

**AKECH MAKUR CHUOT**

*Statement*

**HON AYOR MAKUR CHUOT (North Metropolitan)** [5.26 pm]: I would like to acknowledge and say thank you to Hon Klara Andric for her contribution on that very important situation that is happening in our community at the moment.

This is something that is very new for me and that I have never done before, but I would like to take a moment to share the journey of my younger sister, Akech Makur Chuot, who was a football player in the Australian Football League. On 26 October this year, Akech announced her retirement from footy, which has really shocked many people in our community. It does not mean that I am too old, but she is my younger sister. She is still very young; she should not have retired!

Her passion for sport began at the age of 11 when she started playing soccer in Balga when we first arrived in Australia. I remember Akech spending many hours practising and making sure that she got any opportunity to kick a soccer ball. One of them was her joining the men's teams in Balga. Akech played soccer and was chosen to represent the state school girls team in China that year. As her older sister, I have been privileged to watch her grow to be an amazing star in the community and to witness firsthand the dedication and hard work she put into soccer.

Despite her remarkable talent in soccer when she was growing up, Akech had limited opportunities in soccer. However, she did not let that hold her back. Instead, she made the bold decision to switch to AFL, which was something new. I remember that we did not have AFL when we were in the Kakuma refugee camp; we grew up with soccer and basketball, so AFL was very new. The reason she did that was that she wanted to find better opportunities for herself.

In 2017, she made history by being drafted by the Fremantle Dockers, becoming the first African women's AFL player. Unfortunately, she was delisted at the end of the season and faced two seasons without a spot in the competition, but that did not really discourage her. She remained determined to continue her football journey.

In 2018, Akech relocated to Melbourne and joined the Carlton Football Club, which was a really heartbreaking decision for her, because my mother is very attached to my sister, and it was sad to let her go. We had to support her, because that is what she loved doing. Her hard work and dedication paid off when she was listed in the inaugural Richmond Football Club AFL Women's team in 2020, where she settled into her career and played 17 games for the club. She then joined Hawthorn Football Club in 2022, where she also played 17 games. Despite facing numerous challenges, including being delisted three times and playing for three different AFL clubs, Akech has shown incredible resilience and determination. She has become an ambassador for Cadbury, BHP, Telstra and Australia for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, using her platform to raise awareness for important causes and make a positive impact on her community.

As Akech's older sister I have seen firsthand the challenges she has faced, and not just in terms of cultural differences and expectations. Where we come from, women are not allowed to kick a ball. Akech had so many meetings with aunties when she started her career. There was also a lack of opportunities available to girls and young women from migrant backgrounds and it is much harder for people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Akech's journey has been a testament to her strength and determination to overcome these obstacles and succeed in a sport that she loves. I am incredibly proud of my sister for paving the way for young black women and girls in AFL in Australia. She has shown that anything is possible with hard work, dedication and resilience. I am a bit emotional, because I am the sister who has had to pick up the phone when my sister has had a bad day. One of the things I say to my sister is, "Remember, you're going to that workplace", or whatever particular place. I say, "Those people are going for the same reason—white or black. They want to make a living for themselves. Don't look for those racists. Focus on what you do." That is what I have been doing with my sister.

Although there is still much work to be done in Australia to promote diversity and equality, even for white women, young women are still struggling to make ends meet in football. How will getting paid \$60 000 benefit a player if they break their leg one day? We talk about equality in Australia, but we still do not have that. I hope that we keep fighting. My sister started from a very low pay to get to her current position. We are getting better, but we can do much better so that our women do not have to retire so young. My sister is retiring and white young people are retiring from sport clubs in Australia because they have to work two or three jobs to put food on the table for their families. Remember, the game requires a lot of commitment, because athletes have to be committed in order to achieve what they can achieve. Imagine having other jobs on the side. They are not able to make a career. As a member of Parliament, I am a big fan of seeing change in women's sport, in particular in the AFL. It is a new game, but we can do better.

My sister's achievement has served as an inspiration to all of us. Akech, well done. I am so proud of you. I know you are watching; I am really proud of you. Just know that it is not easy being the first. As a member of Parliament

of South Sudanese heritage, I see myself as an information hub. Sometimes, people come to me so that I can tell them what is happening in the government, how we can help the community and face challenges. I did not face that challenge here, because I am very privileged to be part of a very progressive government that supports me. Thank you so much for giving women of colour the assurance that it is okay to be different. I have read your letter to your young self, which is so powerful. It has not been easy for you as a young person, particularly being a woman of South Sudanese heritage playing sport, and the challenge of trying to fit into the system is a bit difficult when you are new to the country. It has not been easy for you, but you have done it for my kids and many other kids in the community, so thank you.