

****The in - and exclusionary role of football for a migrant community****

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Aim. This research aims to understand the experiences of Zimbabwean men who have migrated to Stellenbosch, South Africa. The author examines how these men cope with the challenges of building a life in a new country often marked by hostility and discrimination, and the role that their participation in grassroots football plays in that process. The study focuses on how these men navigate issues of identity, belonging, and the pervasive threat of xenophobia.

Method. The researcher spent 15 months talking with the men, focusing on their daily lives, their experiences with discrimination, and their participation in an all-Zimbabwean football team.

Key findings. Through the conversations and observations, it became clear that football plays a vital role in creating a sense of community and allowing the men to express their Zimbabwean identity in a place where they often feel unwelcome. The team provides a space for connection and support, helping them to cope with the constant fear of violence and prejudice. One participant powerfully described the situation as “shepherding a leopard,” highlighting the ever-present sense of danger.

However, the research also revealed complexities within this football community. Divisions based on class, background, and even language and ethnicity existed within the football team itself. Traditional ideas about masculinity were often reinforced, leading to exclusionary practices and disrespectful attitudes towards women. The men sometimes expressed negative views about South Africans, which could contribute to broader tensions. The study showed that while the football team offered a vital space for belonging, it also sometimes reproduced existing inequalities.

The research is relevant because it sheds light on the lived realities of Zimbabwean migrants and the challenges they face in South Africa. It highlights the ways in which migration can impact a sense of self and how sports can be both a source of support and a site of tension.

Limitations. It's important to remember that this study focused on a specific group of men in one town, Stellenbosch, and therefore may not fully represent the experiences of all Zimbabwean migrants across South Africa. The findings are also based on what the men chose to share in interviews.