

Symbolic Inclusion, Structural Exclusion: The False Promise of Diversity in Sports

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ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines how the modern celebration of “diversity” in sports often conceals neocolonial exploitation and symbolic inclusion. By analyzing two case studies—West African football youth academies and the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA)—the study reveals how diversity initiatives, framed as inclusion, serve as instruments of economic and symbolic control. In both contexts, athletes from marginalized backgrounds are commodified, valued for their marketability rather than genuine inclusion or welfare. Drawing on theories of neocolonialism, tokenism, and performative diversity, the paper argues that global sports institutions reproduce colonial hierarchies under the guise of multiculturalism. These structures reduce athletes to disposable labor while allowing organizations to maintain moral legitimacy through superficial representation. The paper concludes by proposing policy reforms aimed at transforming diversity from a performative ideal into substantive empowerment, emphasizing enforceable labor protections, equitable contracts, and community-based sports development.

INTRODUCTION

When inclusion is conditional, is it truly inclusion at all?

Diversity, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is “the fact of many different types of things or people being included in something” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). In the context of sports, this typically refers to the inclusion of athletes from a range of racial, cultural, and national backgrounds within the same team. Yet, whether this celebrated diversity is valuable — that is, whether it promotes equitable opportunity, respects the dignity of individuals, and prompts social progress — remains contested. Over time, this embrace of diversity has become increasingly “fashionable” in public discourse — framed not only as a sign of social progress but also as a moral imperative and strategic advantage.

However, beneath the surface of this widespread celebration of diversity lies a more complex reality. While widely regarded as a moral imperative, it is questionable whether diversity effectively fosters equity or merely operates as a symbolic gesture with adverse consequences. This paper aims to respond to this dilemma by emphasizing the distinction between diversity’s positive, public-facing image in sports and the deeper institutional motives behind it. More specifically, it argues that the celebration of diversity is less of a commitment to inclusivity and more a disguise for the exploitation and inequality faced by athletes. In this sense, diversity loses much of its practical value for those who claim to empower it. Furthermore, the discussion extends beyond theory, contributing to the policy discourse through recommendations that address the neocolonialist attitudes sustaining the sports industry.

I: Theoretical Framework Neocolonialism and Sports Exploitation

While the narrative of diversity in sports promotes ideals of inclusion and progress, a closer look reveals the underlying neocolonial power structures. In this context, neocolonial exploitation refers to social systems through which economically dominant countries and organizations profit from the ambitions of athletes from less privileged backgrounds (Gaetano, 2019). In the global sports industry today, it is not natural resources but human potential that is being sought and exploited — a process driven by the pursuit of profit that creates inequalities mirroring those of historical colonialism (Oleson, n.d.). Young athletes, particularly from regions such as Africa, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe, are recruited into rigorous training programs that prioritize performance over

their well-being (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022). Instead of supporting long-term growth, these systems serve athletes as sources of labor, leaving many to contend with precarious working conditions, limited protections, and uncertain futures (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022). Under the banner of “diversity”, their labor and success are leveraged by team stakeholders to boost economic and political agendas (Gaetano, 2019). In effect, diversity becomes what American philosopher Judith Butler characterizes as a performative display — an act that creates the illusion of progress while leaving deeper power relations intact

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(Butler, 1990, p. 25), and offering little real value to the athletes it claims to empower. Rather than ensuring equity and inclusion, the reality for many athletes is one of vulnerability, where their value is measured solely by their ability to generate profit.

Closely tied to neocolonial exploitation is the concept of symbolic inclusion — the display of diversity through superficial representation while avoiding the structural changes needed to address the inequality (Whitehead et al., 2023). In sports, this is most commonly exemplified in the form of tokenism, where selected athletes from underrepresented backgrounds are featured in marketing campaigns to create an illusion of progressiveness and morality (Patton, 2004). Tokenism transforms diversity into a performative tool, commodifying athletes' identities to bolster institutional image and reputation (Wai, 2019). Teams and organizations may spotlight multiculturalism in marketing campaigns (Patton, 2004), using these appearances to attract sponsorships (Gift, 2021) while neglecting meaningful efforts to improve athlete welfare (Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022). Consequently, the stories of tokenized athletes are celebrated when they align with narratives of resilience or triumph; yet, their concerns about labor conditions, health disparities, or post-career hardships are ignored. In this way, symbolic diversity becomes a public relations strategy, with teams favoring appearances over genuine inclusion. As American sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes, it is a form of “racism without racists”— a system that sustains inequality through performative displays while allowing institutions to avoid accountability (Bonilla-Silva, 2023).

II: Case Studies Neocolonial Practices in West Africa and China

The following two case studies from West Africa and China reveal how diversity initiatives, framed as inclusion, operate as tools of economic and symbolic control. By examining these two regions, this section highlights the global scale of the underlying power structures that shape contemporary sports industries.

African Football Youth Academics

The case of African football youth academies demonstrates how the discourse of diversity functions as a cover for early exploitation and commodification of young athletes. European football clubs and their agents heavily recruit young African players, presenting this process as an investment in global talent development and a celebration of multiculturalism, reinforced by so-called “diversity quotas” (Fabricius, 2018). However, this narrative conceals a deeper reality in which diversity is instrumentalized to serve institutional interests rather than empower the athletes themselves. In essence, the system reflects neocolonial extraction, transforming the athletic potential of African youths into a form of labor that benefits transnational sports institutions (Gaetano, 2019).

Agents and unlicensed academies, prevalent across West Africa, have drawn thousands of boys and their families with promises of professional contracts abroad (Fabricius, 2018). In Accra, Ghana alone, over 500 unlicensed academies operate without proper facilities and regulation, often targeting impoverished families who sacrifice education and limited resources in pursuit of football stardom (Agsten, 2020). Yet, what these academies rarely disclose is that the success rate is extremely low: fewer than 1% of their prospects go on to secure contracts in Europe. Meanwhile, more than 20,000 youth players are left stranded domestically — cut from teams, homeless in unfamiliar cities, and abandoned with no support for return or rehabilitation (Agsten, 2020). This systemic neglect of these athletes exposes the disposability nature in neocolonial labor frameworks, where human value is measured purely by economic utility, not by any commitment to inclusion or long-term wellbeing.

In many respects, this dynamic mirrors the patterns of child labor. Many young athletes in African Football Youth Academies are subjected to excessive training, loss of formal education, and hazardous living conditions because stakeholders prioritize economic and reputational gain (Sten-Ziemons, 2018). This flawed practice reflects what French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon described as the persistence of colonial extraction disguised as development— a system through which human resources are appropriated to maintain the advantages of dominant institutions (Fanon, 2004, pp. 148–155). More broadly, it exemplifies how the emphasis on fashionable displays of diversity can conceal the exploitative practices within global sports industries. In doing so, diversity is stripped of any meaningful value for those at the bottom of the system. European clubs market this “diversity” narrative to obtain subsidies and media attention, but once a player is no longer seen as valuable, their welfare is ignored. Hence, the inclusion of African athletes becomes strictly transactional — they are valued only when they serve institutional interests. Diversity, as a result, loses its ethical promise and is repurposed as a means of neocolonial extraction, becoming a tool for power and economic gain. This phenomenon is exemplified by the youth academy system, exposing the darker underside of diversity in sports: where inclusion is conditional, protections are minimal, and the well-being of hardworking athletes is sacrificed as the pursuit of profit outweighs basic dignity.

“Diversity” in the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA)

In China, the CBA's inclusion of foreign players is regularly portrayed as an initiative to boost competitiveness and entertainment value, and presented as a symbol of international engagement. These athletes are widely featured in team promotions and league marketing campaigns, serving as visible proof of the CBA's commitment to diversity. However, this polished representation masks a deeper reality in which diversity is used strategically as a branding tool while failing to achieve authentic inclusion.

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Overseas players are frequently granted more playing time than their performance alone would justify, as their presence improves media attention and ticket sales (Gift, 2021). This approach showcases the tokenistic nature of their inclusion: athletes are valued less for their involvement in the league and more for their marketability. Yet, despite their promotional value, foreign players endure significant challenges. In 2022, for example, American basketball player Sonny Weems, who played for the Guangdong Southern Tigers, was targeted with repeated racial slurs as he exited the team bus (Lane, 2022). The incident, captured on video, sparked public backlash and drew criticism from the players, the public, and the CBA itself. However, such abuse is not a singular occurrence; it reflects a broader pattern of racial discrimination that foreign players encounter — a reality that exposes the disparity between the league's outward image of diversity and the lived experiences of its players.

Employment conditions further reveal the severity of these disparities. Contracts for foreign athletes frequently permit sudden terminations, withheld wages, and avoidance of liability in cases of injury. As a result, many are left jobless mid-season or denied salary payments after injuries, with limited recourse for appeal due to the absence of union representation and the complexities of navigating China's labor legal system (Lane, 2022). Moreover, these precarious conditions are compounded by the intense demands placed on foreign players, who are expected to carry a disproportionate share of the team's workload and serve as the face of the league. Such an approach underscores that their presence is valued not for any enduring commitment to equity, but rather for their capacity for economic utility.

The CBA's approach to foreign recruitment thus embodies the superficial nature of its diversity initiatives. The league's reliance on foreign talent is less about fostering inclusion or team performance, and more an attempt to project an image of "fashionable" inclusion that is widely celebrated in contemporary discourse. Yet, this image offers little of practical worth to the athletes themselves. Instead, it serves to demonstrate how foreign athletes are treated as disposable assets, their presence masking the exploitative practices underlying the league's operations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The reality that many athletes who embody diversity are leveraged for their performance and later discarded showcases how they are reduced to commodities. Strengthening labor protection and welfare standards is crucial for reform. Supported by the International Labor Organization, this approach enables enforceable contracts, guaranteed healthcare, and legal resources, ensuring that athletes are recognized as individuals with recognized rights rather than as expendable workers (UNI Global Union, 2021). By institutionalizing these protections, sports industries can shift beyond appearances of diversity and address the deeper causes and consequences of exploitation.

Investing in community-based sports development programs is also essential to transforming diversity from a fashionable notion into genuine empowerment and inclusion. Previous policies have neglected the deeper inequalities that limit opportunities for marginalized groups (UNI Global Union, 2021). Targeted support for local sports initiatives, such as increased funding for facilities and training for coaches, can create inclusive environments where talent is nurtured and social cohesion is fostered (Funds for NGOs, n.d.). Moreover, locally grounded inclusion helps cultivate a sense of belonging and resilience among vulnerable groups by providing support (Van Bortel et al., 2020). Without meaningful changes, diversity remains largely symbolic and offers little value to the communities it claims to benefit. By prioritizing investment within local communities, stakeholders can overturn patterns of exploitation and tokenism, ensuring that its benefits are widely shared and that sports become a meaningful pathway to economic empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Today, the celebration of diversity serves as a fashionable facade, masking the exploitation and inequalities underrepresented athletes continue to face. While it is often presented as a symbol of progress, it remains a superficial gesture — serving marketing goals, enhancing public image, and furthering institutional interests. To move beyond these performative efforts, sports institutions must transcend symbolic gestures and commit to both substantive and structural reforms: strengthening labor protections, investing in community-based development, and holding themselves accountable to those they represent. Only then can diversity become not merely fashionable, but truly valuable.

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