

Exploring the complexities of community attitudes towards women's rugby: Multiplicity, continuity and change in Fiji's hegemonic rugby discourse

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Abstract

Negative societal pressures against women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sports like rugby are widely acknowledged, but little empirical research has investigated community attitudes associated with such participation, especially in non-Western contexts. This article presents exploratory insights into community attitudes towards women's rugby in Fiji with a focus on athletic young women, who do not play rugby but are physically active, and their 'gatekeepers' or those in positions of influence over athletic young women's sport-related decision-making. Based on a questionnaire survey ($n = 160$) and focus groups, the article identifies significant diversity, possible change, and persisting disapproval in community perceptions of women's participation in rugby. From these findings, the article also draws some insights into the changing dynamics of women's rugby as a site of hegemonic struggle.

Keywords

athletic young women, community attitudes, Fiji, gatekeepers, hegemonic struggle, women's rugby

Introduction

Women's rugby union is one of the fastest-growing team sports. A women's rugby website (Scrumqueens, 2016) reports that the global number of registered players increased by 32% in 2015. According to World Rugby (2017), the sport's international governing body, there are over 2.2 million women rugby players today. With rugby sevens becoming an Olympic sport in 2016, the growth is expected to gain further momentum. While

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this is significant in light of the well-documented challenges that women have historically faced in playing male-dominated sports (see Kleindienst-Cachay and Heckemeyer, 2008), the trend is not equally experienced everywhere. Research commissioned by World Rugby for its *Women's Rugby Plan 2011–2016*, which involved a survey of affiliated unions around the world, noted that “the perception that it is not a Game for girls still persists in some areas” and that “[s]ome people believe that Rugby is too violent and dangerous for girls” (International Rugby Board, 2012: 10).

Despite such awareness of persisting societal opposition, little empirical research has to date examined community attitudes towards women's rugby. Sport has been widely studied as a site of the construction of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality (e.g., Birrell and Cole, 1990; Wright and Clark, 1999). Indeed, rugby, as one of the most ‘hyper-masculine’ sports (Carle and Nauright, 1999), has attracted much research highlighting women players' compliance with gender normativity (i.e., ‘female apologetic’), resistance, and/or interplay between them (e.g., Adjepong, 2015; Gill, 2007; Hardy, 2014). Given significant obstacles to participation, researchers have also investigated women's motivations for starting and continuing to play rugby (Chu et al., 2003; Cleary, 2000; Fields and Comstock, 2008). Yet, much of this research has been undertaken in Western contexts when women's participation in sport is shaped by disparate social and historical trajectories (such as interrelations of indigenous cultures, colonial inheritance and globalisation in many non-Western societies), which warrant close empirical inquiry. Moreover, little is known about how community members – as opposed to players – actually perceive women's participation in rugby.

The present study seeks to contribute to filling this lacuna in the literature with exploratory insights into how women's rugby in Fiji is perceived by young (defined here as 16–35-year-old) women who do not play rugby but are physically active (i.e., regularly exercise and/or play one or more sports – henceforth ‘athletic young women’) and those who exercise influence over these women's sport-related decision-making (e.g., parents, siblings and teachers; henceforth ‘gatekeepers’). While there is a growing body of literature on men's rugby in Fiji (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014; Osborne-Finekaso, 2016; Presterudstuen, 2010; Schieder and Presterudstuen, 2014), few researchers other than Kanemasu and Molnar (2013c, 2015) have studied Fijian women's participation in the game, and no empirical study, to our knowledge, has focused on the voices of community members whose support and interest is critical to facilitating Fijian women's greater access to the game.¹ In short, we aim to provide a critical perspective on women's participation in rugby beyond the playing field by exploring community attitudes.

Fiji is a Pacific island country where rugby is widely regarded as a national sport, with a player–population ratio believed to be the highest among all rugby-playing countries (Fiji Rugby Union, 2016). As highlighted by Kanemasu and Molnar (2013c, 2015), the gendered and hetero-normative nature of rugby in Fiji is consolidated by, among other things, its hegemonic articulation with indigenous cultural tradition and nationalism. In the face of postcolonial marginalisation that Fiji has experienced as a ‘peripheral’ society, Fijian excellence in rugby has served as a key source of national pride and symbolic resistance (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013b). Notably, such pride is embedded in a ‘traditionalist’ discourse defining the game as a privileged cultural practice fused with

indigenous heritage, especially precolonial traditions of warfare and masculinism (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c). Thus, despite its colonial origins and the country's multi-ethnic demography, rugby has come to assume a profoundly 'indigenised,' as well as gendered, nature (Besnier and Brownell, 2016) in the context of the social hierarchies of class, ethnicity and gender in postcolonial Fiji (Naidu, 2007). Previous researchers (e.g., Grainger, 2009; Hokowhitu, 2004, 2009) have usefully examined rugby in New Zealand as a site of the (re)construction of racialised, (post)colonial discourses of Māori/Pacific island masculinities and bodies; in Fiji, rugby as a primary expression of 'the social value placed on militarised and masculinised discipline' (Teaiwa, 2005: 206) is doubly entrenched by anti-colonial ethno-nationalism.

Today, in the face of women's active and collective resistance over many decades (Mishra, 2012), much of social life in Fiji remains profoundly shaped by patriarchal tradition. Fiji's ranking on the Gender Gap Index has been low and further falling, 121st out of 145 countries in 2015, compared to 108th in 2010 (World Economic Forum, 2010, 2015). Gender relations are heavily influenced by traditional gender and sexual norms, manifested in, among other things, a high prevalence of gender-based violence (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, 2013), homophobia and transphobia (Johnson and Vithal, 2015). Fijian women have historically been deterred from entering masculine-defined social institutions and practices, as Teaiwa (2015) shows in the case of the military.

Consequently, women who claim the nation's foremost masculine sport incur severe sanctions, exacerbated by many of them being and/or suspected of being transmasculine and lesbian/gay (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2015). Since its inception in the late 1980s, women's rugby has struggled with low club registration and constant lack of resources. Official statistics show just 270 female senior players, who are predominantly indigenous Fijian and in their 20s, registered with six women's rugby clubs. They have struggled to secure financial, technical or emotional support from their family, rugby bodies and the public. While both men's and women's rugby – and indeed sport in general in Fiji – is underfunded, there exists a stark disparity in the funding and institutional support available to men's and women's rugby. Furthermore, many women have experienced verbal, psychological and/or physical punishment and abuse in their homes and communities for playing the game (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2015). Although institutional support has over the past few years improved substantially with greater commitment from the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU)² and other rugby bodies, negative sanction at grass-roots levels remains a major challenge.

Nevertheless, the players have been resolutely committed to the game, which they see as a key space for mutual support, gender expression and counter-hegemony (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2015). They have made tentative victories in this struggle: the Fijianas, the national team, won the Bowl at the 2013 Women's Rugby World Cup Sevens; qualified for the 2014–2015 World Rugby Women's Sevens Series; and recently became the first women's rugby team from the Pacific region to compete in the Olympics. Especially in the months leading up to the 2016 Summer Olympics, women's rugby, which had previously been largely disregarded by the Fijian news media, was given an unprecedented amount of TV, print and radio coverage. Over the last 2–3 years, some of Fiji's largest companies have also featured Fijiana players in their advertisements (see e.g., Telecom Fiji, 2017), boosting their visibility in the public arena.

To analyse the dynamics of gender/sexual domination, resistance, accommodation and negotiation played out in and through women's rugby, Kanemasu and Molnar drew on Gramsci's (1971: 195) conceptualisation of the rise of a hegemonic/counter-hegemonic discourse as a "process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental ... becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex". This is further refined by Williams's (1977: 122) analysis of cultural processes as dynamic interrelations between 'dominant', 'residual' and 'emergent' elements. Kanemasu and Molnar (2015) detect a possible 'emergent' shift in Fiji's popular perceptions of women's rugby, prompted by the recent publicity, while stressing the persisting power of the hegemonic rugby discourse.

In this article, we present a closer examination of the social context within which Fijian women pursue rugby to extend the existing literature in three ways. First, building on Kanemasu and Molnar's discussion of hegemonic/counter-hegemonic processes in women's rugby, we provide empirical analysis to demonstrate whether the tentative cultural shift they noted is indeed in progress. Second, we seek to offer a more nuanced investigation of the hegemonic rugby discourse in Fiji. Grassroots communities are far from monolithic and consist of diverse social groups with diverse perceptions of the game. Insights into these can contribute to a greater understanding of the complexities of the socio-cultural milieu of women's participation in rugby in particular and male-dominated sports in general. Finally, from such analysis we also aim to draw further insights into the dynamics of women's rugby as a site of hegemonic/counter-hegemonic struggle. The study was conducted as part of a larger project funded by Oceania Rugby and undertaken in partnership with Oceania Rugby and the FRU. We present and analyse findings of the project guided by the following questions:

1. What are athletic young women's attitudes to and interest in women's rugby?
2. What are gatekeepers' attitudes to women's rugby?
3. Based on the above, is there any 'emergent' shift in the hegemonic rugby discourse in Fiji?
4. What does the above indicate in relation to the current and future dynamics of women's rugby in Fiji as a site of hegemonic/counter-hegemonic struggle?

Methods

The study is exploratory in nature and employed a mixed-method approach. A questionnaire survey and focus groups were undertaken concurrently in June 2016 in a manner in which "the data analyses from the two methods are juxtaposed and generate complementary insights that together create a bigger picture" (Brannen, 2005: 12). The survey sample ($n = 160$) was drawn from athletic young women, and family and teachers of athletic young women in Suva (Fiji's capital city) and Nadi. Although the research sites were limited to urban areas, efforts were made to enhance the validity of the data by combining convenience sampling with maximum variation sampling: we sought to recruit diverse participants in terms of age, ethnicity, sex (in the case of gatekeepers), sports

Table 1. Survey sample.

	Athletic young women (n = 81)		Gatekeepers (n = 79)	
Age	16–19	16 (20%)	20–29	14 (17%)
	20–29	49 (60%)	30–39	31 (39%)
	30–35	16 (20%)	40–49	21 (27%)
			50–59	8 (10%)
			60–69	5 (6%)
Ethnicity	Indigenous Fijian	60 (74%)	Indigenous Fijian	51 (65%)
	Indo-Fijian	7 (9%)	Indo-Fijian	18 (23%)
	European-Fijian	9 (11%)	European-Fijian	4 (5%)
	Others	5 (6%)	Others	6 (8%)
Sex	Female	81 (100%)	Female	42 (53%)
	Male	0	Male	37 (47%)

(in the case of athletic young women), etc., to maximise the range of perspectives investigated in the study (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007) (see Table 1).

A self-administered questionnaire produced by Oceania Rugby was used as a basis and modified to suit the research questions.³ Specifically, irrelevant items were deleted and the questions and items were restructured and/or reformatted to directly address the issues relevant to the current examination. The key survey items were general attitude measures associated with rugby. The participants also completed the benevolent sexism scale, which measures the extent that an individual endorses beliefs that women are weak individuals who need to be protected and provided for (see Glick and Fiske, 1996 for further explanation). Frequency analysis was employed to determine the frequency of attitude measures, and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare sexism responses between athletic young women and gatekeepers. Key relative frequency distributions are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Qualitative data were collected via four focus groups. Two groups of six or seven athletic young women and two groups of six or seven gatekeepers met in Suva for 1–1.5 hours to discuss topics designed to obtain in-depth information to complement the survey. These included questions concerning: the participants' gender-related values; normative positions on women's participation in rugby; knowledge about women's rugby; perceptions of its safety; perceptions of its positive and negative aspects; and current level of support for or interest in it. A total of 26 persons (13 athletic young women and 13 gatekeepers), recruited via convenience and maximum variation sampling, participated (see Table 2). Of the two gatekeeper focus groups, one consisted solely of family members (parents and siblings) of athletic young women, while the other was made up predominantly of primary and secondary school teachers. In total, eight were family members and five were teachers. The discussions were moderated by the first author and trained Fijian research assistants in a manner informed by Pacific Talanoa methodology (Vaiolleti, 2006): they were held in an informal, interactive setting and encouraged the participants to provide detailed responses using examples and anecdotes. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and put to qualitative analysis through thematic

coding. In the following sections, quotations from the transcripts are indicated with quotation marks or presented in indented paragraphs, depending on their lengths.

Both the survey and focus group participants were provided with a written outline of the purposes and procedures of the study, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, and their right to withdraw from participation. No minor participated in the study.

Table 2. Focus group sample.

	Athletic young women (<i>n</i> = 13)		Gatekeepers (<i>n</i> = 13)	
Age	16–19	2 (15%)	20–29	3 (23%)
	20–29	7 (54%)	30–39	4 (31%)
	30–35	4 (31%)	40–49	6 (46%)
Ethnicity	Indigenous Fijian	5 (38%)	Indigenous Fijian	10 (77%)
	Indo-Fijian	2 (15%)	Indo-Fijian	2 (15%)
	Indigenous-Indo-Fijian	1 (8%)	Indigenous-Indo-Fijian	1 (8%)
	European-Fijian	4 (31%)		
	Chinese-Fijian	1 (8%)		
Sex	Female	13 (100%)	Female	9 (69%)
	Male	0 (0%)	Male	4 (31%)
Sport played*	Hockey	4 (31%)		
	Volleyball	4 (31%)		
	Basketball	1 (8%)		
	Netball	1 (8%)		
	Powerlifting	1 (8%)		
	Track and field	1 (8%)		
	Regular gym workout	1 (8%)		

Note: *The participants were asked to identify one sport they played most frequently or for the longest period.

Athletic young women: undocumented allies

Sport is historically a male preserve, and in a patriarchal society, physically active women cross gender barriers by the fact of embracing athleticism: sport offers women “an active female physicality that can challenge the gender order” (Howe, 2001: 80). Despite the powerful patriarchal tradition discussed above, the survey results show that athletic young women are not necessarily controlled by it. An ANOVA was employed to directly test whether gatekeepers and athletic young woman differed in their endorsement of sexism beliefs. Specifically, an ANOVA provides a test of whether the average scores between two or more groups on some response is statistically different. An ANOVA revealed that, on a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating greater sexism endorsement, the athletic women participants (mean (*M*) = 2.40) reported significantly less benevolent sexist belief than the gatekeeper participants (*M* = 3.75), *F* (1,156) = 86.66, *p* = 0.000. As for their attitudes to women’s rugby, a vast majority (84%) of the athletic women survey participants expressed respect for women rugby players, and a large number (74%) expressed normative support for women’s participation in rugby (all relevant frequency data are shown in Table 3). The athletic women focus group results

Table 3. Relative frequency distributions from athletic young women survey data (percentages).

Likert scale items	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree/disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
I respect girls who play rugby	40.7	35.8	7.4	6.2	4.9	2.5	2.5	100
It is fine for girls to play rugby	23.5	35.8	14.8	12.3	4.9	6.2	2.5	100
I know many girls who play rugby.	21.5	38.0	19.9	8.9	8.9	3.8	0	100
Thinking about playing rugby does inspire me	16.0	32.1	17.3	19.8	2.5	4.9	7.4	100
Playing Rugby is very safe	13.6	13.6	22.2	23.5	12.3	12.3	2.5	100
I hope to play rugby some day	14.8	29.6	18.5	14.8	2.5	13.6	6.2	100
People laugh at girls who play rugby	17.3	12.3	19.8	7.4	11.1	21.0	11.1	100
Boys would judge me badly if I played rugby	18.5	17.3	17.3	11.1	12.3	14.8	8.6	100
My family would want me to play rugby	11.1	14.8	8.6	27.2	13.6	17.3	7.4	100
My good friends would want me to play rugby	18.5	18.5	22.2	12.3	8.6	12.3	7.4	100

closely parallel these. All participants emphatically stated that women should be encouraged to play rugby on the grounds of equal rights: 'It shouldn't be a question of whether you should play. Women should already be there [playing rugby]'; 'Not just rugby, any sport.' One participant elaborated:

Rugby is associated with men and it's a huge sport in the Pacific. To see women go out there and play – I enjoy seeing them and I love posting about them on Facebook. Just because they are women doesn't mean that they can't do what men can do.

Mirroring the nation-wide popularity of the game, the athletic women had a positive view of rugby itself, with the majority (65%) of the survey participants inspired by the thought of rugby. Similarly, the focus group participants, who were asked to identify one word to describe rugby, predominantly chose words denoting positive qualities: intelligence; self-confidence; strength; cheering ('When I hear the word rugby I feel like

cheering'), etc., while a few associated the sport with physicality ('rough'; 'muscles') and a particular sex/sexuality ('rugby boys'; 'lesbians').

The athletic young women were also less affected by the common perception of rugby as an injury-prone, 'dangerous' sport: due to their own involvement in sport/exercise, they expressed more informed views. Only a minority (27%) of the survey participants had safety concerns (of whom just 2.5% expressed strong concerns), and no focus group participant felt that rugby had any specific safety issue: 'Every sport has its dangers. Once you know the game properly, you are generally safe'.

Accordingly, over 60% of the athletic women survey participants and all but one athletic women focus group participant expressed interest in attempting the sport themselves. It appears that, for these women who already challenge traditional gender barriers, playing rugby is not necessarily a big leap. As a focus group participant explained: 'At the end of the day, weights and stuff are associated with something that guys do, much like rugby. ... So, just to prove them wrong, yes, I would do it.'

For them to take the leap, however, support from their family, friends and wider communities matters, given strong communal and family relations and values in Fiji. Our results suggest that, although these women do not share the societal disapproval of women's rugby, they are aware that such negativity may be directed at them if they are to take up the controversial sport. It should be noted that, at the time of the data collection, the Fijianas' upcoming participation in the 2016 Summer Olympics was widely reported by the local media, giving them more favourable publicity than ever before. Yet, the survey participants were divided in their views as to whether women rugby players were respected by the public. Forty-nine per cent felt that 'people laugh at girls who play rugby' while 42% disagreed. A little over half believed they would be negatively judged by boys if they played rugby. The focus group participants were more vocal about the negative social sanction, in particular, stigmatisation on the basis of the common association of the sport with gender and sexual nonconformity:

The stigma and the labelling that goes with it... Yes, there's lesbians in every sport. But the stigma would be the biggest negative. 'Why do you want to be like a boy? Rugby is for boys not for girls. Play netball.' That's what most of them say. ... For traditional people, it would be a big *tabu* [taboo] for girls to play rugby.

If you are strolling down the street and you are wearing a shirt that says 'I love rugby' and someone says 'Lesbo!' it is not a very uplifting thing.

Further compounding their concerns was their perception of a stark disparity in institutional support for women's and men's rugby. Women rugby players, they pointed out, 'have to bang, scream, kick and shout just to get any kind of reaction [from rugby bodies].' As another participant explained:

When you ... are in minority sports like women's rugby ... just about everything comes out of your pocket. I don't think the Fijianas are fully sponsored. They still don't pay the players, but the boys [i.e., men's national team] get paid. Women actually pay to play for our country!

Given this perception of negative social sanction and poor institutional support, the women presented similarly mixed views on whether they would be supported by their family and friends to play rugby. Although 59% of the survey participants were confident about their close friends' support, only 35% felt the same about their family, with 27% uncertain and 38% not expecting their family to be supportive. This uncertainty was equally evident among the focus group participants. Some expected their family to be encouraging ('Some of us are really lucky having menfolk who are very open-minded'), but others believed that their family would object for the reasons of safety concerns, societal disapproval and stigma:

My husband would probably say 'Don't play rugby, we still need to have children.' Probably he would think that I might get hit badly and that could cause problems. He just knows that men play rugby. He thinks I am dainty; because I am his woman he has to protect me.

One participant indeed once wanted to play rugby:

I asked my husband if he could buy me boots so I could play. The first thing he said to me was 'No, don't play rugby, you might become lesbian.'

In short, both the survey and focus groups show that athletic young women have predominantly affirmative views of rugby in general, women's rugby in particular, and women rugby players. Many already have an interest in attempting the sport themselves, yet there is a degree of apprehension about the perceived lack of support from family, rugby bodies and wider society.

Gatekeepers: multiplicity of community attitudes

At first glance, the gatekeeper survey and the gatekeeper focus groups present different results: some survey results appear to dispute that women rugby players face any particular negative social sanction. Specifically, about 80% of the gatekeeper survey participants expressed respect for women rugby players (all relevant gatekeeper frequency data are shown in Table 4). Sixty-seven per cent did not have normative objection to women's participation in rugby, and further, 63% would 'definitely encourage women to play rugby.'

On the other hand, the gatekeeper focus groups presented more mixed, divided and/or ambivalent views. The two focus groups, one of which consisted entirely of family members of athletic young women (henceforth 'the family members') and the other largely school teachers (henceforth 'the teachers'), showed considerable differences. The family members were almost overwhelmingly opposed to women's rugby for three main reasons. First, they emphatically disapproved of women breaking traditional gender norms by playing a men's sport: 'It [women playing rugby] is a *tabu*'; 'I say women shouldn't play rugby. Rugby is only meant for boys. Basketball, netball, women can play, but rugby I don't think they should.' Second, their objection was not only normatively-based but reinforced by their perception of differential institutional support for women's and men's rugby: 'They almost have no support; what they have

Table 4. Relative frequency distributions from gatekeeper survey data (percentages).

Likert scale items	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree/disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
I respect young women who play rugby	35.4	34.2	10.1	6.3	6.3	3.8	3.8	100
It is fine for young women to play rugby	25.3	26.6	15.2	10.1	8.9	5.1	8.9	100
I will definitely encourage women to play rugby	19.0	29.1	15.2	12.7	7.6	8.9	7.6	100
I would encourage my daughter to play rugby	13.9	21.5	12.7	17.7	3.8	13.9	16.5	100
I know many young women who play rugby	19.9	32.9	22.8	10.1	1.3	10.1	3.8	100
Playing Rugby is very safe	6.3	20.3	20.3	27.8	15.2	5.1	5.1	100
I am concerned that women who play rugby may get injured	25.3	43.0	13.9	5.1	3.8	7.6	1.3	100

now is peanuts.’ Third, the masculinist definition of the game and perceived lack of institutional support led to concerns over rugby’s safety for women, especially the absence of medical insurance:⁴ ‘If there’s a big mishap on the ground, there’s a spinal injury, that woman is going to live in hell for the rest of her life. Nobody’s going to cover for her.’

By contrast, all participants in the teacher group agreed that women should be supported to play rugby for a range of benefits including: exposure and confidence; fame; employment opportunities through professional contracts; character building; educational opportunities through rugby scholarships; physical and mental discipline; and career paths for coaching and sport management. The teachers thus supported the sport as an avenue for educational/career success and personal development. Some, like the athletic young women participants, linked women’s rugby to a broader issue of gender equality: ‘The reason why rugby is male-dominated is because it was looked at as a male sport. I do appreciate that women have come into the sport, because there’s a change in that dominance.’ Yet some also noted perceived detriments, similar to those listed by the family members: the sport’s effects on femininity (‘it’s quite hard for [women players] to retain their femininity’); possibilities of injury; and absence of medical insurance.

Emerging from these focus groups is the picture that the family members who endorsed patriarchal tradition disapproved of women's rugby as a major breach of gender norms, while the teachers, possibly due to their education and professional training/exposure, expressed greater support, although some shared the family members' concerns over injury and gender nonconformity evoked by the sport. One female teacher aptly summarised this continuum of affirmative, ambivalent and oppositional views:

Women's rights have to be considered you know, but in our culture there's this perception that women do not play [rugby], it's a men's sport. Women should be sitting there waving the flag or something. It does take away the passion of someone who wants to play but then considering the odds, there is no financial support. ... They are women and some have a child or two. What happens to those children if they sustain an injury?

Curiously, although the gatekeeper focus group participants were divided/ambivalent in their own normative positions, they unanimously agreed that there was widespread community opposition to the sport on the basis of gender norms, safety concerns, and the stigma associated with gender/sexual nonconformity:

When [the participant's husband] talks about women's rugby, the first thing that comes out of his mouth is, truth be told, 'That's a bunch of lesbians.' The question of sexuality comes into play. Because Fijian society is patriarchal, the thought of a woman playing that game will suddenly shift the interest from her being a woman to her being [behaving like] a man. That's the reality on the ground level ... 'Don't you play, besides being dangerous, that's a men's game. This one [woman] here is going to become like a lesbian.' There's no encouragement from society.

If this [focus group] discussion was to be brought to the village they'd say, 'No, no, no, our daughters are not going to play. We disagree for the very reason of sexuality, sexual preferences. My children will not associate with those girls because they'll end up doing this [i.e., sexual/gender nonconformity].' And that's the reality.

Such community opposition, they noted, might be expressed as silent disapproval or verbal abuse such as spectator jeering during games and calling players '*panikeke*' (derogatory slang for 'lesbian'): 'If we take women to play rugby in the interior ... you will hear the remarks, the faces and the sounds coming from the sidelines.'

The differences between the survey and the focus group results are worthy of some reflection. First, in light of its larger sample size, the results of the survey may indeed be indicative of a broader and substantial rise in public support for women's rugby. This would be consistent with the same trend in institutional support and plausible especially because the data collection was undertaken amidst unprecedented, favourable media coverage of the Fijianas. It should be noted that the favourable views of the survey participants are also shared by the teacher focus group participants. Taken together, these point to a certain shift in community attitudes that Kanemasu and Molnar (2015) observed might be emerging. Second, the focus group results suggest that gatekeepers in different roles may have considerably different attitudes. Although the survey participants were not asked to disclose their relationship to athletic young women, it is possible that the

survey sample included more gatekeepers in professional roles who tend to be more favourable in their views. Third, about 76% of the survey participants personally knew women rugby players, while only one focus group participant did. Personal knowledge of players may have at least in part contributed to the survey participants' responses. Fourth, the differences may be partially attributed to the methodological difference between the survey and the focus group: unlike the standardised questionnaire, the focus groups allowed the participants to respond in their own words and provide additional information, which was more conducive to communicating mixed and ambivalent views.

Interestingly, some survey results are actually consistent with the more mixed and complex picture presented by the focus groups. Despite what appears to be overwhelming support for women's rugby among them, the survey participants were more divided when the matter involved their own family; while 48% said they would encourage their own daughter to play rugby, about 18% were undecided, and 34% were not prepared to do so. This corresponds to the gatekeeper focus group participants' positions on the same question, which ranged from active support, ambivalence and reservation ('Because it [rugby] is physical, I would be more conservative in making my decision [whether to support the participant's daughter playing it].') especially among the teachers, to firm opposition ('I won't allow my daughter to play regardless.') especially among the family members on the grounds of gender norms, safety concerns, and lack of institutional support.

The survey results were also consistent with the focus group results with regard to the participants' perceptions of the sport's safety. An overwhelming 82% of the survey participants were concerned that women rugby players might get injured, with 25% acknowledging strong concerns. It is also notable that there was a much higher prevalence of benevolent sexism, of which protective paternalism is a typical characteristic, among the gatekeeper survey participants than the athletic young women (see earlier ANOVA findings). The focus group discussions paralleled these, with some participants, especially the family members, arguing that rugby is too physical and dangerous for women while the teachers expressed ambivalence or more neutral views. With these results taken into account, the overall survey findings present a fairly nuanced picture of gatekeeper attitudes.

Complexities of community attitudes and changing dynamics of hegemonic struggle

These findings illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of community attitudes to women's rugby in Fiji. The previous research (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2015) shed light on the immense power of the hegemonic masculinist discourse on rugby and the systematic punishment and ostracisation of women rugby players, while also envisaging a possible and tentative shift in this discourse. Our findings extend this discussion by showing that 'community' is neither a monolithic nor static category; that even in communities with an overwhelmingly patriarchal appearance, there exist pockets of resistance and scope for change.

Both the survey and focus groups show that athletic young women may not themselves play rugby but stand in solidarity with women rugby players, respecting them for claiming the sport which they associate with intelligence, confidence and strength, yet

which has long been denied to women. Fijian women tend to be portrayed as victims of gender oppression in the dominant media and popular discourses (Leckie, 2002; Pacific Media Watch, 2006), but these women – both rugby players and other athletic women – daily challenge gender barriers by exercising their autonomy to play the sport of their choice. We note that women have differential abilities and resources to exercise this agency, depending on geographical location, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other factors. Yet, significantly, rugby playing women do not stand alone: they are respected and supported by other athletic women, who may even gladly join them. Other community members are far from homogeneous either. They come from a diversity of ideological, cultural, socio-economic and political backgrounds, resulting in multiple normative positions on women's participation in rugby. Although our focus groups consisted of only two types of gatekeepers, the differences between them are sufficient to signify the plurality of community attitudes.

Consequently, while discussion of a hegemonic discourse is important and necessary as it captures the persisting and consequential dominance of the masculinist definition of the game at the societal level, we need to also unmask its static, all-powerful appearance since diverse community groups hold diverse – sometimes conflicting and competing – views at grassroots levels. As shown in this study, there is at least one notable oppositional group, athletic young women, whose voices are rarely heard or documented in Fiji: when they were asked to speak, the vast majority spoke out unequivocally in defence of women's claims to the nation's most cherished sport.

Furthermore, the hegemonic discourse itself is in the process of constant flux. Our survey and teacher focus group illuminate a possible change in progress at least among some gatekeepers. With women's rugby's newly acquired Olympic-sport status and the corresponding increase in institutional/media attention visible in the public eye, a greater number of gatekeepers may be beginning to approve and appreciate the hitherto-contentious sport. Importantly, gatekeepers are in positions of influence over athletic young women's decision-making. A shift in their attitudes may foster greater scope for Fijian women's access to rugby.

That is, the hegemonic alignment of rugby with nationalism, masculinism, and traditionalism may be showing signs of erosion in some communities. In examining this possible fissure in the hegemonic configuration, it is important to note the impact of the Fijianas' recent successes, and especially their securing a place among the only 12 countries in the world to compete in the 2016 Summer Olympics. This achievement carried a great amount of prestige in Fiji, where rugby has long assumed an unquestioned status as a symbol of national pride, and where, prior to the introduction of rugby sevens as an Olympic Game, only two athletes had ever participated in the Olympics by actually qualifying, not as wild cards (Cutler, 2016). As the *Fiji Times* editor explains its significance: 'Here we are, a dot on the world map. We're turning heads. And our people love it.' The Fijianas' Olympic qualification was publicly commended in the Parliament House by the Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and a prominent opposition parliamentarian (Nauwakarawa, 2015). Thus, an 'emergent' discourse – which appropriates the hegemonic articulation of rugby with (anti-colonial) nationalism and pushes masculinism and traditionalism to the margin – may be in the process of making. If this dynamic is sustained and continues to expand, the currently 'dominant'

positioning of rugby as a pinnacle of indigenous masculinity enshrined by sacred tradition may eventually decline into 'residual' status, causing a decisive alteration of the hegemonic configuration.

But our results also warn against uncritical assumption of wholesale, surpassing change. It remains to be seen if the change identified here is an enduring one or a 'fad' stimulated temporarily by the Olympic fervour. The focus group results show that the normative opposition may be entrenched in some communities, especially villages and rural areas. The old stigma, discouragement and condemnation remain prevalent enough to concern a substantial number of athletic young women who participated in the survey and focus groups. As discussed above, even the gatekeeper survey participants, who were largely sympathetic, were divided as to whether they were prepared to encourage their own daughter to play the sport. Considerable proportions of the gatekeepers also endorsed the benevolent sexist notion that rugby is too 'dangerous' for women.

What these results suggest, then, is that Fiji's hegemonic rugby discourse may be undergoing a process of complex and multifaceted transition, with elements of both significant push for counter-hegemony (i.e., emergent discourse) and enduring hegemonic power (i.e., dominant discourse) visible in the communities. In short, our results show that communities are diverse, and that they are constantly evolving: they illuminate the multiplicity and fluidity of the hegemonic discourse that often go unnoticed.

We may also draw some theoretical implications from this as it illustrates hegemony/counter-hegemony as a strategic and dynamic process whereby, in Gramsci's (1971: 349) words, "a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together ... on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world." Hegemony/counter-hegemony is not a simple case of imposition of a completely new and already-formulated discourse but rather, differential interests and discourses (such as those of anti-colonialism, ethno-nationalism, traditionalism, masculinism/hetero-normativity and gender/sexual nonconformity) continually aligned, re-aligned and dis-aligned to form a 'common conception of the world' (a hegemonic/counter-hegemonic rugby discourse). While a hegemonic discourse is powerful so far as it sustains an effective articulation, it is "also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own" (Williams, 1977: 112). The findings of this study embody such multifarious and ever-shifting dynamics of hegemonic/counter-hegemonic struggle – that is, women's rugby as a dynamic site of "cultural battle" (Gramsci, 1971: 348).

Conclusions

This article has explored community attitudes towards women's rugby in Fiji, with a focus on athletic young women and gatekeepers (family and teachers in positions of influence over athletic young women's sport-related decision-making). Central to the existing research (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2015) is the proposition that Fijian women experience severe punishment, stigmatisation and sometimes ostracisation by families and communities for playing the country's foremost masculine sport. Little empirical research has however actually investigated community members' attitudes towards women's participation in rugby. In this context, we have attempted to provide a critical perspective beyond the playing field by exploring community attitudes.

Our survey and focus group results show that even in a society with an overwhelmingly patriarchal appearance, there exist pockets of resistance and scope for change. A vast majority of athletic young women in Fiji in fact actively support and respect women rugby players to the extent that they would consider joining them. Gatekeepers are also far from homogeneous; they have considerably different normative positions arising from diverse ideological, cultural, socio-economic and political backgrounds. Furthermore, there appears to be a potentially significant, broad-based positive shift in community attitudes. Many gatekeepers, especially those in professional roles (such as teachers), and at least in urban areas, may be developing affirmative views of the game at a time of nation-wide excitement about Fiji's participation in the 2016 Olympic rugby sevens competition. That is, the shift that Kanemasu and Molnar (2015) suggested might be possibly arising in the dominant rugby discourse is indeed empirically observable. At the same time, it appears that negative perceptions and sanctions, grounded in traditional gender norms, safety concerns, and perceived lack of institutional support, also remain, discouraging some athletic women from attempting the game. In sum, our study has identified significant diversity, possible change and persisting disapproval.

These findings also add to the existing literature further insights into the complexities and fluidity of the hegemonic/counter-hegemonic struggle played out in and through women's rugby. While the power of the dominant rugby discourse rests on effective articulation between rugby, (anti-colonial) nationalism, masculinism and traditionalism (among other things), it is also continually resisted and challenged by an 'emergent' discourse of women's rugby, which, through conspicuous international successes (such as the Fijianas' Olympic qualification), appeals to national pride and thereby appropriates the hegemonic alignment between rugby and nationalism, pushing masculinism and traditionalism to the margin and potentially relegating them to 'residual' status in the hegemonic configuration.

While the study is intended to contribute to sociological analysis of the social environments for women's participation in rugby and other male-dominated sports, these findings may also inform institutional policies and strategies for women's rugby development. Given the limited scope and samples of the study, however, greater contributions to both sociological inquiry and institutional policy require further research that delineates the scale and precise nature of the cultural shift outlined here, with attention to the views and voices of more diverse community groups (such as villagers, rural residents and male athletes) as well as institutional gatekeepers (such as the FRU and the mass media).

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Notes

1. While athletic young women may take interest in attempting rugby, encouragement or acceptance from their gatekeepers is vital due to strong communal/familial relations and values in Fiji.
2. For instance, the position of Women's Rugby Development Officer was established in the Fiji Rugby Union in 2012.
3. While the questionnaire, consisting of closed-ended and Likert-scale questions, was presented in English, no participant indicated communication difficulty, as English is Fiji's official language and extra care was taken to ensure the clarity and accessibility of the wording of the questions.
4. As of December 2016, the fifteen-a-side Fijianas were not provided with medical insurance.

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