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Camille Nakhid & Dion Enari

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## What are we hiding? - The loud silence on the racialized experiences of Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes in Aotearoa New Zealand

Camille Nakhid and Dion Enari

Social Sciences and Public Policy, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

The recent global attention on the racism experienced by athletes has seen a number of sporting codes come under scrutiny in their respective countries and worldwide. In the colonized countries of Aotearoa New Zealand, and the land known as Australia, much of these racist behaviours have targeted Indigenous, Brown, and Black male athletes and have come from spectators, sports commentators, and the public, primarily on mainstream and social media. Much less is known about the racialized experiences of Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes at the systemic and institutional levels in the social institution of sport. This paper argues that the lack of attention to, and information about the presence of racism in the lives of these sportswomen are insufficient to conclude that racism does not exist for these athletes. This paper calls for research in this area.

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Racism; sports; Aotearoa New Zealand; female; indigenous

## Introduction

Indigenous, Brown, and Black<sup>1</sup> athletes in Aotearoa<sup>2</sup> have a long history of being targeted by racism. In 2009, Va'aiga 'Inga' Tuigamala, a former New Zealand All Black player, recounted a young girl telling him that her father referred to him as a 'big black bastard'; in 2010, Andy Haden, a former All Black, ignited a huge reaction when he accused the Crusaders of having an annual quota for Polynesian players; in 2012, during a game in New Zealand, Samoan international soccer player Tama Fasavalu lashed out at a white player who had spat in his face and called his mother a whore; in 2015, Fijian rugby player Sake Aca spoke of his anguish at the racial taunts he received from Lincoln University supporters; in 2015 and 2016, Peni Manumanuniliwa was racially abused while playing rugby; in 2018, at a cricket match in Wellington, a group of about 100 men made obscene chants and relentlessly harassed Pakistani cricketers; in 2019, New Zealand boxer Israel Adesanya said that the bullying and racism he experienced at high school led to his martial arts career; in 2019, Jofra Archer, an England pace bowler, said he was the victim of racist insults while batting against the Black Caps, and was called a 'black cunt' on social media; in 2022, a

**CONTACT** Camille Nakhid  [camille.nakhid@aut.ac.nz](mailto:camille.nakhid@aut.ac.nz)

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Kāpiti Coast high school investigated a claim that its supporters made racist comments to Porirua rugby players during a game.

While these incidents have focused on male athletes, far less attention, if any, has been given to the racism experienced by Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes in the country. The volume of media articles on the racism aimed at Māori and some Pacific and Black male athletes, however, suggests that racism is also likely to be experienced by their female counterparts. Information on the racism faced by women in sports in Aotearoa has been negligible. Apart from a 2023 media article on the lack of cultural sensitivity experienced by the Black Ferns (Aotearoa New Zealand Womens Rugby Team); a pay walled 2022 report on Grace Mweke, a Silver Fern player (Aotearoa New Zealand's Womens Netball Team) overcoming racism; and a recent 2024 action taken by two Black Ferns to withdraw from participating in the pre-game haka, presumably in response to criticism to a previous haka calling out the 'white supremacist policies' of the newly elected government, there have been few other media reports of racism against Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes. As such, there has been very little evidence on which to investigate the existence of racism or the extent to which it impacts these athletes.

In Aotearoa, the desire to believe that Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes do not face racism aligns with the misleading perception of a racist-free country, particularly regarding sports. This complicity serves to abrogate sporting organizations of any responsibility or action that might need to be taken to expose and challenge racism. Already, many myths surround sports in Aotearoa – from presenting rural legends as the cornerstone of rugby, to the prowess of taming while racially stereotyping 'wild and savage West Indian' cricket teams. This is far from the reality as the majority of 'legends' of rugby come from urban cities, and the many instances of hostility and bullying initiated on the cricket pitch have been by New Zealand cricket teams against almost any other team. Given the level of racism meted out to Māori, Pacific, and African male athletes in Aotearoa, it is reasonable to hypothesize that Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes are similarly subjected to racism, and to have endured racialized experiences (Hokowhitu 2003; Houghton 1990).

The silence that surrounds racism in Aotearoa sports contributes to the inaccurate portrayal of the country as having good race relations, and the influence of sports in creating racial equality (Hippolite and Bruce 2010). Media reports of spectators cheering for athletes irrespective of their ethnicity or colour are used to illustrate the lack of racism within sports and among spectators. This is a dangerous narrative for several reasons. First, as we have noted, there have been several incidents where racist comments have been made by the public towards athletes of colour. Second, a society that supports their sports teams is an exhibition of national pride, not a show of anti-racism or non-racism. Third, accepting that there is no racism in sports because of the large numbers of Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes distracts us from questioning why their access to the sports field is not duplicated by equitable access in other areas of society such as education, health, income, and politics. Fourth, it does not allow for critical reflexion on the subsequent patronizing and derogatory stereotypes (Brown and Black people as more physical, less intellectual) that stem from this segregation (Hokowhitu 2003).

This paper focuses on the racialized sporting environment for Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes. We discuss the persistence of racism in sports, the lack of representation of Indigenous, Brown, and Black sporting staff at the higher levels of the sport, and the commodification of Indigenous, Brown, and Black bodies in sports.

## The ongoing presence of racism in sports

Racism occurs at all levels in the social institution of sport. It can be argued, however, that its presence is most damaging at the systemic and institutional levels. A research study carried out for Manukau United Football Club (2022)<sup>3</sup> was critical of the commonly held view that sport was a 'meritocratic and egalitarian space' where race no longer mattered and racial inequalities had ceased to exist. The study found that participants who experienced racism said it often went unpunished by referees and other sporting administrators.

Systemic racism, when expressed in the societal expectations of Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes, prevent many of them from being seen as capable of, or excelling at sports. Prejudices that perceive these players to be ill disciplined, casual, too family oriented, quick tempered, and uncommitted are destined to draw our attention to look for these behaviours in the players, and to experience confirmation bias when they behave in ways that we believe demonstrate these characteristics. When these are magnified in the media and other forums (Palmer and Masters 2010), we continue to view these players as unreliable and unable to achieve in the sporting arena, to attribute their behaviours to their culture, and to respond in ways that limit or prevent their participation and progress in the sport.

The negative perceptions of Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes on the field influences how they are treated by referees, umpires, sports commentators, and the general public. These players are more likely to be subjected to penalties, to be accused of fouls, and to be given harsher penalties for these transgressions. In March 2018, two white Australians Steve Smith and Cameron Bancroft, who were found guilty of tampering with the ball in a match against South Africa<sup>4</sup> received a one match ban and fined 75% of match fees respectively. Social media quickly pointed out the white privilege in the penalties imposed on these players by the International Cricket Council (ICC) in contrast to the 5 year ban imposed on Mohd Amir who was found guilty of bowling deliberate no-balls to throw a match.

News media reporter Ross Karl believes that Polynesian players in the Rugby World Cup 2019 were the victims of sub-conscious bias<sup>5</sup>. Karl pointed to the perception held by the rugby community that the overly physical stereotype of Pacific players wills them to infringe the rules of the game. Ross mentions Samu Kerevi who was cited for an illegal play when reviews showed this not to be the case and was not dissimilar to other plays that went uncited by the referee. Ross noted the similarity to Samoa's Alesana Tuilagi during the 2015 Rugby World Cup who was suspended for five weeks for 'striking' with a knee. Ross deemed the decision to be 'atrocious', perceiving Tuilagi to be running into a player with poor tacking technique<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, wrote Ross, Piers Francis, a white player who admitted committing an act of foul play, escaped a ban for his high tackle on the USA's Will Hooley in the 2019 World Cup.<sup>7</sup>

Black athletes globally are not exempt from the consequences of these racist behaviours. An analysis of US sports news content found that Black athletes were overrepresented in crime news when compared to other racial groups (Mastro, Blecha, and Atwell-Seate 2011). News stories also included more explicit detail of the crime, tended to be more accusatory, and showed more support for the victim if the suspected perpetrator were Black (Atwell-Seate, Harwood, and Blecha 2010). Ash, Cranmer, and Pool (2023) argue that sport is not simply a microcosm of society but, through its means of communication, influences what its audiences are taught about society.

The rise in social media use has also led to an increase in the racial abuse of athletes. Online and offline comments have referred to Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes as ‘black monkeys’ and ‘useless coconuts’. Media commentators have fuelled the racial discrimination of Pacific athletes by condemning those who have chosen to play for their nations of origin instead of their colonial birth countries (Enari and Keung 2023). However, Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes have managed to maintain their own positive social media presence, for example, the ‘Between Two Beers Podcast’<sup>8</sup> which has featured notable figures such as Lani Daniels, Mea Motu, Melodie Robinson, Sarai Bareman, among others.

Institutional racism obstructs the involvement of Indigenous, Brown, and Black people in sports which hold a privileged status in Aotearoa. This racism is evident in the resources associated with participating in these sports including the money required for training equipment and sports gear, transport, and time. Indigenous, Brown, and Black communities have lower median incomes than the national median (despite some groups having higher qualifications than the national average), and thus less able to support the financial costs of their children’s involvement in these sports (The New Zealand Pacific Economy 2018). Lower incomes also mean that many families hold two or three jobs, often in precarious employment, and are not given the time to take their children to the different venues to participate in sports. Even when public transport is available, the distances and travel times are deterrents in the mental and physical preparation of the player, or in having family support on the sidelines.

### **Lack of representation of Indigenous, Brown, and Black sporting staff**

In the wider environment of sports, while we have seen an increase in the number of Māori and Pacific female sports journalists, they are typically in assisting roles or as commentators, and very rarely as the main anchor women leading the sports news. There are even less or no Black women in any of these roles in Aotearoa. Within the sporting industry, there is a disproportionate and visible lack of Indigenous, Brown, and Black females in non-playing roles particularly as coaches, match officials, and most importantly, on sporting boards (Keung and Enari 2022). Their absence in these areas means that their knowledges, cultures, and unique contributions to sport policies and procedures are not being included, acknowledged, or valued. It also perpetuates the stereotype of Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes as capable of only providing ‘sweat labour’ (Hokowhita 2004).

The control of all aspects of sports – promotion, financial, administrative, managerial, media etc - is held by Pakeha and by males. French (2013) noted that female athletes received 6.1% of the media coverage compared with male athletes, who received 73.6%. In 2022, 28% of sports coverage in New Zealand was about women, up from 15% in 2020. Similarly, female visibility increased for the same years from 15% to 26%. There was also a greater representation of women in sports coverage, with visibility at 26% (Sport New Zealand 2022). In 2011, the average number of female board of directors was 0.8% (Lynch 2012), with 27% of females as sports board members (Sport New Zealand 2012). The percentages, however, did not indicate how many of these females were Indigenous, Brown, or Black.

It is recognized that almost all publicly funded sports have implemented stringent anti-racism measures, along with sanctions for any player found guilty of racial abuse. Recent years have seen numerous reviews concerning New Zealand’s sporting organizations

and their treatment of female athletes in sports such as hockey, netball, cycling, gymnastics, and rugby. However, this is not sufficient, as racism remains prevalent in several sports, where NZ Europeans are more likely to be in leadership roles (Angus & Associates 2021). The Respect and Responsibility Review – New Zealand Rugby focused on making rugby players better people, and on shaping attitudes and behaviours particularly towards women. Yet, no mention was made of codes of conduct relating to racialized behaviours (Cockburn and Atkinson 2017). The review also highlighted the need for an environment that supported and safe guarded and encouraged Māori values and culture. In Manukau United Football Club's 2022 research study, deeply entrenched racist policies were said to be behind the lack of resourcing for ethnic specific groups and the absence of management and coaching opportunities for people of colour. Diversity and inclusion, the study claimed, referred to only increasing the number of Pākehā women in the sport.

Despite a few exceptions, most notably Dame Noeline Taurua as Netball head coach, Tina Karaitiana President Board of Netball New Zealand, and Jody Cameron, assistant coach of the Tall Ferns (women's basketball team), who are all Māori (Netball New Zealand 2024), there is a notable scarcity of Indigenous, Brown, and Black coaches across various sports. This factor also contributes to the lack of Indigenous languages being spoken at training.

In team sports that are closely tied to the nation's identity and highly popular among women – such as women's rugby, rugby league, netball and basketball – there is an increasing number of players identifying as Indigenous, Brown, and Black. This growing diversity is also becoming more visible in teams like the White Ferns (cricket), the Black Sticks (hockey), and New Zealand's Olympic teams (Angus & Associates 2021). However, Spaaij, Knoppers, and Jeanes (2020) believe that increased diversity in sports is slow to eventuate due to a corresponding lack of diversity in sport leadership. The authors also argue that sport policies focused on increasing the participation of diverse and underrepresented groups does little to change the discriminatory practices of sports organizations. In addition, the increase in diversity hides the subtle and racist ideologies and practices of sporting bodies that have little intention of being inclusive and equitable.

Historically as well as quite recently, Indigenous athletes from colonised countries have been prohibited from carrying flags of sovereignty at sporting events. It was also uncommon for their country's national anthem to be sung in their Indigenous languages. A notable exception is Hinewehi Mohi's performance of the national anthem in te reo Māori at the 1999 Rugby World Cup (Sheehan 2016). Since then, it has become common for the national anthem to be sung in te reo Māori at international rugby competitions. However, there is still much to be done to ensure wider and more consistent implementation in all sports in Aotearoa.

### **The commodification of the indigenous, Brown, and Black female athlete**

Despite the racism that exists in sports, Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes have maintained a profile in the sporting arena. The over representation of these athletes, in contrast to other areas requiring less emphasis on physicality, is explained by authors such as Majavu (2018) as the commodification of the Black body. The gladiatorial exhibition of prowess reduces Indigenous, Brown, and Black humans to bodies that we mould, ogle, and rally for or against, and then discard as we move on to the next set of gladiator athletes.

For Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes, this reduction of their humanity is embedded in the racism they experience through this public display designed for the pleasure of the viewing public. It is unlikely that any spectator, while watching these athletes perform, will reflect on the ways in which they view that athlete beyond the competition, or the racialized experiences and racial microaggressions that the athlete has most likely faced on their way to the field or court.

Grainger (2009) criticizes the racialized stereotype of Pacific peoples' athletic ability to the exclusion of any reference to their intellectual capabilities. BuzzFeed writer luaikenasio also writes about her annoyance at her physical body being likened to that of an athlete while her academic ability was considered an exception for a Pacific person.<sup>9</sup>

Health research studies on Pacific women in sports are invariably around their physical fitness and abilities, or the health benefits of exercise for their Brown bodies (Nemani and Thorpe 2016). This persistent focus on problematizing the health of Pacific women contributes to how their health and wellbeing are seen and promoted. Addressing the wellbeing of Indigenous, Brown, and Black women is appropriate (Nemani and Thorpe 2016); what is less so, is seeing those health characteristics as the entirety of women of colour to the extent that they are perceived only in the context of a health crisis (Sione 2023).

The physical stature of Pacific women is perceived as being limited to a particular type of sport where physicality rather than intellect or strategy is involved. When physical characteristics are erroneously associated with level of intelligence, the expectations of and attitudes by coaches, officials, and the wider public towards Pacific women contribute to how they are treated on and off the playing field.

### **The problem with the lack of information on the racism experienced by Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes**

The dearth of information, literature, and research on the racism faced by Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes in Aotearoa suggests that this is likely to be a problem that has not been acknowledged rather than a phenomenon that does not exist in female sports. The lack of attention to the racism experienced by these athletes needs to be addressed for several reasons. One, without this information, we are unable to determine the impact that racism has on keeping Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes out of sports. Two, if we fail to acknowledge the presence and impact of this racism, we will be unable to remedy its harmful impact. Three, ignoring the racism amongst Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes suggests that the concerns of women play a far less important role in society and warrant less attention and redress. Four, the racial hierarchy that stems from a colonial system is likely to be perpetuated among sports women, and to result in Black female athletes facing racial prejudice from Indigenous and Brown peers. Anti-blackness, a dominant feature of colonization, makes this a real possibility despite the fact that Black people have had no involvement in the subordination and oppression of Māori or Pacific people either historically or in contemporary times. Due to their presence as a Pacific nation, their numbers, proximity to, and longer history in Aotearoa, Pacific female athletes have been more accepted by Pakeha and by Māori. To a lesser extent, and due to the converse factors, Black female athletes are less visible

(though not in the phenotypical sense) than their Pacific counterparts. The consequences of systemic and institutional racism lead to the absence of role models for Indigenous, Brown, and Black people interested in playing the sport despite the increasing involvement of these athletes.

## Conclusion

Addressing racism and mitigating its impact on Indigenous, Brown, and Black athletes are inherently challenging. This is due as much to racism being ingrained in our beliefs and values, informing how we structure and operate our sports, as to our reluctance to accept the presence and influence of racism in sports. Sports, like all social institutions, embody the policies, practices, and ideologies of society. Given Aotearoa's colonialist history and its colonizing present, it is expected that the racism inherent in colonialism will have made its way into the social institution of sports. What is the place and position of Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes? How do they see themselves? More importantly, how are they seen by others particularly by those with influence on their access to and involvement in the sport?

We know very little of how racism is experienced by Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes in Aotearoa. The absence of any research or literature in this area strongly suggests that it is a subject that no one wants to confront or investigate. It is for this reason that research is needed into the likely presence and impact of racism experienced by Indigenous, Brown, and Black female athletes.

## Notes

1. We use the term Indigenous, Brown, and Black instead of Māori, Pacific and Ethnic to be as inclusive as possible of all ethnicities while fully acknowledging Māori as the Indigenous people of Aotearoa (tangata whenua – people of the land). Ethnic is used in Aotearoa (Statistics New Zealand) to refer to people that are not Māori, or of Pacific heritage but includes continental Europeans. In this paper, Brown and Black refer to Pacific and Ethnic people excluding continental Europeans.
2. Aotearoa is the name Māori use to refer to New Zealand. It is now widely used and will be used in this article except in certain instances where New Zealand will be written.
3. Racism in Football in Aotearoa He aha temeanui o tēnēiao? He Tāngata, He Tāngata, He Tāngatakatoa! RESEARCH REPORT [chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/ https://unesco.org.nz/assets/general/dRacism-in-Football-in-Aotearoa-edited-NA-edits-5-LOW-RES.pdf](https://unesco.org.nz/assets/general/dRacism-in-Football-in-Aotearoa-edited-NA-edits-5-LOW-RES.pdf).
4. <https://www.teaonews.co.nz/2018/03/26/australian-cricket-cheats-desperate-maori-commentator/>.
5. <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/rugby-world-cup-2019/2019/09/ross-karl-sub-conscious-bias-plaguing-polynesian-players-at-rugby-world-cup.html>.
6. <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/rugby-world-cup-2019/2019/09/ross-karl-sub-conscious-bias-plaguing-polynesian-players-at-rugby-world-cup.html>.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/sep/29/england-piers-francis-rugby-world-cup-cleared-citing-dismissed>.
8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yn0nbRdHOQQ>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe9tZoUJOGY>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOytqtRNPR0>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hN8K3yO2Q6A>.
9. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/luaikenasio/stereotypes-about-pacific-islanders-i-hate>.

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## Disclosure statement

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