Socio-environmental factors and vulnerability in the migration of Brazilian soccer players

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ABSTRACT

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| **Background:** Migration has been a phenomenon since the beginning of human history, driven by the pursuit of better living conditions for individuals or populations. Economic, sociocultural, environmental, political, and religious contexts are directly linked to migratory patterns. Soccer players migrate mainly in search of better professional opportunities, such as higher pay, greater visibility and the chance to play in more competitive leagues. Migration occurs in professional sports, such as in professional soccer, for similar reasons. **Objective:** This study aims at contextualizing the socio-environmental and vulnerability aspects related to migration in professional soccer. It is a theoretical essay that values qualitative changes in the objects or phenomena analyzed through reflection and interpretation. **Methods:** This is a narrative review of the literature with searches in random scientific databases on the theme of vulnerabilities associated with migration in professional football. This methodology is justified by the scarcity of works in the scientific literature addressing this theme. **Results:** The study reveals that young soccer athletes, during their professional training process, may face various situations of vulnerability and risks related to physical or mental health, such as bullying; physical, sexual, or psychological violence; or negligence. The fact that young people are away from their families can exacerbate these situations of vulnerability and risk. **Conclusions**: The implications of the evidence related to the vulnerabilities of soccer athletes are discussed to expose and reflect on this reality. |

*Keywords: Human migration; soccer; environmental vulnerability; health vulnerability; athlete health*

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has been a part of human history since ancient times (Seyferth, 2011).According to Gallino(2001), migration refers to the voluntary or forced movement of people from one geographic area to another, either temporarily, long-term, or permanently. Seyferth (2011) notes that the first mass migration to Brazil was that of thousands of Africans who were brought as slaves. The displacement of people due to migration is a significant demographic process that affects the health and disease of both individuals and communities (Barata et al., 2011).

In this context, Barata et al.(2011) analyze the migratory process from a social perspective to understand the reasons behind people’s decision to migrate. The authors’ findings indicate that the search for employment or better working conditions is the primary reason that drives the migratory process. However, political, religious, or ethnic issues also contribute to people leaving their place of origin and migrating to other regions or countries (Castelli, 2018).Regardless of the factor that triggers the migratory process, it can be affirmed that a common goal among immigrants is to find a safe place with better living conditions. Therefore, economic, sociocultural, environmental, political, and religious contexts significantly influence migrations (Lee,1966).

Soccer athletes, like other workers, are also affected by the phenomenon of migration in the globalized world (Coelho, 2015). The migration of athletes - particularly soccer players - has become increasingly prominent in the sports industry (Soares, 2011). These authors suggest that salary, media exposure, and prestige are the key factors that motivate soccer athletes to migrate from Brazil to other countries. Similarly, Rial(2008) highlights that the migration of soccer players is a complex issue that involves socioeconomic factors and working conditions.It is worth noting that the first migration of Brazilian athletes occurred in the 1930s, after the World Cup in Uruguay, with Italy being the destination.

Currently, 40 clubs participate in the main divisions of the Brazilian championship. However, considering the vast number of athletes in the country, it is evident that not all of them can compete in the main competitions, resulting in a lack of attractive financial remuneration for many. This context is directly related to the migration of Brazilian soccer players to other countries, as highlighted by the Brazilian Soccer Confederation in 2018 (CBF, 2018).In fact, data from the International Center for Sports Studiesreveals that Brazil was the leading exporter of soccer players to world leagues in 2019, with Europe, Asia, and the Middle East being the primary destinations (Polli et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, this study aims at contextualizing the socio-environmental and vulnerability aspects associated with migration in professional soccer (Polli et al., 2018).

2. material and methods

The methodological basis of this study is a narrative review of the literature with searches in random scientific databases on the subject covering the vulnerabilities associated with migration in professional football. This methodology is justified by the scarcity of works in the scientific literature on the subject. The reflective and interpretative character permeates the object of study and searches do not exhaust the sources of information.

This research was characterized as a narrative review study. For this purpose, the methodological criteria of a literature review were adapted, following the model proposed by Cooper (1984). This method enables the synthesis of existing scientific knowledge on a given topic, allowing for the identification of research gaps and the strengthening of evidence to support health practices and public policies. The process was divided into six sequential stages, as described below:

**Identification of the topic and formulation of the research question**

The central theme focused on migration of soccer players, vulnerabilities and their impact on health of these athletes. The guiding question was: *"What are the main impacts of migration on health of soccer players?"*

**Establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria and definition of data sources**

Scientific articles were used as primary sources. The inclusion criteria were: (1) scientific articles and official documents; (2) relation to the proposed topic; and (3) presentation of measures to deal with the vulnerabilities to which athletes are exposed. These topics were extracted specifically from the aforementioned studies.

**Categorization of the studies**

After selection, the reports were organized in an analysis spreadsheet containing the following categories: year of publication, main vulnerability, impacts on health, and other relevant observations. All selected data were reviewed by three of the authors to identify which issues appeared repeatedly across the reports for further analysis and discussion.

**Evaluation of the included studies**

Based on the criteria, data from the studies were selected primarily based on the persistence and recurrence of specific themes over time, which were then analyzed.

**Interpretation of the results**

Interpretation was conducted following both a temporal and thematic approach. The main shifts in the understanding migration impacts and the vulnerabilities to address them were identified, with an emphasis on those measures that showed the greatest evidence on soccer player athletes.

**Presentation of the review and synthesis of knowledge**

The results were presented in the form of a descriptive summary, illustrating the evolution of the impacts of the migration process on athletes, as well as the vulnerabilities to which they are exposed. The analysis also highlighted relevant gaps for future research, especially regarding action strategies to deal with these vulnerabilities.

3. results AND DISCUSSION

# Vulnerability in the context of the training of young soccer players

Vulnerability refers to the state in which groups or individuals face difficulties in protecting their interests (De Barchifontaine, 2006).The vulnerability can be classified into three categories: individual, social, and programmatic. Individual vulnerability is related to emotional, biological, and attitudinal aspects, while social vulnerability is characterized by cultural and economic aspects and access to goods and services (Ayres et al., 2006). Programmatic vulnerability refers to the social resources necessary for the protection of an individual’s integrity and well-being. Currently, vulnerability is gaining prominence in various contexts, including the sports environment (Brito & Silva Junior, 2023). In Brazil, soccer is a passion for all Brazilians and can provide financial improvement and an escape from poverty, reducing the vulnerability of successful players (Mandel & Santos, 2018).

Many families of aspiring professional soccer players face vulnerable situations, and one of the main ways to alleviate this is by improving their financial conditions. When a family member becomes a professional soccer player, it can improve the living conditions of numerous relatives. However, the journey from dreaming to realizing this goal is often long and not always successful (Marques & Samulski, 2009).

Soccer is one of the most popular sports in the world, with a huge media following, and its popularity inspires the dreams of many young people, particularly boys (Rocha et al., 2011). However, in a soccer athlete’s development, many processes can negatively impact their social and cultural growth (Souza et al., 2008). According to Marques and Samulski (2009), young athletes often struggle to balance their academic studies with their sports training.

The dream of young athletes to become professional soccer players increases their vulnerability to exploitation by clubs and agents (Souza, 2015).These young people often have low levels of education due to dropping out or failing academically, and they believe that playing professional soccer is the only way to improve their living conditions and those of their families. This situation worsens their social vulnerability. Additionally, coaches’ professional preparation can also increase the vulnerability of young athletes as some coaches may not have sufficient understanding of social, ethnic, mental health, and gender issues. The dream and challenges of becoming a professional soccer player do not only affect young athletes but also their families, who share the same goals and face the same struggles. As a result, the cyclical process of being exposed to social vulnerabilities becomes part of the family context (Newman & Alvarez, 2015).

Elite football players operate in an intensely demanding environment where a culture of performance takes center stage. This performance-driven narrative emphasizes overcoming obstacles through relentless hard work, mental toughness, and emotional control—often at the expense of emotional well-being and other important areas of life. In this context, vulnerability is frequently seen as the opposite of strength and is rarely acknowledged, except when it's part of a storyline where it is ultimately conquered (Hägglund et al., 2023).

However, recent research suggests that vulnerability is an inherent part of high-performance sports. Feelings such as fear of failure, shame, uncertainty, and emotional exposure are common experiences for athletes and sports professionals. In this setting, vulnerability can be understood as the ability to connect with one’s emotions with compassion—acknowledging personal limitations and having the courage to seek support when needed. This approach redefines resilience as something built through self-awareness, openness, and emotional courage (Cormier et al., 2023, Hägglund et al., 2023).

Sports inherently create a sense of family connection, fostering a shared bond among members. This can manifest in various ways, such as providing financial and psychological support for athletes or offering opportunities for family gatherings during soccer matches. The journey of these young athletes is complex. Typically starting at the age of 12 and without any accompanying adults, they leave their hometown and often their birth state in search of better training facilities and professional opportunities in the youth categories of major sports clubs. Upon arrival, the young athlete begins to reside in dormitories with simple, sometimes precarious structures and interacts with various other athletes who share similar goals but come from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Additionally, the athlete becomes emotionally invested in the sport. Through the enjoyment derived from sports practice, soccer is not only viewed as work but also as a source of leisure and as providing a sense of belonging (Williams et al., 2022).

Several factors can increase the vulnerability of certain population groups, particularly those who spend extended periods away from their families; this situation and environment can also lead to various forms of violence, exacerbating existing risk factors (Morão et al., 2011). While sports can have positive effects on athletes’ social, psychological, and moral well-being, negative behaviors such as bullying, arrogance, and discrimination are also observed among them (Schipper van Veldhoven, 2016).

Athletes in the process of training—particularly children and adolescents—often encounter situations of physical, sexual, psychological, or neglectful violence. Among the various forms of violence, community violence caused by individuals without family ties is the most prevalent in this environment. Bullying is so prevalent in the soccer environment that athletes often confuse or even normalize it as a form of verbal and physical play attributed to jokes and fun.These attitudes are repeatedly used to establish dominance, prove masculinity, or establish social hierarchies (Booth et al., 2023).

Another important aspect to consider is the health of young people who are away from home. Mental illnesses have been identified as a major contributor to low performance and work absenteeism, resulting in significant financial losses for both public and private sectors (Whiteford et al., 2013). In the sports context, mental illnesses are often stigmatized and viewed as a challenge to overcome due to fear and prejudice (Maclntyre et al., 2017).

Soccer athletes face not only pressure to perform at high levels but also constant conflicts, existential and future uncertainty, lack of control over their work environment, and potential relocations and adaptations if loaned to other clubs (Darpatova-Hruzewicz & Book Jr., 2021). Mental health has been extensively researched in relation to soccer athletes, revealing that these challenges persist beyond their professional careers (Gouttebarge et al., 2015).

The routine followed by young soccer athletes can lead to an increase in stress-related factors. Consequently, physiological changes associated with these factors can make the athlete more vulnerable to physical problems and exacerbate the onset of conditions such as anxiety and depression (Park et al., 2013). Despite the challenges highlighted by Marques and Samulski (2009), some young individuals can fulfill their dream of becoming professional soccer players; however, a significant number of them are unable to turn professional or even earn a living from soccer. This situation is worsened by the fact that in most cases, these young people lack any other professional training and have not completed high school, which significantly contributes to their vulnerability (Crocket, 2012).

Despite this understanding, vulnerability and mental health remain stigmatized in soccer players. A lack of psychological safety and the fear of being perceived as weak often prevent athletes from asking for help. Fostering a culture of self-compassion, which includes kindness toward oneself, recognizing shared struggles, and maintaining emotional balance, could help address these issues. Still, changing the culture faces resistance, as many athletes fear being seen as “soft” or less driven. This highlights the importance of developing tools and support systems that make space for vulnerability in a healthy and constructive way (Hägglund et al., 2023).

# Migration and soccer

The phenomenon of sports migration is gaining attention in the academic field. Further research should explore the consequences of the increasing number of athletes migrating and the impact it has on the lives of young and adult individuals, particularly those who do not achieve professional success (CBF, 2018).

Brazilian clubs have been facing several economic and administrative challenges in recent years, which may be directly linked to the increase in athlete migration. Additionally, the limited number of clubs in the main national leagues and the high number of athletes in the country’s territory could also be contributing factors to this trend (CBF, 2018).

The Brazilian Soccer Confederation (*Confederação Brasileira de Futebol*-CBF)reported that in 2018, the country had 7,000 registered soccer clubs, with 40 of them being in the first and second divisions. Brazil has around 90,000 professional soccer players (CBF, 2018), with approximately 1,300 playing for clubs that offer satisfactory salaries; however, 55% of these workers earn less than R$1,000.00 per month.

Upon analyzing the aforementioned data, it becomes clear that a significant labor competition exists in the national market. As a result, migration becomes an appealing option for many athletes, particularly those who aspire to enhance their financial situation and, consequently, their quality of life. However, an athlete’s decision to transition to another country or club is not always a personal choice. Despite being influenced by social structures and individual subjectivities, this transition is sometimes imposed by relational structures that are concretized through a negotiation model between businessmen, managers, and clubs, all for the sake of profit. In other words, in certain situations, the player may be compelled to migrate and must adapt to a new reality (Darpatova-Hruzewicz & Book Jr., 2021).

The international soccer statistical analysis research group, Soccer Observatory Weekly, and the independent Swiss-based Center for Studies frequently conduct research across all areas of soccer (Polli et al., 2020). According to the 2019 report, Brazil leads the global market in terms of athlete transfers abroad. The data suggest that Europe - particularly Portugal - is the primary destination for these athletes leaving Brazil; however, regions in Asia, such as the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, also see significant flows of Brazilian athletes (Polli et al., 2018).

When a soccer athlete leaves Brazil and migrates to other countries, they are faced with a new local reality that involves living with people from diverse social classes and ideologies—particularly political, cultural, and religious ones. Additionally, the club’s fanbase also reflects sociocultural diversity, which poses another challenging factor (Fiorenzano, 2010). This diversity presents a significant challenge for the soccer athlete.

According to Brandão et al.(2013), political ideologies and economic, social, and historical factors, as well as the language spoken, may differ from those of the country of origin. Therefore, athletes who struggle to make friends or learn a new language may feel isolated and distant.

Adapting to a new location can be challenging, especially in environments where military conflicts or extreme religious cultures are prevalent. Athletes who find themselves in such situations may experience emotional discomfort, physical problems, physiological disorders, increased anxiety levels, and other factors that can negatively impact their personal and professional lives (Brandão et al., 2013). However, if the athlete is able to adapt quickly, their chances of success are higher (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014).

# Migration in national soccer

Soccer players do not move only from Brazil to other countries but also within the country itself, with a much higher frequency than international movements. According to the CBF report, in 2018, 257 soccer competitions were held in Brazil between January and December. As these competitions take place at different times of the year, it is common for athletes to seek work in other championships after one ends, often in a different region of the country; this requires them to migrate between states to continue their profession (CBF, 2018).

Part of the Brazilian Soccer Impact Report, shows that soccer athletes in Brazil come from the South, Southeast, and Northeast regions. However, the Northeast and Midwest regions have the highest concentration of athlete births, indicating a significant migratory flow. The Brazilian Soccer Impact Report highlights an important data point regarding the location of soccer clubs registered in the country. As of 2018, both professional and amateur clubs were spread across 1,499 municipalities, with the highest concentration of clubs in the Southeast (38%), South (26%), North (14%), Northeast (13%), and Midwest (9%) regions, respectively (CBF, 2018). This indicates a significant movement of athletes between different regions of the country. The distribution of clubs in the South and Southeast regions contrasts with a higher concentration of athletes originating from the North and Northeast regions.

# Socio-environmental factors and migration in professional soccer

After soccer players become professionals, which is legally allowed in Brazil after the age of 16, they can pursue various paths and play for multiple clubs throughout their careers. This results in high turnover, as highlighted in the Brazilian Soccer Impact Report (CBF, 2018). Additionally, many athletes leave the country, mainly to migrate to other continents.Being a professional athlete requires physical, mental, and technical skills. However, social, racial, religious, sexual orientation, and other characteristics often create barriers that hinder the athlete’s ability to perform their function. These issues are reflected in the soccer environment through episodes of racism experienced in many stadiums (Pimenta, 2021), despite embracing diversity, soccer is a multifaceted phenomenon that is still plagued by taboos and prejudices.Racial discrimination refers to any behavior that poses a threat based on race, color, ethnicity, language, religion, or nationality, thereby undermining human dignity (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Racist behavior is not limited to the soccer field as it can also occur among fans in the stands through verbal abuse and insults that incite violence (Bandeira & Seffner, 2016).

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, games were held without spectators in stadiums. However, 31 reported cases of racism related to soccer occurred in the country, with 17 occurring inside stadiums, 10 on the internet, and four in other locations. Typically, these cases are judged by sports or common justice systems, and if proven, penalties may include financial fines for clubs, bans on spectators for a certain number of games, and in some cases, loss of points in the championship (Manera & Carvalho, 2020). Incidents of racism occurred in several regions of Brazil, with Rio Grande do Sul recording the highest number of cases. It is important to note that incidents that occurred online were not included in this count, as it is not possible to identify their location.

It is important to note that there is a law in place that criminalizes prejudice based on race or skin color. Law No. 7.716/1989 prohibits discriminatory behavior and the practice, inducement, or incitement of offensive and racist actions (Brazil, 1989). Various forms of media, such as social media, news programs, radio, and TV, consistently highlight reports of not only racism but also discriminatory, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic behavior (Manera & Carvalho, 2020). Such aggression not only undermines an individual’s dignity, but it also has adverse effects on their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being as well as their family, work, and social relationships. Additionally, the challenges faced by soccer players—particularly migrants—expose their social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities. Addressing these challenges requires individuals and communities to empower themselves with the capacity to respond and build possibilities for overcoming them.

Soccer players face a series of vulnerabilities, which are accentuated when they migrate periodically, especially the younger ones. Among the individual strategies they use to become more resilient are belief in their own potential, dialog with trusted people, religiosity, individual motivations and focus on goals. However, collective strategies are also necessary, such as the social support networks in the players' lives. Family members, friends, teammates and club professionals were identified as essential sources of emotional and motivational support. The presence of a solid network contributes significantly to players' ability to cope with pressure and adversity (Sales, Braga & Baião, 2022).

4. Conclusion

This essay examines the challenges and factors involved in the migratory processes of professional soccer players. It highlights how the environmental context of families and the media’s fascination with soccer contribute to the interest of children and young people in pursuing a career in soccer, with the primary goal of improving their own and their families’ living standards.

Becoming a professional soccer player is a complex and highly competitive process that often requires adolescents to migrate, even as children, thus beginning the migratory process in their athletic careers. At this stage of life, they are already exposed to situations of vulnerability, particularly physical and mental violence, which is commonly known as bullying. Professional soccer players work in clubs located in various regions of Brazil and the world, which exacerbates vulnerabilities related to racism, xenophobia, and homophobia due to cultural adaptation and exposure bias.

The process of migration poses numerous challenges that require effective risk mitigation and vulnerability reduction strategies. To achieve this, campaigns related to the theme must be continuous and collaborative, with government actions also being coordinated. Sports entities, researchers, and athletes should be involved in the planning process.

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**DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)**

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

**CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL**

The research was carried out in accordance with CNS Resolution 466/2012 (Brasil, 2012) and Resolution 510/2016 (Brasil, 2016). It was also carried out in accordance with the General Personal Data Protection Law (LGPD), Law No. 13,709/2018 (Brasil, 2018).

Competing interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors’ Contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Author 1, Author 2, Author 3 and Author 4 designed the study, work on data interpretation and wrote the manuscript. Author 5, Author 6, Author 7 and Author 8 work on data interpretation and reviewed the final version of the manuscript.

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