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# Exploring racialised minority women's lived experiences of negotiating sports boardroom positions in the UK

Anika Leslie-Walker <sup>a</sup> and Zuleikha Chikh <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sport Science, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, this study critically explores the lived experiences of racialised minority women ( $n = 15$ ) in sport boardrooms via semi-structured in-depth interviews. We explore their perceptions, experiences and interactions across a range of sport organisations in the United Kingdom (UK); National Governing Bodies (NGB), not-for-profit organisations, sport charities, and private sporting organisations. Findings illustrate how institutional arrangements designed to uphold Whiteness and patriarchy not only manifest within some sports boardrooms but also during preparatory stages and interview processes. Racialised minority women drew attention to exclusionary racialised and gendered practices including tokenism, microaggressions and a series of power dynamics which resulted in them feeling silenced, undervalued and isolated. Challenges to such exclusionary behaviours are explored through examples of micro-resistance practices. We argue that despite the representation of racialised minority women on sport boards, their presence may function as a performative gesture, masking deeper structural inequalities and keeping them on the peripheries of decision-making processes. To address inequitable boardroom cultures, stakeholders and policy-makers must (1) revise the current Code for Sports Governance to include requirements for boards to monitor and make changes to address inequitable board cultures; (2) provide mandatory anti-discrimination education for Chairs, CEO's and board members-; (3) establish appropriate independent channels for board members to seek support and report incidents of discrimination.

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## Introduction

Boardrooms have been identified as the 'crucial lynchpin' of organisations, marking the highest level of organisational strategy and decision-making processes (Pye 2004, p. 65). Scholars have attempted to define sports governance and, in doing so, have largely focused on the organisational, systemic and political aspects of governance (Henry 2007). Attention has been drawn to 'the structures and processes used by an organisation to develop its strategic goals and direction, monitor its performance against these goals

**CONTACT** Anika Leslie-Walker  [anika.leslie-walker@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:anika.leslie-walker@ntu.ac.uk)  Department of Sport Science, Clifton Campus, Nottingham Trent University, Clifton Lane, Nottingham NG11 8NS, UK

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and ensure that its board acts in the best interests of the members' (Hoye and Cuskelly 2007, p. 9). Such definitions have largely focused on goal-oriented aspects of sports governance, while other areas have been overlooked including aspects of power and board behaviour (Buse *et al.* 2016). For Cho *et al.* (2024) sports governance is a realm where members are 'granted power and authority' to drive strategic changes on behalf of the organisation (p. 280). Within their roles, board members are expected to adhere to good governance principles which generally refer to a set of behaviours members are expected to follow. Good governance has also been defined as a 'normative' approach, requiring organisations to mirror broader societal expectations of ethical practice (Henry and Lee 2004). Nevertheless, scholars have questioned whether 'good' governance can ever be achieved given the power relations that operate within boardrooms (Claringbold *et al.* 2021). Further interrogation of these standards facilitates a closer examination of boardroom cultures and behaviours which remains under-researched (Walton *et al.* 2017).

This article explores the voices and lived realities of racialised minority women by drawing upon their perceptions and experiences of sports boardroom cultures and behaviours. Further, we seek to foreground their voices to make sense of how they negotiate their intersectional identities to exert influence over board decisions once appointed (McLeod 2019, Tasheva and Huse 2023). The research questions that underpin this work are as follows:

- (1) What are the experiences of racialised minority women in the UK during the preparatory stages of pursuing sports board membership?
- (2) What are the experiences of racialised minority women within sports boardrooms in the UK?

To achieve this, we utilise the qualitative stories of 15 racialised minority women in sports board roles across National Governing Bodies (NGBs), not-for-profit, charities and private organisations.

Firstly, in the context of sport in the UK, NGBs are funded by Sport Councils and are primarily focused on setting the rules and regulations for participation in sport. Secondly, not-for-profit organisations focus on providing a community service alongside a range of sporting activities and are eligible to apply for funding from Sports Councils (Megheirkouni 2017; Tyler–Todd 2024). Thirdly, sport charities often have similar aims to not-for-profit organisations, however their charitable status often means their existence is for public benefit. Whilst government funding for sports charities is one source of income, charities also seek out multiple sources of funding to remain financially sustainable (Bingham and Walters 2013). Finally, private organisations are privately owned entities that seek to generate profit for shareholders, and are thus not in receipt of funding via Sport Councils. Whilst NGBs focus on governing and developing elite and grassroots sport participation nationally, not-for-profits, charities and private organisations are focused on social impact which may refer to wider societal benefits or quantifiable outcomes from programmes and/or initiatives.

All sports organisations in the UK (including NGBs) in receipt of UK Sport and Sport England funding must comply with the relevant mandatory requirements, as outlined in a set of governance principles which is referred to as *A Code for Sports Governance* (hereafter the Code) (UK Sport 2021). Given the varied levels of income generated by

sports organisations, the Code operates a proportionate approach across three tiers. Sports organisations are positioned in tiers reflecting the levels of investment received by Sport England and UK Sport, ranging from £10,000 and £250,000 (Tier 1), £250,000 - £1 million (Tier 2) and greater than £1 m (Tier 3) (Sport England and UK Sport 2021). One area of compliance featured throughout all tiers of the Code is principle two which focuses on people, with one area focused on addressing diversity. In respect of the 17 organisations represented by the study respondents, 9 of the organisations receive over £1 million of funding from Sport England and UK Sport, with some bodies reliant on only a portion of funding.<sup>1,2</sup>

## Theoretical framework

### *Critical race theory*

We employ Critical Race Theory (hereafter CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (hereafter BFT). This lens advances our understanding of the experiences of racialised minority women in sports governance positions, in particular the non-executive director and trustee roles where both racial and gendered discrimination are experienced.

CRT offers an analytical tool to explore how 'race' and racism organise society, exposing how the system of White supremacy upholds Whiteness (Gillborn 2008; Joseph-Salisbury 2019). Indeed, organisations operate under symbols and traditions that reproduce hegemonic power relations (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022). Exploring this concept further, Delgado and Stefancic (2013), Bonilla-Silva (1997) draw upon CRT to suggest racism is so deeply embedded in social structures and systems that it is normalised and invisibilised, meaning the existence and impacts of racism are overlooked if not presented in their most egregious forms. Moreover, CRT provides a framework for scholars to locate and critique the 'complex personal, cultural, institutional and structural arrangements' in institutions (such as sports organisations) and wider society (Hylton 2018, p. 7) that serve to keep racialised minorities subordinated.

Within the context of sport and leisure, Hylton (2005) highlights the focus on core social relations and processes of power. This signifies why boards are largely White, as those recruiting often hire in an image of themselves (Alon-Beck *et al.* 2021). Fundamentally, CRT challenges dominant ideologies and myths within sport surrounding 'objectivity, meritocracy, colour-blindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity' (Hylton 2010, p. 6) that renders Whiteness invisible and Blackness visible within sports boardrooms.

Whilst White liberal feminists have often ignored and disregarded 'race' in the academy in regard to the race-gendered discourse (Scruton 2001), this has consequently resulted in homogenising the women's experience as universal and accepted practice (Hooks 2000, Ahmed 2009, Mirza 2009). Such practice absences the voices and experiences of racialised minority women in industry processes, such as policy development, key decision-making and regulatory standards.

As argued by Ratna 2018, the study of gender has been approached through a 'White, Western, Eurocentric, secular and universalizing feminist lens' (p. 199). To ensure such perspectives do not dominate, Crenshaw *et al.* (2019) promotes redistributive justice and critical race feminism to be at the heart of change. Furthermore, Crenshaw advocates eradicating male domination and permitting a race-gendered combination of thought,

separate to the notion of gender essentialism which often platforms the White female (Crain 1991). The intersectionality visage enacts knowledge distribution and synthesises power dynamics and inequality within institutions (Rodriguez *et al.* 2016).

As articulated by Collins (1990), BFT centres Black women's voices, whilst considering the socio-political and economical power structures that authorise axes of racial, gendered and class oppression. Significantly, the work of Collins identified seven core themes of BFT theory to promote a nuanced understanding of racialised minority women's lived experiences; activism, empowerment, intersectionality, knowledge production, marginalisation, oppression and resistance. Although BFT originally focused on African American women in the US, it is important to raise wider concepts of racialised minority women and to resist homogeneous grouping. This is illustrated by Carter-Francique (2017, p. 67) who explains women's 'homogeneous grouping ... must be understood in respect of their own unique histories, traditions, experiences and perspective'. Therefore, the opportunity to explore the experiences of racialised minority women permits new notions that anchor away from radical ideals, which are often rooted in historical Eurocentric and masculine viewpoints. This shift empowers racialised minority women to assert themselves in spheres of influence (Collins 2015).

It is necessary to note that racialised minority women may not only face discrimination in the forms of racism and sexism but may also encounter multiple jeopardies impacting upon their everyday lives such as classism, ableism, islamophobia and homophobia, contributing to oppressive configurations (King 2016). Within the context of this study, CRT therefore helps to expose the normativity and invisibility of Whiteness within boardroom spaces, whereas BFT aids in situating the voices of racialised minority women along racial and gendered lines.

### ***Situating gender in sports governance***

There has been a notable increase in research pertaining to gender representation in sports leadership, in reference to governance and barriers faced by women (Evans and Pfister 2021). The majority of studies exploring the experiences of women in sports governance have, by default, focused on White women. This involves gendered structures, cultures and policies that prioritise patriarchy and masculinity which operate to shape the realities of women in the realm of sports leadership and governance (Bradbury *et al.* 2014, Burton and Leberman 2017, Elling *et al.* 2018, Sotiriadou and De Haan 2019, Piggott and Pike 2020, Piggott and Matthews 2020, Piggott 2022). For example, research undertaken by Piggott and Pike (2020) found sports boards were sites where masculinity and informal gendered practices were enforced through gendered dress codes, language and segregation. Within their study, they found some women engaged in resistance practices with regard to 'informal' gendered dress codes. Further, scholars have found that women are often located outside of the 'old boys network' reducing their heightened power, influence and homophilic safety (Adriaanse and Schofield 2013, Piggott and Tjønnndal 2023, Lawrence *et al.* 2024).

First introduced in 2016, the Code required NGBs whose total funding exceeds £1 m to work towards a target of at least 30% gender diversity on their boards (UK Sport 2016). In 2019, women made up 40%, with almost three-quarters of sport boards achieving the required 30% target (Diversity in Sport Governance Survey 2020). Whilst boards generally

exceeded the target, this figure has since remained static at 41% (Diversity in Sports Governance Survey 2024). Drawing upon regulation challenges concerning gender representation, Evans and Pfister (2021) posit how specified board targets can often be perceived as tokenistic, as the inclusion of women appears to 'tick the (gender) box', rather than women feeling appointed and valued based on their qualifications, skills or expertise. It has been argued that tokenism is a realm for high-pressured expectations (performance and assimilation) and can cause acts of resistance, hostility and challenges leaving women isolated and stereotyped (Kanter 1977). Here, Adriaanse (2024) asserts 'simply having more women on sport boards may not necessarily change the organizational culture' (p. 32).

### ***Situating 'race' and gender in sports governance***

In 2020, following a series of killings at the hands of police in America, the lives of African Americans Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were taken and protests were initiated against their deaths (Bunch and Cianfrone 2022). Such incidents brought issues of systemic and institutionalised racism to the fore and instigated change across institutions globally. The issue of 'race' drew attention to sports organisations prompting their (re) engagement with strategic commitments to diversity and inclusion agendas (Ofoegbu and Ekpe 2022, Tasheva and Huse 2023). Following the Black Lives Matter movement, changes were made in 2021 to strengthen the Code to include additional requirements for tier 3 funded sports bodies (UK Sport 2021). The revised Code no longer stipulated boards to meet 30% gender targets but required boards to implement Diversity, Inclusion Action Plans (DIAPs) to drive 'diversity in all its forms' on boards, senior leadership teams and throughout wider structures (Sport England and UK Sport 2021, p. 3). Whilst scholars have focused on gendered issues in sports governance, less attention has been paid towards racialised issues impacting the experiences of racialised minorities (Bradbury *et al.* 2025). Within these spaces, they experience being 'othered' and subject to microaggressions (Sue *et al.* 2007). Whether intentional or unintentional, they are verbalised and actioned as microinsults, microassaults and microinvalidations. For example, racialised minority males have reported negative experiences of microaggressions, including racist remarks based on their physical and religious appearance (Bradbury *et al.* 2018). More recently, the work of Kilvington *et al.* (2024) and Lawrence *et al.* (2024) explored the experiences of British South Asians in managerial and governance positions in football. A series of racialised experiences and assessments including the presence of stereotypes, microaggressions and code-switching practices were noted in predominantly White boardrooms.

Similar to studies exploring racialised issues in sport, racialised minority women's experiences have largely been examined within participation, coaching and leadership contexts (Leslie-Walker *et al.* 2023, Keaton and Macaulay 2025; Rankin-Wright *et al.* 2020). Black women face a double-jeopardy as they must deal with the everyday pressures of sexism and racism (Essed 1991, Rankin-Wright *et al.* 2017). A common argument is that racialised minority women in sports leadership and governance positions, face additional stressors and burdens in the workplace (McDowell and Carter-Fracique, 2017) including the pressure to represent the views of underrepresented communities, and in doing so, face resistance in challenging racialised and

gendered norms and practices (Palmer and Masters 2010, Cook and Glass 2020, Keaton *et al.* 2025). Such feelings of non-belonging in sport hinder opportunities to be seen, heard, valued and known (Stride *et al.* 2025). Further, Simpkins *et al.* (2022) explored the UK and US leadership and boardroom contexts and found instances of Black women feeling like an ‘outsider-within’ predominantly White sports organisations and subject to occupational stereotyping. These racialised logics are also prevalent in online spaces such as football video games where White women footballers have been rated as possessing generally higher cerebral qualities in comparison to their Black female counterparts (Campbell *et al.* 2025). Whilst racialised minority women constitute 6.4% of all NGB board members in the UK (Sporting Equals 2024), they face challenges justifying their skills and legitimacy as leaders under the ‘White gaze’ (McDowell and Puwar 2004, Rosette *et al.* 2008, Carter-Francique 2017). Scholars posit that there is a need to move beyond numerical diversity and investigate how intersectional diversity connects with broader inclusive board behaviours, interactions and relationships within boardrooms (Schoenberg *et al.* 2016, McLeod 2019).

It has been argued that the incorporation of board diversity policies is believed to enhance diversity and the positive experiences of underrepresented groups (Buse *et al.* 2016). However, Lusted (2014) states such pressures to comply for financial purposes, simply ‘include’ the under-represented into existing structures and cultures, avoiding the need for organisational reform” (p. 89). This study seeks to further ‘interrogate the racialisation of gender and the gendering of “race”’ (Scraton *et al.* 2005, p. 76) by drawing upon the lived experiences of racialised minority women on sports boards in the UK.

## Methodology

A qualitative research method approach was employed for the study, utilising an interpretive strategy that focuses on the subjective experiences of respondents. This method allowed insights into respondents’ unique perceptions and practices experienced within the socio-cultural phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The study explores narrative solely from racialised minority women within sports boardroom spaces in the UK (Table 1), serving on a variety of sports boards: National Governing Bodies [NGBs] ( $n = 6$ ), charity ( $n = 7$ ), private companies ( $n = 1$ ), not-for-profit (1) multiple organisations ( $n = 1$ ). One respondent held a boardroom position in an NGB and a charity organisation. The qualitative research design included ( $n = 15$ ) one-to-one, in-depth online semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Formal ethical approval was gained from the University ethics committee.

Respondents were recruited via purposive stratified sampling and snowball sampling. Given that the authors held sports board roles and actively networked within the sports governance space, recruitment involved a combination of personal networks and the advertisement of the study through social media platforms LinkedIn and X (formerly known as Twitter). Respondent criteria included being aged 18+, identified as a racialised minority woman and held a sports board role at the time of the interview for at least one year. This study has various sensitivities given the small number of racialised minority women occupying sports board roles in the UK; therefore, ensuring confidentiality, validity and anonymity was imperative. We therefore highlight the type of organisation but do not refer to specific sports.

The research team comprised a Black British woman of Caribbean heritage (first author) and a British woman of Indian and Algerian heritage (second author). Both authors are considered cultural 'insiders' due to shared racialised and gendered experiences with respondents. The work of Campbell (2015) highlights the dual positionality of researchers as both insiders and outsiders, emphasising how affiliation with particular social groups may increase their ability to construct meaning during the research process. However, we are also aware of our shifting identities and power inequalities which could have impacted upon our access to retrieve information (Fletcher 2010).

The interviews elicited information and enabled freedom when reflecting on the interview themes (Creswell 2014), therefore promoting and ensuring psychological safety and respondent openness. Each interview lasted between 30 and 85 minutes and respondents were aged between 21 and 55. The interview guide aimed to explore questions that were designed to retract in-depth information, in regard to their gendered and racialised experiences and key issues that were experienced in respondents' roles as sport board members. The interview guide was designed with both the aims of the study and the theoretical framework of BFT in mind. Key themes outlined are decision-making and leadership, power, representation and how these acknowledge 'race' and gender. An example of questions asked included; (i) 'where did you see the board opportunity and what prompted you to apply?' (ii) 'how do you think you are perceived as a racialised minority woman in your organisation'; and (iii) 'please can you reflect on your encounters whilst being a board member in your organisation'. The interview questions were supplemented by follow-up questions and probes in order to capture and explore their unique experiences.

Notably within the interviews, respondents assumed narratives were understood due to similarities along primarily racial lines stating 'you know what I mean' and 'I'm glad I don't have to explain to you', in connection to the interviewers being racialised minority women. Although this demonstrated comfortability and openness amongst respondents, the authors engaged in member checking to allow respondents to ensure narratives were captured accurately and to avoid assumptions on the part of the researchers. As researchers, we understand the power that exists beyond the interview. As such, we sought to reach out to several interviewees to member check and validate their transcripts. The work of Olesen (2000) allows respondents to review and authenticate their transcript as a regular practice. This process was implemented to ensure reliability and validity of the narrative.

To analyse the data, Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis process was utilised to enable transparency and for meaning to be elicited in the extracts we analysed. Following the interviews, we individually undertook a familiarisation stage that allowed us to review each transcript and begin to note recurring areas that would later be actioned into key themes and sub-themes. We then coded the narrative into semantic and latent codes, to ensure we acknowledged prominent areas of the transcripts. From these initial codes, we reviewed the areas and reflected upon our research questions, to ensure the themes decided upon held relevance and any overlapping themes were appropriately discarded. The process of reviewing the themes was reflexive, our approach was to ensure the themes identified offered a rich narrative and our positionality allowed us to have agency and reflexivity in the production of knowledge.

**Table 1.** Research sample.

Number	Respondent	Ethnicity	Number of years in sport governance position	Organisation
1	Cheryl	Mixed Heritage	1	Charity
2	Meera	South Asian	1	Charity
3	Dilwara	Mixed Heritage	2	Charity
4	Janki	South Asian	2	National Governing Body
5	Sharon	Black	2	Charity
6	Sonia	Black	2	Charity
7	Madiha	South Asian	3	National Governing Body
8	Sara	South Asian	3	Charity
9	Nisha	Mixed Heritage	4	National Governing Body
10	Neelam	South Asian	4	National Governing Body
11	Shanice	Black	5	National Governing Body
12	Fatima	South Asian	6	Charity
13	Angela	Mixed Heritage	10+	National Governing Body/Charity
14	Sadia	South Asian	10+	National Governing Body
15	Saphia	South Asian	10+	Private organisation

## **Results and discussion**

The majority of respondents represented NGBs and charities largely focused on addressing issues faced by marginalised communities. The key themes that speak to the aim and purpose of this paper are as follows: (1) negotiating board-readiness; (2) the tokenism trap; (3) race-gendered power dynamics in sports boardrooms; (4) resistance in sports boardrooms. To provide context, each respondent narrative discussed is labelled accordingly by organisation type (NGB, charity, private, not-for-profit).

### **Negotiating board-readiness**

In an effort to address the underrepresentation of racialised minority women on sports boards, sporting bodies and stakeholders have delivered positive action programmes to facilitate such women to become 'board ready'. Although a small number of women within our sample engaged in a sports board-ready development programme (targeted specifically for racialised minority women), their reflections more broadly contribute to our understanding of how such initiatives are perceived by racialised minority women.

Three graduates from a sports board-ready development programme reflected on how the programme helped them to leverage their skills, build a sense of community and address gaps in knowledge. Sonia (Charity) explained how the programme supported her to engage in a process of self-introspection. She expressed: 'the workshops were instrumental in just helping me reflect and helping me evaluate myself and appreciate me and the value that I could also bring to an organisation'. Sonia also referred to feelings of empowerment by attending a course with other racialised minority women, which is a core element of BFT (Collins 1990). She explained: 'just being in amongst that cohort of you know of women, you know who were again just so accomplished, so distinguished and you know just who were brilliant in themselves'. Empowerment in this form acknowledges collective agency, as Sonia draws attention to the intellectual contributions the cohort brought to the programme. Such targeted programmes can help racialised minority women develop agency over their own stories (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) by using these environments to 'reinforce their superiority by telling their own stories'

(Hylton 2009, p. 55). Other programme graduates shared how the programme provided value by enhancing their knowledge of the sports sector more broadly. Sharon (Charity) explained how she found value from the programme which built on her existing knowledge: 'my knowledge of the sporting landscape was limited, because all my experiences have been [name of sport]. And that was good to learn more about [the] wider landscape than just [name of sport] ... I was pretty ignorant into a lot of areas of the sporting landscape'. However, whilst such targeted programmes can effectively enhance knowledge and establish a sense of community, they might inadvertently reinforce a deficit approach by perpetuating stereotypical assumptions that racialised minority women are 'lacking' in certain skills required to be in positions of power and influence (Ospina and Foldy 2009). These reflections are underscored by the dominant racial ideologies of Whiteness which serve to frame racialised minority women as the ones that need 'fixing' rather than the system which upholds sexist and racist structures and cultures (Cooper *et al.* 2020). Shanice (NGB) shared how the course made her feel: 'I mean it felt in itself that the course was a validation for other people to know you've gone through the processes, as if these people don't know how to speak and that's where they had a nod to conduct themselves, and how to dress ... it's like somebody needs to feel it's like you need to be advocated for'. Taken together, experiences of this positive action initiative to enhance board-readiness can be negotiated and experienced in multiple ways to create feelings of positivity and negativity amongst racialised minority women.

### ***The tokenism trap***

Tokenism provides illegitimacy towards those who are not dominant in organisational cultures and is concomitant to epistemic exclusion and covert racism (Vong 2021, Rixom *et al.* 2023). Sports organisations in receipt of Sport England and UK Sport funding are expected to adhere to the Code and demonstrate progress towards enhancing board diversity. Nevertheless, the audit culture associated with sports policies can often lead organisations undertaking the minimum requirements to remain compliant (Shaw 2007, Lusted 2009, Kilvington *et al.* 2024). Angela (NGB) reflected on how her appointment to an NGB board felt tokenistic: I believe that the problem is, when White people get upset and they're like, 'they only got the job because they were Black' and all of that nonsense'. Angela's reflection underscores how White board members interpret her presence in the boardroom, primarily through her Blackness further undermining her skills, expertise and agency (Howe *et al.* 2023). CRT scholars argue that although Whiteness often operates as an unmarked category, it has tangible effects by reinforcing stereotypes and anti-intellectual myths concerning the Black body (Frankenberg 1993, Keaton and Macaulay 2025). Similarly, some interviewees representing charity boards recalled how their appointments were tokenistic. For example, Dilwara (Charity) reflected on how her appointment reflected favourably upon the organisation's image, rather than feeling appointed based on her acumen: 'that tokenistic aspect doesn't sit well with me at all. Like, you know, you're here just because of who you are. Well, not your expertise, not your knowledge. Might be skills, but just because we're ticking the boxes, it's so horrible'. Such narratives speak to the notion of interest convergence whereby the addition of racialised minority women on sport boards serves the interest of White people (Bell 1992). Organisations, who focus on meeting compliance for funding purposes, can often project an image of diversity without addressing the underlying structures and cultures that

maintain Whiteness (Ahmed 2007, Turconi and Shaw 2023). Nevertheless, it has been argued that simply adding racialised minority women to a space that does not guarantee full inclusion, acceptance or integration is problematic (van Slobbe 2021).

### *Race-gendered power dynamics in sports boardrooms*

Once appointed to a sports board, some racialised minority women observed a series of exclusionary board dynamics and behaviours. As newcomers, concerns with regard to the cliques and culture became apparent presenting challenges for 'outsiders' to negotiate predominantly White spaces (Long and Hylton 2002, Ratna and Samie 2017). For instance, Shanice (NGB) observed board members had prior connections before becoming board members: 'what was really interesting though is when you divulge, there were a lot of prior friendships, it was very much like a who you know'. Such relationships can operate to exclude racialised minority women. It has been argued White individuals are more likely to have access to influential networks which can facilitate easier access just by being White, whereas racialised minority women can often be positioned as 'outsiders' of the dominant White social and cultural networks (McIntosh 1989, Bradbury 2013). This exclusion often results in racialised minority women psychologically preparing themselves to enter predominantly White boardrooms and prove their value. For example, Nisha (not-for-profit) expressed: 'you have to have the confidence and conviction to even step into that space in the first place. But then once you're in the environment, you need to be confident in what it is that you bring'.

Given that the majority of sports boards were predominantly White, there was often a lack of understanding of equity, diversity and inclusion issues more broadly. For instance, Sadia (NGB) explained how sports boards should look to not only appoint racialised minority individuals but ensure there is also proximity to lived experiences of exclusion: 'you need people in there that have the lived experience of what it feels [like] to be excluded'. Further, it has been argued that the role of the CEO is important in shaping decisions in sports boardrooms (Knoppers *et al.* 2021). Sadia's boardroom observations extended beyond the need for diverse board members to interrogate the composition of the predominantly White senior leadership team. Here, Sadia observes how boards may appear diverse, however these diversity efforts are largely overlooked with regard to senior leadership team diversity: 'let's get the highest level and then let's not worry about the rest of the organisation because if anybody questions as well, we have a board director, that's a woman, how could we not be inclusive and diverse and it's like, yeah, okay, well your Exec is all White men'. Here, Sadia's experience as part of an NGB board indicates how such leadership teams can often internalise ideas around colour-blindness and race neutrality to justify the underrepresentation of racialised minorities in senior leadership roles (Cunningham 2015). Within sports boardrooms, power imbalances remain problematic (Simpkins *et al.* 2022). Given that racialised minority women share neither the same gender or 'race' as White men, there can often be an unbalanced power relationship. Through board conversations, Shanice (NGB) reflected on how some encounters with White men made her feel: 'there are times that you know it feels like I'm lifting my skirt up and the reason I say that is there's a vulnerability that comes with talking about race because anybody that's asking you doesn't tend to look like you. So if you don't tend to look like me, you are asking me this question from a position of perceived power or my inferiority. I mean it's an unbalanced situation, because if you

have to ask and if I have to break it down, there is a power dynamic there'. Shanice's reflection draws on BFT to highlight how her intersecting race-gendered identities subject her to multiple forms of oppression as well as bearing the responsibility and expectation to educate White board members on 'race' related issues and be the voice for marginalised communities. Furthermore, these interactions operate on the assumption that racialised minority women's expertise is solely confined to the realm of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the boardroom whilst discarding their wider skillsets. These microaggressions may not only reinforce racial hierarchies but impact upon their cognitive performance within boardroom spaces (Sue 2004).

Further, within predominantly White spaces, racialised minority women are reminded to remain 'invisible, innocuous, quiet and unthreatening' as these are the behaviours aligned with Whiteness (Liu *et al.* 2019, p. 148). However, when there were board matters that required members to express opinions, some interviewees holding positions on NGB boards expressed how their racialised and gendered identities contributed to their non-participation and silence during board meetings. Neelam (NGB) reflected on her partial inclusion in the boardroom: 'at times you feel welcomed in but you don't feel the empowerment to speak up or to share or to contribute, you know and so that's where people are kind of saying they are but they're not quite really being inclusive you know'. Similarly, Sadia (NGB) drew attention to how her body is racially marked differently to her White female counterparts in the boardroom, often needing to prove that she deserves a seat at the table: 'women and particularly women from ethnic minorities are, you know, we're just put through extra layers of tests of acceptance, like in terms of how long it takes to be accepted, how long?' It has been argued organisations seeking to include women and 'racially marked bodies' in an attempt to solely increase numerical diversity, ultimately fail to instigate and address systemic institutional cultural change (Sotiriadou and De Haan 2019). In particular, for NGBs, where there is often a need to comply with the Code, the visible diversity of such women is capitalised upon as predominantly White organisations and individuals benefit socially and economically from the presence of racialised bodies (Leong 2013). Here, Ahmed (2012, p. 249) argues organisational commitments to diversity and inclusion focus on the 'saying' rather than the 'doing' of diversity. For some interviewees, there were instances where their contributions were openly devalued, often resulting in feeling isolated and attacked. Whilst many African American women have been stereotyped for being assertive (McDowell and Carter-Francique 2017), these observations also extended to racialised minority women in the UK. As argued by Kilvington *et al.* (2024) speaking about injustices in the workforce may result in racialised minorities being unfairly labelled as troublemakers as they are perceived to be lacking collaborative behaviours. Angela (NGB) spoke about how her choosing to speak up often resulted in her contributions being policed more than her White female counterparts: 'I think people think I'm difficult. Some of the main issues are just the way in which my contribution to anything is undermined. My White counterparts would not have received the same amount of you know, resistance'. Further, instances of covert and overt racism were brought to the fore for some women where their contributions resulted in backlash from fellow board members impacting upon their sense of belonging. Sadia (NGB) expressed: 'I was standing up for doing the right thing,

rather than just saving your mates. And as a result of that, I got attacked very directly, very personally. And using bullying tactics, I would say. I think it becomes much more personal, much more subtly as well as overtly sometimes racist'. Collectively, these examples signify the agentic penalties imposed upon racialised minority women who demonstrate dominance in leadership settings (Rosette *et al.* 2016).

### *Resistance in sports boardrooms*

Whilst some racialised minority women were silenced and made to feel undervalued in sports boardroom settings, there were instances of actively resisting discriminatory encounters, objectification and degradation (Feagin and Elias 2013). Some interviewees expressed the need for sports boards to self-introspect and interrogate normalised behaviours. It has been argued that due to a lack of inclusive recruitment practices, sports board members with homogenous identities may result in a lack of diversity of thought (Piggott 2022). Madiha (NGB) expressed how decision-making within sports boardrooms may be inhibited due to a lack of inclusive cultures: 'you're going to start getting people that look like you, behave like you, think like you because you have unconsciously created a culture based on that personal behaviour of yours'. Further, in order to psychologically protect themselves from the damaging consequences of discrimination, they employed micro-resistance practices which signifies an important tool to combat White supremacy (Collins 2000). Prior to securing a board role, Shanice (NGB) explained an incident where she challenged remarks during a board interview: 'I was in an interview and one of the panel members said "that is a bit of a stretch", implying my CV was inaccurate. I remember thinking that was a really rude comment, I said "which part?" and she said it out loud, so we dealt with it there. Those things will always stay with you and that's what I talk about when I say that racism is so insidious as you're sometimes kept in that perpetual doubting zone'. Such race-gendered microaggressions diminish the achievements of racialised minority women by reinforcing myths that they are intellectually inferior and lack legitimacy to occupy influential roles. Shanice's defence of her intellectual capabilities exemplifies resistance, a core tenet of CRT. This action not only challenges White ideological myths which have become normalised in sport but highlights how such women are not passively accepting controlling images, and instead are redefining themselves away from the White gaze (Collins 2000, Hylton 2010, Evans and Moore 2015). Moreover, instances of sexism were found to operate through differential treatment through occupational stereotyping and gendered microinvalidations (Norman and Simpson 2022). For example, Sadia (NGB) explained how she corrected sexist remarks from a White male in the moment: 'I was just saying hello to everyone introducing myself because it was the first meeting and got to him. He has his back to me. Just call him Steve. I said "Hi Steve" and he turned around and he said "oh, hello. Thanks so much for booking my parking". And I stood and smiled at him. Eventually, the penny dropped and you saw his face change and he started apologising. So, at that moment, I kind of educated him not to make that kind of assumption anymore'. Sadia's act of resistance in correcting her fellow White board member's misconception regarding her occupation illustrates the CRT tenet of resistance emphasising the importance of challenging stereotypes by offering vital counter-narratives (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

## Conclusion

Drawing on CRT and BFT, this study underscores how Whiteness and patriarchy shape experiences of exclusion among racialised minority women serving on sports boards in the UK. Given the necessity for some of the boards included in this study to comply with the Code, our research critically challenges the superficial forms of inclusion often adopted by sport boards. We argue that the presence of racialised minority women on sport boards may function as a symbolic gesture, accounting for metrics on the basis of ethnicity and gender, whilst masking deeper structural inequalities and cultures of exclusion. In doing so, board decision-making may be compromised due to racialised minority women being pushed to the peripheries in sports boardrooms rather than being central to decision-making processes. In particular, those representing the NGB and charitable boards experienced heightened levels of tokenism drawing upon instances of feeling undervalued.

Similar to Kilvington *et al.* (2024), interviewees experienced heightened levels of discrimination from overt racist microaggressions to subtle othering. Whilst issues of sexism were prevalent in the narrative, racialised experiences were brought to the fore. For example, perceptions amongst White board members indicated racialised minority women were 'lacking' the necessary acumen to lead. In particular, NGB and charity boards may heighten physical, psychological, and emotional demands on racialised minority women, impacting upon them feeling seen, heard, valued and known (Stride *et al.* 2025). Although steps have been taken to address the underrepresentation of women through gendered targets (Piggot *et al.* 2019), our findings indicate that not all femininities are subordinated equally within sports boardrooms due to the prevalence of race-gendered stereotypes and exclusions. Our research therefore builds on other scholarly work analysing racialised and gendered dynamics within sports governance (Simpkins *et al.* 2022, Kilvington *et al.* 2024) which signify the many ways in which institutional practices reinforce power dynamics and racialised and gendered hierarchies. The findings confer how institutional arrangements uphold Whiteness and White cultural norms (Levine-Rasky, 2013) which not only manifest within the boardroom but during preparatory stages, such as targeted development programmes and interview processes. Whilst some respondents in our study found value in accumulating more knowledge in such spaces, these spaces reinforced a deficit approach and undermined their existing skillsets and capabilities. Additionally, some interviewees challenged dominant norms and engaged in micro-resistance practices. In doing so, they actively challenged microaggressions to reassert their presence and expertise to lead. However, this agency and capital to resist can differ, given that intersectional identities and lived experiences are not homogenous.

Our study highlights three key recommendations to enhance sports boardroom cultures. Firstly, interviewees welcomed how a programme for racialised minority women presented opportunities to build community; therefore, further development of these counterspaces is vital for enabling racialised minority women to connect through shared experiences and collectively resist dominant norms. Nevertheless, more exploration is necessary to understand how the transition from a development programme into an appointed board role prepares racialised minority women for boardroom realities. Secondly, to address exclusionary board cultures and behaviours within sports boardrooms, sports boards should look to move beyond a single-axis approach to data collection. To gain a clearer contextual understanding of their own board culture, they should

look to examine racialised minority women's board retention rates and their authentic board experiences. By doing this, boards can gather intelligence on whether their diversity policies and practices are allowing diverse members to positively influence board matters (Buse *et al.* 2016). This work should be supported by Sport England and UK Sport through a revised Code that centres requirements for boards to drive anti-racist, anti-sexist and other anti-discriminatory practices. Such stakeholders may wish to consider enhanced specificity with regard to board cultures, by emphasising the need for sports boards to actively monitor and make changes to address discrimination. For example, whilst a series of targeted programmes exist in the sports sector to upskill marginalised communities, there is often a gap in provision to upskill the most influential figures, predominantly White CEOs and Chairs with regard to anti-discrimination. To address this competence and confidence gap in knowledge, Sport Councils may seek to collaboratively establish a training programme to equip such individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to de-centre Whiteness and patriarchy. Alongside this, we argue for an independent reporting service to be established through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to allow protected characteristics (as outlined in the Code) to freely report instances of discrimination faced by their respective sports boards, and more importantly, seek culturally appropriate and timely support. Collectively, these actions can help shift key actors in the sports sector from compliance to active inclusion agents, by valuing racialised bodies that are different to the White norm within decision-making spaces. To this end, to enhance board decision-making, we advocate for Sport Councils to advance their collaborative work on anti-racism to include tackling inequitable board cultures.

## Notes

1. This study adopts the term 'racialised minority women'. By using this term we refer to Black, South Asian and mixed-heritage women living in the UK. We draw attention to the racialisation of women who are not only marginalised due to their minority status but also emphasise how Whiteness impacts upon the social processes in which their gendered and racialised identities shape their access to power, resource and privileges. We capitalise the following terms: Black, White, Blackness, Whiteness and White supremacy to draw attention to 'race' as a social construct.
2. This study references a targeted development programme for prospective sports board members delivered in England. This programme specifically sought to facilitate the progression of racialised minority women attendees onto sports boards.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Anika Leslie-Walker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8521-5910>

Zuleikha Chikh  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-4951-2573>

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