women' here.
2. Several members, however, subsequently left this group, denouncing CBF managers' authoritarian attitudes (de Almeida, 2019).
3. It should be noted that local feminist bodies have variously supported women's rugby in recent years and that such connections may develop further in the future.
4. We do not assume that these ethnic communities are homogeneous but focus on dominant narratives (rather than the lived realities) of ethnicity in Fiji.
5. Football features prominently in UN Women's violence prevention programmes. In 2019, UN Women and FIFA signed a memorandum of understanding to acknowledge a common gender equality goal, an initiative described as 'the first ever of its kind' (UNESCO and UN Women, 2023: 64).

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