

‘Treated like children born out of wedlock’: the development and the neglect of women’s football in post-colonial Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Women's football in Zimbabwe was institutionalised in 1980 at independence but has evidently been neglected by the Zimbabwe Football Association and the government. This neglect is a manifestation of the phenomenon of ‘negative integration’. This is demonstrated in the negligible way that women's football has been treated throughout the years in comparison with the men's national team. This is a situation metaphorically described by former Zimbabwe Women Soccer League chairperson Mavis Gumbo as ‘being treated like children born out of wedlock’. This was illustrated when the women's national football team qualified for the Rio 2016 summer Olympics, becoming the first Zimbabwean football team to play in a major intercontinental tournament. The team was hailed as ‘national heroines and patriots’ by prominent voices including President Robert Mugabe, titles that carry significant political meaning in the Zimbabwean context. However, upon returning the players were only given a paltry transport allowance and practically abandoned by the authorities, an incident described by the local media as a back to reality moment. This reflects a broader contradictory approach to gender issues in post-colonial Zimbabwe by the political authorities who conveniently publicly express support for gender equality, whilst simultaneously neglecting to reform gender oppressive institutions.