

United States Senate

July 20, 2021

Husain Al-Musallam
President
Fédération Internationale de Natation
Chemin de Bellevue 24a/24b
CH - 1005 Lausanne
Switzerland

Dear President Al-Musallam,

We write to you to express our serious concern with your decision to prohibit the use of swim caps designed for natural Black hair in the upcoming Tokyo Olympics. The decision by the International Swimming Federation (FINA) evidences the implicit and explicit biases against Afro-textured or natural hair that are deeply ingrained in society at large, and now, as a result of this policy, in competitive swimming. This exclusionary barrier serves to primarily impact competitors of African descent in a sport in which Black people continue to be underrepresented.

In its decision, FINA described the caps designed to accommodate natural hair as unsuitable because they do not follow “the natural form of the head” and that to their “best knowledge, the athletes competing at the international events never used, neither require to use, caps of such size and configuration.” Acknowledging that swimmers have “never used” swim caps that accommodate natural hair only underscores the fact that Black people have historically faced barriers to competitive swimming. Indeed, in the United States, the lack of diversity has its roots in the historic racism that denied Black people access to public pools as recently as the 1960s.

This history persists and is reflected in the sport of competitive swimming. According to a 2019 demographic report by USA Swimming, a mere 0.8% of female athletes and 0.6% of male athletes out of 327,337 year-round are Black. This lack of representation perpetuates itself – a joint study conducted by the University of Memphis and University of Nevada-Las Vegas found that 65 percent of African-American children would like to swim more than they do and 76 percent of parents reported that their children would be more likely to want to participate in swimming if they saw a talented swimmer that looked like them.

In its statement expressing its intent to ensure there are no barriers to swimming, FINA explained that it must ensure that “swimwear does not confer a competitive advantage” to swimmers. What this misses is that the ban on swim caps for natural hair *is* a barrier in and of itself that primarily disadvantages Black swimmers. For too long, Black people have had to conform to the societal and cultural norms in areas of life from which they have been excluded. It is time to recognize this history and make all spaces – including competitive swimming – inclusive.


As an international organization that sets the standards for swimming across the globe, FINA bears a special responsibility to ensure it serves all people and cultures. FINA has stated that it will review its decision to ban swim caps for natural hair and embark on initiatives to promote inclusivity. While we appreciate this commitment, FINA has the ability to reconsider its policy to ban swim caps for natural hair now.

We respectfully urge you to take immediate action to reverse this policy before the Tokyo Olympics. This is an opportunity for FINA to realize its stated commitment to inclusivity and to begin to address issues of diversity and representation in competitive swimming. It is actions such as these that can move us toward the vision of a more fair and equitable society.

We look forward to further engagement with you and receiving a timely response.

United States Senate

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



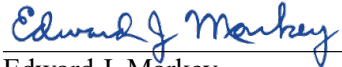
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



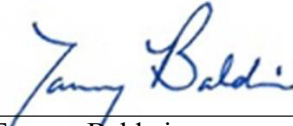
Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



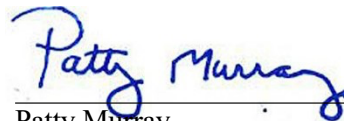
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United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
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United States Senator



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