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## The most Beautiful Game or the most Gender Violent Sport? Exploring the Interface between Soccer, Gender and Violence in Zimbabwe

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### Introduction

The Brazilian legend, Pele, reportedly dubbed soccer/football the world's 'most beautiful game'. This phrase creates the impression that soccer is an unproblematic game, representing only gallantry, artistry and goodness. To be sure, soccer has its aesthetic dimensions, but an appreciation of these dimensions must be balanced by sensitivity to the game's ideological, structural and material effects on different segments of society. As elsewhere in the global North and South, soccer has a huge following in Africa. However, its relations of production and consumption in the continent intertwine with cultural and socio-economic factors which reproduce social inequities, gender discrimination and exclusion. As a form of sport, soccer is socially constructed as a masculine activity in which women are grudgingly accommodated as supporters (Kuyel 1999). As Parpart (2008) observes, the dominant patriarchal ideology locates women's roles in the domestic sphere; thus their participation in sports is viewed as a challenge to the male control of the public domain – a challenge that often elicit violence against those women perceived as transgressors. According to West (2002), 'in most sporting activities, women are abused physically and verbally as a means of humiliation'. Issues in this chapter are the various forms of violence within the context of soccer production and consumption in Zimbabwe. The premise of the chapter is that to engender Africa's development, it is necessary to understand and tackle gender-based violence and vandalism in sport.

### Zimbabwean Stadia: Theatres of Machismo

Zimbabwean stadia have become arenas for the display of machismo. Consequently, most Zimbabwean women prefer not to attend these stadia because they perceive these structures as very androcentric. There are particular seating areas or grand stands where the most volatile and vocal males are found during matches. For example, in Harare's Rufaro Stadium, which is the home of Dynamos FC, Zimbabwe's most popular team but arguably with the most violent supporters, there is an area popularly known as the 'Vietnam' stand. The name 'Vietnam' is a metaphor for the brutality of the Vietnam War of the 1960s. So this section of Rufaro Stadium represents a war zone, solely preserved for Dynamos fans. Paradoxically, the name 'Rufaro' denotes happiness or joy. Most hooligans who include rouges and criminals are found in this area. Any non-Dynamos fans, including males, who trespass into this territory, are violently mobbed and ejected. Likewise, women who venture into this war-zone are subjected to violation by male supporters. According to Lenskyj (1986), 'women who venture into these areas are described as 'having balls' since soccer is seen as celebrating masculinity and male bonding'.

It is the same situation at the Bulawayo's Barbourfields stadium whose 'Soweto' grand stand is a domain of the volatile Highlanders 'Bosso' FC supporters. The name 'Soweto' is associated with bloodshed reminiscent of the killings in Soweto township during the apartheid era in South Africa. In an interview, Madhlozi Moyo, a staunch Highlanders FC supporter, points out that 'a woman by nature is supposed to be sexually molested in a stadium and no woman is allowed to sit in 'Soweto', unless she is a well known regular member of the 'Bosso' supporters who can withstand the pressure of being in the midst of the vociferous fans in the Soweto area.' (Interview with Madhlozi Moyo dated 8 October 2009). Therefore, for a woman to be accepted into the androcentric sections of the stadia, she has to embody masculine behaviour.

Likewise, Zimbabwean stadium humour is usually obscene. It is a theatre of vulgar language, insults and repugnant songs that are usually traded by male supporters and hurled at match officials and team coaches for bad refereeing decisions or poor team performance. Obscene songs that usually degrade the female sexual anatomy are very popular during these occasions. The presence of women in stadia often evokes ribald jokes and comments. For example, during goal celebrations, men usually use the term '*hurray*' in jubilation. In Zimbabwe, this word is unfortunately abused and translated to the vernacular term of '*hure*' meaning prostitute. In this case, the ball entering the net is symbolic of a prostitute being penetrated during sexual intercourse. It is also common in Zimbabwe to associate defeated teams with women. For instance, Dynamos FC supporters always make a caricature of their rival Highlanders FC as '*Umfazwi weDembare*'

implying Dynamos' woman or bitch. In addition, male fans believe that most women who attend soccer matches on their own are people of loose morals and are thus labelled as prostitutes, bitches and witches. Unfortunately, this stigmatization is also perpetrated by housewives who often accuse women in soccer stadia as whores and husband poachers.

Such male chauvinism against women soccer fans also extends to real sexual violence within the stadia. Women who attend matches are seen as fair game for verbal and physical abuse as well as sexual harassment (Lenskyj 1986:113). Men sometimes strip naked to humiliate the women present. Some women are sexually molested in the stadia's dark alleys, toilets and even on the grand stands. For example, during a match between Dynamos FC and Lengthens FC at Rufaro Stadium on 27 September 2009, video footage from one of the pitch cameras caught glimpse of a man who was molesting a female fan's right breast as she was busy celebrating a goal by Dynamos FC (ZBC TV, 27 September 2009). In response, she slapped the man in the face and shrieked to attract the attention of other fans. However, no one came to her rescue; instead most of the predominantly male spectators turned against her, accusing her of being a prostitute. In some instances, women have been forcefully stripped by hooligans. African television cameramen also have a tendency of zooming in on beautiful lady spectators in the grand stands, which greatly violates their privacy. Despite this, not all men are brutes and some do respect or cherish the presence of females during matches. They thrive to make such occasions family friendly to an extent that they bring their wives and children to the stadia. Some men are also not immune to stadia brutalisation and violation. Male trespassers are also beaten up and ejected. They are also explicitly scolded and sometimes stoned and stabbed during soccer disturbances.

In the face of these violations, both men and women have engaged multiple responses. To avoid becoming targets of such violations, most women in Zimbabwean either totally desist from attending soccer matches or prefer to sit in the VIP sections of the stadium. In this sense, Zimbabwean soccer arenas are gendered and oppressive. Apart from avoidance and cooperative tactics, Zimbabwean women have demonstrated agency, collective efficacy and resistance against their oppression and violation in soccer settings. Some have taken the bull by the horns by continuing to attend these soccer matches. They have attended in droves and sat amongst the volatile fans in the stands. Despite the bullying, most women resist being ejected arguing that they have paid their hard-earned monies to be there. Others even scold back. Some have become registered members of the supporters club as well as taken influential positions within the fans club. Others have joined the supporters' band as singers, drummers and dancers. Women are also trying to conscientize society by taking the campaign against soccer violence

to the media, producing articles, pamphlets and documentaries in the print and electronic media. Male victims have also taken after the initiative. When bullied or ejected, some fight back and mark their territory.

### **Hooliganism, Police Teargas and Women's Vulnerability**

Hooliganism is one of the banes of soccer. Every year, multitudes of soccer fans are killed or injured in stampedes triggered by hooliganism, poor crowd control and underdeveloped football infrastructure. According to Tulloh (1994), 'a recurrent dimension of football hooliganism is the occurrence of physical violence, either in the form of assaults on referees, players or clashes among soccer fans'. In the process, hooliganism exposes the vulnerable to physical and psychological violence. The disturbances are usually triggered by male hooligans who are disgruntled over poor results and bad decisions by the coaches and referees. Hooligans demonstrate their displeasure by hurling stones, plastic bottles, orange or banana peels and sometimes seats and steel rails into the football pitch; often vandalizing the stadium. Some even invade the field during and after the game in show of displeasure (Martin 1995:68). Such actions always culminate in panic, chaos and stampedes among the spectators.

In the context of Zimbabwe, the situation is habitually worsened by the presence and use of the infamous anti-riot police to manage rowdy crowds in stadia. Many soccer tragedies are caused by poor crowd control, especially when the anti-riot police fire teargas canisters into the crowds. According to Gleeson (2001), 'the indiscriminate firing of teargas by anti-riot police is commonplace in African soccer, where stewarding and other security measures are non-existent'. Such was the case on 9 July 2000 when about thirteen soccer fans, comprising 6 women, 4 men and 3 boys, perished in a stampede after police deliberately fired teargas at the exits of the National Sports Stadium in Harare during a World Cup qualifier between Zimbabwe and South Africa. The police wanted to quell growing discontent and unruliness when Delron Buckley of South Africa had gestured a silencing finger to the incensed 60,000 strong home crowd, after scoring South Africa's second goal. (*The Herald* 10 July 2000). The match had to be abandoned as players from both sides felt the effects of the teargas and had to receive medical treatment. The police were condemned for firing teargas, with authorities calling it a total over-reaction. Almost a year later, on 11 April 2001, crowd trouble also reared its ugly head in Johannesburg, South Africa, when 43 people were killed as about 75,000 fans attempted to force their way into an overcrowded 60,000 capacity Ellis Park Stadium to watch a top of the table league clash between the country's two most popular clubs, Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates (Alegi 2004; Darby 2005). Seven more people died in a stampede two weeks later on 29 April 2001 in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo after the police again fired tear gas into the crowd (<http://www.wikipedia.org>).

Such soccer violence can be contextualised in the field of cultural analysis where it acts as a political statement about police brutality, social inequities, ethnic nationalism, social identity, soccer maladministration among others. In the case of the Zimbabwean stampede, fans used the violence to contest dictatorial rule and political oppression by the state and its agents, in particular the police and the army. In some cases, the soccer violence is used as a platform of ethnic nationalism. Such is the case in Zimbabwe where hegemonic Shona and Ndebele ethnic groups identify with Dynamos FC and Highlanders FC, respectively, along ethnic lines. Thus, any games pitting these two teams are always ethnically charged and so volatile that most women and men do not attend them.

The worst soccer disaster in African history occurred almost a week later on 9 May 2001 in Accra, Ghana, when at least 130 people, including women and children, died when over-zealous policing involving the arbitrary firing of teargas canisters into the crowd led to a stampede for the locked gates at a match pitting local rivals, Hearts of Oak and Asante Kotoko (Darby 2005). According to Fridy (2009:20), 'the Hearts/Kotoko rivalry is usually inflamed by the inherent nexus between football and politics in lieu of the relationship between Ghana's two dominant soccer clubs, Accra Hearts of Oak and Kumasi Asante Kotoko and Ghana's two dominant parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP), respectively'. In this context, soccer violence is being used to reflect or contest political dichotomies and affiliations in society. More deaths also occurred in Lusaka, Zambia on 3 June 2007 when 12 fans were crushed to death as crowds rushed from the stadium after Zambia's victory in an African Cup of Nations qualifier against the Democratic Republic of Congo. Also, on March 29 2009, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, thousands of fans pushing to get into a stadium to watch a game between Ivory Coast and Malawi set off a stampede that killed 19 people and injured hundreds more (<http://www.wikipedia.org>). Despite all these tragedies, there have been no moves by African football leaders to ban police from firing teargas or set up guidelines for better stadium safety. It is because of these incidences that many African women and men do not attend soccer matches and prefer staying within the comfort of their homes.

### **Soccer 'Apartheid' and Zero Sponsorship**

Many Zimbabwean women also encounter 'apartheid' in soccer participation. Men own, control, compete, coach and organize the game largely excluding women. (Bogopa 2007). Women basically play a supportive role of courtesans, jiggling and cheering on the sidelines. This 'apartheid' starts at grassroots level where local communities and schools socially construct sport along the lines of gender. Soccer is constructed as a boy/male sport at an early age. Girls are taught feminine sports particularly the popular sport of netball.

Likewise, provision of sport infrastructure is heavily biased towards soccer, with football stadia sprouting virtually everywhere across Zimbabwe. In contrast, very few netball and volleyball courts or hockey fields are constructed for females to showcase their talents. Marianne (2005) demonstrates that inconvenient schedules of soccer activities greatly affect women's and girls' participation in the game. There is a general lack of enthusiasm for female soccer even among women themselves. Very few women attend female soccer games, even the ones involving the national team. This under-representation is further exacerbated by the inherent lack of sponsorship for female soccer in Zimbabwe. The corporate world's sponsorship packages are geared towards male soccer, rugby, basketball and cricket teams. Much more money is also poured into soccer development for boys than for girls from the junior levels upwards. Hence, just like the famous Abidjan Soccer Academy in Ivory Coast, various soccer academies exist in Zimbabwe where budding boys are taught the skills of the 'beautiful game' at the expense of the girl child. This gender discrimination is also evident at the national level where professional women soccer leagues are non-existent and the Zimbabwean Women National Soccer Team, nicknamed the 'Mighty Warriors' always struggle to raise funds during such tournaments as the COSAFA female championships and World Cup qualifiers.

Despite these sponsorship barriers, women have sustained their participation in many ways. Individual female personalities have struggled and toiled around, using their own funds to run female soccer. One of these is Susan Chibizhe who was a former chairlady of the Zimbabwean Women Soccer League. She has shown resiliency and creativity typical of Bogopa's (2007) 'Standpoint Theory' which places the experiences and perspectives of the oppressed people at the centre of analysis. The theory assumes that the experiences of those who enjoy and control differ significantly from those who are marginalised in sport (Bogopa 2007). While Susan Chibizhe and female soccer players are struggling, their male counterparts have many sponsors to choose from. Women's initiatives are central to the survival of their profession against all odds. They have not sat on their laurels but have gone around looking for sponsorship packages from as far as the head of the state. They have also lobbied to administer the FIFA funds allocated to women soccer since most of the funds are misused within Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA).

### **Sexual Subjugation and Discrimination**

In 2008, a major sex scandal was exposed in the Zimbabwe 'Mighty Warriors' team involving a member of the coaching staff. One of the players accused one of the team officials of infecting her with the deadly HIV/AIDS virus (<http://www.newzimbabwe.com>, 12 January 2008). Apparently, the officials used team selection as a bait to lure the susceptible players into sexual relations. Allegations

of drug abuse among players was reported with some players becoming pregnant after drug-induced sex romps during training camps. In response, there was a public outcry over such scandals which made ZIFA to investigate and punish the offenders who were putting the association and the game into disrepute. Sportswomen in Zimbabwe are also stigmatised as pseudo-masculine creatures that wish to behave like real men. Despite what Bodey (2008) calls 'international sport reforms that are being undertaken to challenge the status of women in sport like what is being currently done in Morocco', most Zimbabwean sports women continue to be caricatured as tomboys or even as lesbians. People always tend to associate any success in soccer and other sports with masculinity and any sportswoman who is exceptionally successful has her sexuality questioned. Such has been the case of Nomisa Moyo, the best Zimbabwe 'Mighty Warriors' soccer player since independence. She has been nicknamed Nomisa 'Boys' Moyo, which is reflective of a society that does not appreciate her talents as a woman and thus associates her football prowess with that of boys or men. Similarly, Caster Semenya of South Africa, the current Women's 800m World Champion, has dominated world headlines with questions over her sexuality simply because she exceeded the expectations that society expects of 'real' women in sports. In addition, female referees are rare in Zimbabwean soccer. The existing few only act in a supportive role as peripheral match commissioners who are not really involved in the actual refereeing of the match. It is because of these gendered prejudices that male attendance at female sporting activities in Zimbabwe, especially soccer, is extremely low.

The few Zimbabwean female soccer administrators are also not spared from physical and verbal violence. In early May 2008, Henrietta Rushwaya, the only female Chief Executive Officer of ZIFA since independence, was attacked by angry football fans who were demonstrating against a sudden hike in entry charges at a premier league match between Kiglon FC and Dynamos FC in Harare. Her only crime was trying to mediate between the parties, but she was herself caught up in the mayhem, with her car being stoned in the attack. A visibly angry Rushwaya confirmed that rioting fans attacked her car at the stadium, saying that 'all I wanted to do was to see if I could convince Kiglon officials to lower their entry charges, but I ended up being caught up in the violence' (<http://www.thezimbabwetimes.com>). The credibility of her appointment is also being questioned, with some arguing that she underwent a 'carpet interview' or exchanged sexual favours to acquire that CEO position. Many also make reference to her well-known political connections with ZANU PF, a political party that many urban Zimbabweans hate with passion. They refuse to give her credit and the benefit of doubt over her rise to power in Zimbabwean football administration. Currently, she is labelled as prostitute and the Jezebel of Zimbabwean football by those who are jealous of her position.

### Female Sexuality and the Curse of *Juju* in Soccer

African soccer teams are renowned for deploying *juju* or magic to win matches. *Juju* men with their paraphernalia are often seen during soccer matches, conducting their rituals purported to weaken, confuse and ultimately vanquish the opposing team. Straker (2007) observes that most footballers believe that superior talent is not natural, and excessive skill by individual players can only be explained through the intervention of supernatural forces, which gives them this 'force' or 'dexterity'. So individual players, local teams and even national teams consult what are popularly known as *marabouts* in West Africa, *sangomas/n'angas* in Southern Africa or '*féticheur*' *magicians/fortune-tellers* in Central Africa. In Zimbabwe, many myths and legends exist of teams that camp at graveyards in preparation for a match. Some employ illusionary and intimidatory tactics, like unleashing a swarm of bees against their opponents. Goalkeepers might be given charms to improve their leaping abilities, or strikers' shoes might be adorned with fetishes so that they can score more goals. Skilled magicians usually 'turn the opponent's ball into stone or make the ball invisible until it is in the back of the net' (Straker 2007). Captains and team members are also given talisman and amulets to wear, or special preparations to rub into their skin and a favourite tactic is to bury a talisman in the centre of the playing field the night before a big match, while watching out for spies from the other side (Martin 1995). In response, other teams carry and blow handfuls of salt or simply urinate onto the turf before kick-off to weaken the *juju*. All this is meant to give a team an edge over its opponents.

Be that as it may, the use of *juju* comes at a price for African women. Generally, *juju* users greatly believe that women should be avoided at all costs. Female sexuality is deemed detrimental and retrogressive in the *juju* world. Hence, women are caricatured as evil or wicked elements that bring bad luck to soccer. So they are shunned by both the team officials and players especially on the eve of and during a match. This is the reason why many teams that sternly believe in *juju* emphasize camping before matches and also desist from engaging any female officials in their technical setups. In Zimbabwe for instance, the ZIFA CEO, Henrietta Rushwaya, has been castigated and portrayed as a symbol of bad omens or misfortunes in Zimbabwean soccer on a number of occasions. In August 2008, she was once barred from watching an African Champions League match between Dynamos FC and Zamalek of Egypt after Dynamos had lost the previous two home matches in her presence (Interview with Anslotte Mangena, 13 October 2009). Coincidentally, Dynamos went on to win by a single goal against Zamalek and progressed into the semi-finals which thereby consolidated the belief that she had much to do with the team's misfortunes.



Woman employed as team officials often experience denigration. This has been the case of Abigail Mnikwa, the former physiotherapist of Dynamos FC who was kicked out of her job by the club's leadership and fans representatives on 6 October 2009, after they had resolved that she was to blame for the team's poor performance. (*The Herald*, 10 October 2009). Soon after her dismissal, the team went on to win its next league by three goals to nil. Dynamos have always been a club built on a foundation of superstition and a section of their fans believe Mnikwa's presence on the bench was affecting the club's gender-insensitive magical powers. Despite this, some unidentified Dynamos players pointed that it was not her fault since all players were not playing well, hence the team's dismal performance. In response, Mnikwa took her case to the High Court which ordered her reinstatement with damages and Dynamos FC complied with the court ruling. Such resilience showed that many Zimbabwean women do not believe in the myth that they are *juju* neutralizers. Despite this, the *juju* phenomenon has been detrimental to the engendering of sport and social development in Africa since women are categorised and constructed as evil to the game of soccer.

#### **Soccer and Gender Socialization**

Feminist scholars have asserted that gender violence occurs both in private and public spheres and manifests in various forms: physical, psychological, emotional and sexual (Epprecht 2001; Green 2001; Tichagwa 1998). Gendered soccer violence also spills into the private sphere where women interested in the game grapple with patriarchal ideologies that tend to socialise men to be competitive and women cooperative (Bogopa 2007). Accordingly, the majority of females are discouraged to engage or be interested in sports that challenge the traditional norms and values of society. Lenskyj (1986) observes that a woman who invades male turf in sport is seen as rejecting the privileged and protected status of those who conform to the traditional feminine roles. Digressing from such patriarchal norms leads to hostilities against women.

Hence, female soccer personalities are usually treated as deviant who cannot be married to sane men. Because of pride and chauvinistic mindsets, men avoid marrying such women whom they deem masculine in character. For example, Lucia Goreng of Ghana revealed that she decided to abandon her football career after facing mounting criticism from many people who viewed her as a man and that she would not be married ([www.violenceinsports.org](http://www.violenceinsports.org)). Consequently, soccer players tend to court and marry one another. For example, the Zimbabwean male national soccer team defensive midfielder, Esrom Nyandoro married Ruth Banda, a 'Mighty Warriors' player (*The Herald*, 7 March 2007). Female players also have to fulfil their domestic and conjugal duties within the home with no excuses of tiredness. They are also discouraged from the game by the patriarchal notions that vigorous activities affect their sexuality and fertility.

Most Zimbabwean women are compelled to support their husbands' teams, especially the popular Dynamos, Caps United and Highlanders football clubs. Failure to comply frequently leads to rebuke and domestic violence, especially when the husband's team loses a match. Women are thus hindered from watching their own favourite teams and support their spouses' teams out of fear. According to Albert Mvurume, men sometimes vent their anger on their spouses and children when their team loses (Interview, 13 October 2009). Similarly, supporting a team is safer for a married woman than having a favourite male soccer player. Most husbands accuse their wives of insubordination and prostitution for praising another man. This leaves the accused wives with little option but to dance to the tune of their husbands. Ultimately, they lose interest in the game.

### Conclusion

The chapter has used the Zimbabwean soccer scenario as a window into how Zimbabwean women are exposed to various forms of violence that affects their physical, psychological and sexual well-being. The sport poses threats to women through hooliganism, sexual molestation; discrimination, lack of sponsorship, *juju* stigmatizations, and gender socialization problems within the home. Therefore, there is need to act and develop policies to eliminate soccer violence and transform the game's regime of gender relations in ways that promote equitable sport development. For instance, women soccer should be promoted and nurtured from the grassroots level, especially at school. The government and the corporate world should allocate specific funds for women sport development so that they do not struggle for sponsorship. Zimbabwean soccer authorities also need to promote conducive sporting environments within their stadia, including ensuring professional crowd control, discouraging police brutality, improving the infrastructure as well as engendering soccer as an inclusive sport.

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