African Renaissance

Published consistently since 2004
ISSN: 1744-2532 (Print) ISSN: 2516-5305 (Online)

Indexed by: SCOPUS, IBSS, EBSCO, COPERNICUS, ERIH PLUS ProQuest, J-Gate and Sabinet

Vol. 23, (No. 1), March 2026
pp 289–311

Internalisation of Xenophobic Violence among Migrant Children in KwaZulu-Natal and its Implications

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-5305/2026/23n1a13

Ruth T Nyamadzawo
International Centre of Non-Violence,
Durban University of Technology.
ruth.nyamadzawo@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1927-8697

Abstract

While South Africa experiences multiple forms of violence such as gender-based violence, political unrest, and crime, extensive research has specifically focused on xenophobia. However, few studies have explored how young children internalise this particular form of violence and its impact on their identity and sense of belonging. In South Africa, violent incidents occur daily, placing children at risk of physical and mental harm.. This paper explores the experiences of migrant children within a South African community, with particular emphasis on how they internalise xenophobic violence. Between April and August 2019, data was collected through interviews, observations, and workshops with purposively selected Black migrant children. Thematic analysis guided coding of themes. To theorize our findings, the study employed the Human Rights and Ecological Systems paradigms. Through a series of interviews and workshops, we engaged with a diverse group of children in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study highlights how xenophobia disrupts identity formation, causing rejection, exclusion, and low self-esteem, which ultimately alter the way migrant children view themselves. Secondly, many end up legitimising the violence as a part of life. Based on our findings, xenophobia poses immediate physical and emotional threats to migrant children, fostering feelings of inferiority and fear that undermine their identity formation.

Therefore addressing xenophobia, requires a holistic commitment to safeguarding children's human rights, dignity, and sense of belonging.

Keywords: *Children, Identity, Low self-esteem, Migrant, Violence, Xenophobia.*

Introduction

South Africa's economy is an emerging global market (Kpoghul et al., 2023, p. 193; Nwobi et al., 2020, p. 407). This positioning makes the country a hub for opportunity seekers and a destination for African immigrants (Maseng & Gabara, 2025, p. 1909). South Africa is estimated to host approximately 3.95 million immigrants (Stats SA, 2021). Around 642,000 are migrant or displaced children, making the nation one with the largest child migrant population on the continent (UNICEF, 2020). Around 51 per cent of all refugees are children (armed conflict, persecution, and systemic violence), totalling more than 4.5 million (UNICEF, 2023). Data across South Africa's provinces reveals that migrant children represent 28 diverse nationalities, primarily originating from Zimbabwe, the Congo, and Mozambique (Manicom, 2019).

Children, much like their parents, are directly and indirectly impacted by instances of violence as integral members of the migrant community. In South Africa, violence occurs at alarmingly high rates on a daily basis (Turner et al., 2024). For children growing up in impoverished communities, violence manifests in gangs, community, schools and family (Maringira & Tyanai Masiya, 2018; Herrero et al., 2021). Violence against children in South Africa has become firmly embedded, with around 34.4% of children reporting that they have experienced physical abuse, child homicide, child abuse, rape and neglect (Tsunga, 2023). Children who encounter violence are at an increased risk of physical and mental health challenges. Even without direct exposure to the violence, children can inherit psychological, cultural and emotional consequences of unresolved injustices of violence (Adonis, 2016). Current research has focused on the impact of xenophobic violence on children, mainly within the educational learning space. A review of recent studies suggests that schoolchildren experience classroom-based xenophobia, identity harm, exclusion, body shaming, and derogatory labelling (Dube & Setlalentoa, 2024; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, 2017; McCorkle, 2018; Dube et al., 2021; Bouyat, 2024). In Johannesburg, a study reveals that hostility and discrimination towards migrant children are so pervasive that they lead to the systemic denial of health care access (Meda, 2017). They frequently witness and experience

violence, abuse and negative attitudes, which significantly affects their significant mental health (Scorgie et al., 2017). Another study by Dube and Setlalentoa (2024) found that xenophobia in the classrooms affected classroom performance and identity. Dube et al. (2021) further supported this by highlighting that xenophobia created unsafe learning conditions. These studies, as researched collectively, highlight the pervasive impact of xenophobia on children in South Africa, affecting their education, mental health, and social integration.

Existing literature on effects of xenophobic violence has predominantly focused on Gauteng and Cape Town, while research on KwaZulu-Natal lacks in this regard. Given KwaZulu-Natal's violent historical past and high levels of xenophobic tensions (Ngcamu & Mantzaris, 2019; Hamilton & Wright, 2017), this study is essential. This study provides essential insights for a localised strategy against xenophobia, addressing the gap where national statistics overlook the specific realities of the province. This paper does not challenge earlier studies on the accepted knowledge of xenophobia in children. However, it emphasises that earlier studies have excluded child-led interventions as tools that can feed into the narrative on violence. This article aims to examine the effects of violence on children and how it influences their development through a sample of migrant children in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. The objective is to understand the psychological and emotional effects xenophobic violence has on children's development and their identity and its effects on their behaviour. Framing the issue from a human rights perspective, the study aims to show how xenophobia violates children's rights to protection, identity, and education and also disrupts social cohesion within communities. To guide this inquiry, the paper first explores how children experience and internalise violence, drawing from relevant literature. It then outlines the conceptual framework, research design, and methodology that shaped the study. This is followed by a presentation of findings, discussion, and reflections, and concludes with practical recommendations for policy and community-based interventions.

Understanding the Impact of Violence on Children

Scholars commonly define xenophobia as "the deep dislike of non-nationals by nationals of a recipient state" (Ayuba et al., 2020; Ueda, 2020). Scholars further define the term 'xenophobia' as the fear of what is different (Shoyisa & Ilesanmi, 2021). Xenophobia originates from the

Greek words *"xenos*," meaning "strange" or "foreign," and "phobos," meaning "fear" (Papanikos, 2020; Majola, 2018). In South Africa, xenophobic attitudes towards foreigners have become part of society and have become widespread (Oni & Okunade, 2018). For many migrant families, violence is not only a recurring lived reality but also an ever-present threat of future harm (Dube, 2019, p. 191). Generally, xenophobia breeds violence, which leads to mental and physical injuries (Tsheole et al., 2023). Violence and its effects on children have been reported to create a cycle of perpetual violence in communities where there are high levels of community violence (Luthar & Goldstein, 2004; Fowler et al., 2009; Estrada et al., 2023). In such violent communities, children and their parents begin to tolerate, accept, and expect violence. When children feel victimised by their environment, they are more likely to act aggressively (Vestal & Jones, 2004). It is said that "sensitivity to culture-specific social norms and development of internalised standards of social behaviours are highest during ages 6–12 years" (Parra Grajales et al., 2024, p. 357). Exposure to violence may also cause children to engage in future violence and other antisocial behaviour. Björkfors, (2023), in a case study of Finland, reveals that xenophobia significantly impacted the psychological functioning of those affected. Violence in school can impact and cause psychological distress, permanent physical disability, and long-term physical or mental ill-health in children (Ferrara et al., 2019). When children experience adverse childhood experiences through violence, they can become anxious and depressed (Gautam et al., 2024, p. 125). In other cases where children experience bullying as a form of violence, problems such as sleep disturbance are detected (Tang et al., 2023).

The story of Nathalie, a 10th-grade student from the Democratic Republic of Congo who was violently attacked at a school in Cape Town due to xenophobia, serves as a powerful example of the devastating effects of xenophobic violence.

> Nathalie, a grade-10 student at a public school in Cape Town, who came to South Africa in 2009 with her family from the Democratic Republic of Congo, paid a heavy price for being elected class monitor. She was severely beaten on 27 August 2019 by fellow students who thought a non-national was undeserving of being elected to such a position. She spent nine days in the hospital because of her injuries. Education authorities took no action because, according to them, the offending students expressed remorse, and taking further action would, in their view, inflame tensions. By August 2020, Nathalie had still not

> returned to school out of fear, as her attackers were still attending the school but had not faced any consequences for attacking her. (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Nathalie's story poignantly illustrates how multiple interacting environmental systems shape a childs experience. To better understand and contextualise experiences like Nathalie's, we now turn to the frameworks that informed our analysis and interpretation.

Conceptual Framework

i. Human Rights

A human rights framework is crucial in addressing xenophobia and protecting migrant children from violence. This approach is "based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights" (Marks, 2005). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1998 (CRC), article 2, states that there must be no discrimination based on national or ethnic origin. Scholars observe an evolution of this article, where its expansion into areas such as public health and climate change has effectively broadened the definition of non-discrimination rights (Daly et al., 2022). Articles 19 and 21 offer protection to children from all forms of violence and provide safeguards for refugees and asylum-seeking children. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) frequently refers to discrimination against children on grounds such as gender, ethnicity, disability, and religion. General Comment No. 6 (2005), dealing with "Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside Their Country of Origin" has also added migrant children to this list (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). This shows the importance of protecting migrant children on an international level. The CRC Committee's appeal to states highlights that xenophobia and racism are the root causes of conflict, disproportionately affecting children in the process. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), in Article 2, also states that "states parties condemn racial discrimination and undertake to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and promoting understanding among all races…" Article 2, paragraph 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)

requires that the rights in the Covenant be exercised without discrimination "on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or national or social origin, property, birth or another status." Article 2 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) further affirms the right of every individual to protection from discrimination and guarantees equality before the law.

South Africa's legal framework is grounded in human rights, and migrant children are accordingly protected under it. Sections 28(1) and (2) of the South African Constitution state that "every child has the right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services, and social services," and "a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child." Section 10 affords human dignity to all. Section 39(1)(b) states that when interpreting the Bill of Rights, international law must be considered. The National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (2019), in paragraph 86, recognises that xenophobia affects children severely and leads to the deterioration of their living conditions, poverty, violence, and many other forms of discrimination. Migrant children are also protected by the Children's Act 38 of 2005, which applies to all children regardless of their country of origin or immigration status. Section 6(2)(d) of the Act prohibits discrimination and affirms that all children must be treated equally and with dignity. Section 7 outlines the best interests of the child as the guiding principle in all decisions affecting them, including those related to care, placement, and legal status. The Act provides a legal foundation for safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrant children within South Africa's borders (Tigere, 2015). The Immigration Act 13 of 2002 regulates the entry, residence, and departure of all migrants in South Africa, including children. Written consent from both parents or legal guardians is a mandatory safeguard for children travelling internationally, as specified in the regulations. This is to prevent child trafficking and abduction. In parallel, the Refugees Act 130 of 1998 embeds the 'best interests of the child' principle in asylum procedures. It ensures that unaccompanied or separated children seeking refuge are assigned legal guardians and have access to education, health care, and social services while their status is determined. These Acts form a layered legal framework that upholds the dignity, safety, and developmental rights of migrant and refugee children within South Africa's borders. International and regional laws are crucial in combating xenophobic violence as they establish legal frameworks that protect

individuals from violence. These laws ensure that states uphold the human rights of children.

Ecological Systems Theory

The ecological systems theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), helps us understand the impact of violence on these children as experienced in the various community environments that influence them. This theory integrates biological, psychological, and social factors, highlighting how these elements collectively influence an individual. It provides a comprehensive developmental framework that encompasses multiple factors, each exerting layers of influence on an individual throughout their life. Within this system, the individual occupies the centre of the model (Tanhan et al., 2025). This theory posits that each human being is embedded in multiple nested systems. This arises from the complex interaction between the individual and the interconnected systemic components that shape their environment(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mabokachaba, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory framework helps understand the intersection of factors that influence human development by showing how individuals and their environments interact (Duerden & Witt, 2010; Ooko & Aluko, 2023). The theory serves as a conceptual framework that encompasses the entire development of an individual, from their early years of education until the end of their further education (McLinden, 2017). The ecological theory, when applied, shows how violence and prejudice intersect and create harmful conditions for vulnerable migrant children (Kamenopoulou, 2016). Drawing on the ecological systems theory, we can interpret how intersecting layers of violence and prejudice in South Africa create harmful conditions for migrant children. Secondly, it helps us understand how different layers of a child's environment shape their development.

Research Design

The study employed action research (AR). AR utilises the notion that for change to occur, members of the community facing the challenge must be involved in the inquiry process (Nyamadzawo, 2023). The core feature of AR is that most of the work occurs in the context of action, where participants shape the research and research design (Kaye, 2017; Bradbury-Huang, 2010). Significantly, action research shifts its focus

from viewing researched individuals and communities as sources of research information to viewing them as individuals participating as co-researchers (Ngwenya et al., 2021; Ngwenya, 2017). The study population consisted of 10 randomly selected adolescents, aged 12 to 15 of Zimbabwean, Congolese, Nigerian, Tanzanian, and Malawian origin but residing in KwaZulu-Natal. This sample population is representative of the geographic area that houses people from differing nationalities. The number 10 was determined based on logistical feasibility, ensuring a manageable yet representative sample for in-depth qualitative analysis. As Sesheba (2021) observes, a smaller sample allows the researcher to capture much more detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, aligning with the aim of this study. The accounts of these 10 migrant children provided sufficient depth to address the study's research questions and objectives. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The reason children were selected was to assess the children's impressionability and adaptability to determine whether xenophobic violence had affected them personally by the end of the evaluation. Developmental psychology suggests that the foundations of a child's social and emotional responses are established during the early childhood years (Dawson et al., 2000). Engaging children at this stage is thus paramount, as exposure to a violent context influences long-term identity formation and behaviour. The research was conducted in Umbilo, Durban, South Africa, a lower-middle-class area (Mabaso, 2017). Demographic statistics of the area indicate a higher presence of Black foreigners.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach, which enabled the exploration and understanding of how individuals and groups perceive and respond to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This was a relevant paradigm, as it helps answer the 'why,' 'what,' or 'how' questions (Lacey & Luff, 2007). Qualitative methods enabled the researcher to gain insight into the respondents' perspectives on the values, attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of the participant populations (Mack, 2005). The triangulation of interviews, observations, and workshops provided a robust framework for the researcher to investigate the complexities of the subject. Educational workshops are helpful in research, as they offer interactive and student-centred learning, which develops skills and sensitivity to specific problems

(Prkosovački et al., 2020). The participants were selected, as they provided a valuable opportunity for teaching, learning and engagement, with the expectation that it would lead to their personal transformation (Ørngreen & Levinsen 2017). Data collection took place between April and August 2019. Following collecting, the data was edited, coded, and analysed using interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The coding and labelling process of themes was done using the following categories: keywords, participants' stories, and the settings/environments (Grbich 2013: 262). This study received approval from the DUT Research Ethics Committee on 26 July 2018. The researcher addressed ethical issues by obtaining informed consent from parents and participants, maintaining confidentiality, ensuring anonymity, and ensuring that participation was voluntary. To protect participants, pseudonyms were used throughout this study to ensure confidentiality. This study deliberately focuses on Black migrants because of their unique socio-historical positioning, which has often subjected them to marginalisation and has rendered them as the major targets of xenophobic violence (Chekenya, 2024; Adjai & Lazaridis, 2013; Addae & Quan-Baffour 2022). This research focus specifically targets the intersection of race, migration, and belonging, providing depth to a narrative that remains underrepresented in the wider field of migration studies. Scholars acknowledge that non-Black migrants also experience challenges, their exclusion in this phase is a methodological decision to allow for depth, specificity, and contextual relevance. This is a limitation which future researchers may expand on.

Findings And Discussion of the Results

The research aimed to critically examine how migrant children in South Africa internalise and respond to experiences of violence. In this way, the study would understand the developmental impact on their identity, sense of belonging, self, and behaviours. This section presents the research findings, and examines them in respect of the study objectives. It provides a comprehensive overview, intended to deepen our understanding of the consequences of xenophobic violence for migrant children. Below, we will examine aspects of what the children experienced daily and how it impacted them.

Human dignity is an inherent right for all

One of the profound insights that occurred when the participants met was the establishment of a common set of values. We will begin by analysing the significance of this shared set of values. As indicated in the preceding section, workshops, as indicated in the section, were utilised. These workshop meetings allowed for the creation of a common set of values[1] to be used for the duration of the workshops as a code of conduct. The participants expectations, revealed that even children themselves have a desire to be respected as a fundamental human right (Okeke, 2022). From the common set of values, the following examples were mentioned: respect, sympathy, empathy and being polite to each other. These common sets of values show that children strongly value respect and know the importance of treating others with dignity, even in the face of differences. This finding supports research that views xenophobia as an international crime against humanity and is unacceptable (Ottuh, 2020). In one activity during the workshop, one of the participants had this to say:

> I had to search deep within, and I realized that people are all the same; we all experience the same feelings and prejudices. Role-playing the activity was highly challenging, as I could sense how the others felt while acting it out. It is not a good feeling at all.

There is a consensus that respect for children must transcend social courtesy, establishing itself as a fundamental human right. Migrant children deserve respect, safety, and equitable treatment regardless of their nationality or status. Protecting human dignity in the face of xenophobia is essential to prevent violence, exclusion, and discrimination. More must be done in South African communities to decolonise xenophobic minds and instil in the minds of children that all are entitled to their human rights and no one is superior to another.

Psychological impact

Interaction with the local children highlighted the fact that their experiences and understanding of the host communities had a

[1] These common sets of values help create a safe and open environment during the session.

psychological impact on them. Most of them were name-called, especially Zimbabweans and Nigerians, as the culprits for high crime rates. The workshops used role plays, and most of the participants depicted issues concerning drugs, car theft, rape, murder, and trafficking of people as being mainly perpetrated by foreigners. Research supports the actions depicted (Mothibi et al., 2015, p. 153). The participants consistently expressed concern over the prevailing narrative, which frequently stereotypes migrant communities by associating them with criminality. However, in reality, they did not know anyone who was like that. They agreed that it was possible to have a few negative influences that would undermine the reputation of the rest of the group. They highlighted that despite such sentiments, their parents were good members of society, yet daily, they faced accusations of being money launderers, job stealers, drug mafia members, and robbers. The central theme was that nothing good would ever be ascribed to them.

Such sentiments highlight that xenophobia has a psychological impact on its victims. Research shows that xenophobia can lead to heightened anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal among affected individuals, and those who experience discrimination may develop paranoia and stress-related disorders (Okeke, 2022, p. 53). The aforementioned findings illustrate a significant discrepancy between the external depiction of migrant families and their true lived identities. Such depictions shape their perception of themselves, which leads to low self-esteem.

Social Exclusion and Isolation

One of the impacts of xenophobia is that it can affect an individual's sense of self. According to Crush and Tawodzera (2014), xenophobic violence and exclusion in South Africa have created a climate in which many migrant children feel unwelcome and dehumanised, resulting in emotional distress and lowered self-esteem. Over time, these experiences can contribute to long-term psychological consequences, such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. The persistent experience of discrimination and violence can catalyse internal turmoil, leading to the psychological acceptance of negative stereotypical projections as a core part of one's identity. Many of these children have been born into a xenophobic environment. This internalisation often manifests as self-dislike, low self-esteem, and a fractured sense of identity. The children showed evidence that they felt ashamed of their heritage and nationality.

This led many of them to withdraw from culturally related interactions. For example, on 24 September, South Africa celebrates Heritage Day every year, which is a day where people of "diverse races, languages and cultures" come together to celebrate their uniqueness (Modise, 2022). In such instances, our findings show that it was not favourable for the participants to wear their country-of-origin cultural material, as this would expose them as foreigners. They would rather not participate or wear South African regalia. A change of dress was a form of disguise that allowed them to escape hostility and be accepted. Sibiya (2021) defines Heritage Day as a day when Blacks can freely express their heritage, celebrate and promote unity in diversity, and honour the rich cultural tapestry of the nation's residents. However, migrant children are not able to do so freely, and this contradicts what this day stands for.
Furthermore, some participants dissociated themselves from their vernacular names and preferred to use an English name, as this did not reveal their country of origin. The refusal to bring traditional pre-packaged lunches to school, due to concerns over sensory perception and peer judgment, highlights a process of deculturation and the subsequent erosion of cultural identity.
H stated:

> I do not like to wear my traditional clothing, yet my parents insist that I do. These days, I choose my clothes when I buy them so that when people see me, they will think I am a South African.

Some of the participants were isolated, despite being born to an unmarried South African father. Their predicament was that they still did not belong, as their mother held sole custody, and some locals held beliefs that a child born to unmarried parents is solely the mother's.[2] So they would not be considered local South Africans.

Another key finding that emerged was that of identity. Identity and self-esteem are closely interconnected and influence each other. Self-esteem comprises a person's identity and is crucial for both mental and physical health (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). The absence of a strong identity can erode self-confidence, creating a ripple effect that alters how an individual behaves and interacts within their social environment (Kurosawa, 2016). Kirik et al., (2015) describes this as the outgroup

[2] According to customary practice the wife and her children are under the care of her guardian or father until the completion of the payment of *lobola.*

suffering isolationism, where a group will deny themselves a social life not to confront or face any xenophobic violence (Okeke, 2022). This indicates that social identity is an original baseline of xenophobia. Within this social identity cluster, an inter-group comparison occurs, resulting in the categorisation of insiders and outsiders (Kirik et al., 2015). The children's narrations show experiences of "binarity in the construction of social relations, negativism and hostility" (Kirik et al., 2015). We conclude that migrant children facing xenophobia do experience isolation, rejection, and disconnection. B captured this feeling when they stated the following:

> I have realized that the same feeling I felt of being alone and not belonging when I relocated are the same ones they also felt.

These feelings suggest that children also experience a sense of not belonging, which has impacted their sense of identity and overall well-being. It is essential to ensure that these migrant children feel valued and connected, as this is crucial for their integration into the host country. Absorption in their country of residence is important, as the majority of them do not know any other place to be home, having never been to countries where their parents come from.

Forced integration of the local language.

The experience of the migrant participants also highlighted the issue that proficient use of the local language, isiZulu, resulted in better treatment from the locals compared to when English was adopted as the medium of communication. From the data, the only way to fit in and be accepted was to speak Isizulu fluently. Refugees and migrants are often evlauated in terms of their belonging through language (Migliarini & Cioè-Peña, 2024). Research by Zorlu and Hartog (2018) confirms that language skills are a vital gateway to social integration, noting that proficiency directly enhances the acceptance of immigrants by the host society. When one is unable to speak the local language, that becomes an identifier that they are non-South Africans, resulting in social isolation. The child participant indicated that most of the time, they had strived to learn about South African culture and language to fit better into society. Some of them did not speak any language from their country of origin; English and isiZulu were their primary languages. Participants M stated that

> I do not use my vernacular name. I prefer the English one.

The use of forced language as a defensive strategy against xenophobia is a problematic response; it highlights the failure of language as a voluntary tool for social cohesion (Migliarini & Cioè-Peña, 2024). Research highlights that young children typically have various platforms for learning language in contexts such as school, where they have no choice but to acquire local language skills (Richards, 2015). This is known as acculturation, whereby the migrant group "assimilates cultural values and beliefs of a majority community" either voluntarily or involuntarily (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Acculturation, in our instance, seems forced, and when forced, it arouses strong feelings, which is what we see with these children. The participants thus demonstrated that they understand learning the local language as a means of facilitating integration into society. However, forced linguistic assimilation places the burden of change solely on migrants, whereas social cohesion is supposed to be a dual effort of mutual cultural exchange. For integration to be sustained, we need to have platforms where both host communities and migrants can engage in authentic dialogue, where the concept of diversity is not only tolerated but also celebrated as a source of collective strength.

Insecurity and Safety

Issues of safety and insecurity were recurring themes. Living in South Africa was characterised by participants as a significant struggle, where daily life necessitated a persistent readiness to run for safety. Each time there is news on violence, their families are always on edge. No one knows what tomorrow will hold, and so they are constantly living on edge, fearing they will be the next victim. A few participants highlighted the following:

> As a foreigner, I live in fear of being killed and robbed by South Africans. Moreover, I would not want to be married to a South African because they love to pick fights and cause trouble.
> Life is not easy for a migrant in South Africa. You are always on the run. Every time there is an attack, and it is reported on the news, my parents call everyone to see if they are safe. My parents keep praying that God protects us.

> When there are rumours of an attack, we do not even go to church because we use public transport, and where we stay, there are many migrants.

It seems no one knows what will happen tomorrow, and thus, the children live in a constant state of insecurity, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Many of them had witnessed violence before, and in such cases, they would be in isolation; they could not attend any event but stayed restricted in their movement. Insecurity led to a loss of freedom of movement. One respondent's account highlighted the psychological toll of living in a perpetual lockdown-like state, where the threat of a future attack feels as persistent and unpredictable as a pandemic. Moreover, this state of insecurity was experienced by those who had visas to stay in South Africa legally. Research by Innes (2023), supports this as it states that migration-related insecurities are broader, regardless of whether individuals have a regular status or are undocumented.

Verbal Aggression and Emotional Harm

The research found that the participants were accustomed to being labelled with derogatory terms. For migrants, they were comonly referred to as *kwerekwere*.[3] As mentioned by the participants, they had accepted this name and considered it their own. Many of the participants stated that at school, they were generally identified as *amakwerekwere* without having done anything at all. In cases where they excelled in school, it was often perceived as showing off, and they were also subjected to ridicule for their academic achievements. Their skin tones, for some, were also a subject of bullying, and some suggested that if they could, they would resort to skin lightening to alleviate the problem. These findings align with existing research showing that skin tone discrimination is a pervasive yet under-examined issue; it reinforces privilege for lighter-skinned people and acts as a catalyst for trauma(Landor & McNeil, 2019). It has been seen that Black foreign nationals are perceived to be 'too dark' to be South Africans, and this affects them (Dube et al., 2021). The participants thus highlighted how the xenophobic name-calling went as far as body shaming. This led to

[3] The term *kwerekwere* connotes "a derogatory designation for people from other countries in Africa.

the loss of confidence in the participants, who became more self-conscious. One of the participants shared that:

> People would joke that I was a *kwerekwere*. I really felt uncomfortable, and I told my mother. However, nowadays, I just laugh when they say *kwerekwere*. I am used to it.

As a coping mechanism, some had now accepted the name-calling as a regular part of how they were perceived. From the above, verbal aggression is a significant issue for children who are caught in the turmoil of xenophobia because they find themselves at the centre of hostile interactions. These migrant children are subjected to racial slurs and derogatory name-calling because of their ethnicity, which negatively affects their identity formation and integration into society.

The above results show that xenophobic violence has a significant negative impact on the overall well-being of migrant children. This finding confirms that identity crisis is a "disorder that alienates an individual in personal and social relationships," which causes those who experience it to suffer from "signs of aimlessness, hopelessness, the lack of self-confidence, anxiety, aggression, and anger" (Kalateh et al., 2024). The participants exhibited these traits, as they struggled with dual cultural identities, exhibiting avoidant attachment, anxiety and fear (Pillay et al., 2024). A xenophobic environment thus exacerbates identity confusion, as these children internalise negative societal messages about their ethnicity. The participants also experienced "othering", a prejudice based on group identities (Powell & Menendian, 2016). Though internalising violent behaviours carries devastating implications for a child such as risk of suicide (Liu et al., 2011), our findings revealed no evidence that the participants had been driven to that point. This might represent a potential opportunity for further research, given that there is evidence of victimisation-related suicides by minors (Chen et al., 2025).

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Legal and Policy Enforcement

Governments must ensure the effective enforcement of existing laws that protect migrant children from xenophobic violence and discrimination. This includes enhancing the implementation of the

Children's Act 38 of 2005, particularly the sections that guarantee non-discrimination and prioritise the best interests of the child.

2. Anti-Xenophobia Education in School Curricula

Schools play a critical role in shaping attitudes and fostering empathy. The Life Orientation curriculum should be expanded to include modules addressing xenophobia, non-violence, diversity, and human rights. Lessons should be age-appropriate and participatory, encouraging learners to reflect on prejudice, identity, and inclusion.

3. Promote Cultural and African Heritage Appreciation

To counteract identity confusion and foster belonging, schools and community centres should host African Identity Library Reading Months, book clubs, and storytelling sessions that explore diverse African cultures, languages, and traditions. Transforming Heritage Day into a participatory platform allows migrant and local children to collaborate on performances and exhibitions, shifting the focus towards social cohesion and shared human values. These initiatives will help children develop pride in their heritage, reduce othering, and build bridges across cultural divides.

4. Leverage Media and National Days to Promote Unity

Society must also reshape public discourse to affirm the dignity of all children. For example, on Human Rights Day (21 March), media campaigns could spotlight stories of resilience and excellence among migrant children, promoting a narrative of shared humanity.

Conclusion

Research shows that xenophobia is a recurring issue in South Africa. From the above discussion, the findings highlight that migrant children are affected by xenophobic violence. They suffer from low self-esteem, fear, loss of identity, and insecurity. Violence has become a part of their day-to-day lives that they have adopted their identity to fit, blend in, and belong in the communities they reside in. This study illustrates how xenophobic violence manifests in children internally, through trauma and identity, and externally, through their behaviour and community

engagement. Creating safe spaces in communities where children feel protected and valued is thus crucial. We believe that having participated in this research, migrant children gained a platform to express their experiences with violence. Therefore, more initiatives that aim at integration and social cohesion, as recommended above, need to be prioritised. We thus recommend that children engage in activities that amplify their voices, such as storytelling, drama, and peer-to-peer education, them to share their experiences and co-create solutions.

REFERENCES

Addae, D., & Quan-Baffour, K. P. (2022). Afrophobia,"black on black" violence and the new racism in South Africa: the nexus between adult education and mutual co-existence. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *8*(1), 2130458.

Adjai, C., & Lazaridis, G. (2013). Migration, xenophobia and new racism in post-apartheid South Africa. *Int'l J. Soc. Sci. Stud.*, *1*, 192.

Ayuba, C., Ehiane, S. O., & Haruna, A. (2020). Xenophobia as an impediment to the spirit of a united Africa in the 21st century. *Journal of African Union Studies*, *9*(1), 5-22.

Bhugra, D., & Becker, M. A. (2005). Migration, cultural bereavement, and cultural identity. *World psychiatry*, *4*(1), 18.

Bouyat, J. (2024). Gatekeeping the School Against Foreign Others: Three Dimensions of Institutional Xenophobia at School in South Africa. In *States and the Making of Others: Perspectives on Social State Institutions and Othering in Southern Africa and Western Europe* (pp. 167–200). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

Björkfors, J. (2023). Mental health among immigrants – The case of asylum seekers in Finland (Master's thesis, Åbo Akademi University, Faculty of Education and Welfare). sph

Bradbury-Huang, H. (2010). What is good action research? Why the resurgent interest? *Action research*, *8*(1), 93–109.

Chekenya, N. S. (2024). Migrants and xenophobic attacks in South Africa: theory and evidence. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 00219096241287369.

Chen, Z., Zhang, J., Zhang, T., Zhang, F., Liu, Y., Ma, Y., ... & Zhou, Z. (2025). The relationship between early adolescent bullying victimization and suicidal ideation: the longitudinal mediating role of self-efficacy. *BMC Public Health*, 25(1), 1000.

Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) General Comment No. 6: Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside Their Country of Origin. CRC/GC/2005/6. Geneva: United Nations.

Daly, A., Stern, R. T., & Leviner, P. (2022). UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 2 and Discrimination based on Childhood: The CRC Paradox. *Nordic Journal of International Law*, *91*(3), 419–452.

Dawson, G., Ashman, S. B., & Carver, L. J. (2000). The role of early experience in shaping behavioral and brain development and its implications for social policy. *Development and Psychopathology*, 12(4), 695–712.

Dube, B., Jita, L., & Jita, T. (2021). Xenophobia and Religious Education: Evoking an Education that Takes Responsibility in South Africa. *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, *7*(3), 265-274.

Dube, B., & Setlalentoa, W. (2024). But we do not know anything, we were born in this predicament: Experiences of learners facing Xenophobia in South Africa. *Education Sciences*, *14*(3), 297.

Dube, G. (2019). Black South Africans' attitudes toward African immigrants between 2008 and 2016. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, *25*(2), 191–210.

Estrada, S., Gee, D. G., Bozic, I., Cinguina, M., Joormann, J., & Baskin-Sommers, A. (2023). Individual and environmental correlates of childhood maltreatment and exposure to community violence: Utilizing a latent profile and a multilevel meta-analytic approach. *Psychological medicine*, *53*(1), 189–205.

Ferrara, P., Franceschini, G., Villani, A., & Corsello, G. (2019). Physical, psychological, and social impact of school violence on children. *Italian journal of paediatrics*, *45*(1), 76.

Fowler, P. J., Tompsett, C. J., Braciszewski, J. M., Jacques-Tiura, A. J., & Baltes, B. B. (2009). Community violence: A meta-analysis on the effect of exposure and mental health outcomes of children and adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, *21*(1), 227-259.

Gautam, N., Rahman, M. M., & Khanam, R. (2024). Adverse childhood experiences and externalizing, internalising, and prosocial behaviors in children and adolescents: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *363*, 124–133.

Hamilton, C., & Wright, J. (2017). Moving beyond ethnic framing: political differentiation in the chiefdoms of the KwaZulu-Natal Region before 1830. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *43*(4), 663–679.

Human Rights Watch. (2020, 17 September). "They Have Robbed Me of My Life": Xenophobic Violence Against Non-Nationals in South Africa. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/09/17/they-have-robbed-me-my-life/xenophobic-violence-against-non-nationals-south.

Innes, A. (2023). Migration, vulnerability, and experiences of insecurity: conceptualising insecure migration status. *Social Sciences*, *12*(10), 540.

Kalateh, S. N. G., Rajaei, A., Farhangi, H., & Bayazi, M. H. (2024). The effectiveness of acceptance and commitment therapy on identity crisis and distress tolerance in mothers of children with cancer. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, *13*(1), 190.

Kamenopoulou, L. (2016). Ecological systems theory: A valuable framework for research on inclusion and special educational needs/disabilities. *Педагогика*, *88*(4), 515-527.

Kaye, S. (2017). An overview of action research and its relevance to peacebuilding. Building peace via action research: African case studies, 2.

Kirik, V. A., Popov, A. V., Posukhova, O. Y., Serikov, A. V., & Shevchenko, O. M. (2015). Conceptual and methodological research of xenophobia in social sciences. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*.

Kpoghul, M. T., Ityonzughul, T. T., & Gbamwuan, A. (2023). Economic dimensions of xenophobia in South Africa, 1994–2018. In *Political Economy of Colonial Relations and Crisis of Contemporary African Diplomacy* (pp. 189-206). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Lacey, A., & Luff, D. (2007). Qualitative research analysis. *The NIHR RDS for the East Midlands/Yorkshire & the Humber*.

Landor, A. M., & McNeil Smith, S. (2019). Skin-tone trauma: Historical and contemporary influences on the health and interpersonal outcomes of African Americans. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *14*(5), 797–815.

Luthar, S. S., & Goldstein, A. (2004). Children's exposure to community violence: Implications for understanding risk and resilience. *Journal of clinical child and adolescent psychology*, *33*(3), 499–505.

Mabaso, N. P. Z. (2017). *The Impact of the Corporatization of Housing Rental Stock on the Living Conditions of Tenants in EThekwini Municipality: A Case Study of Flamingo Court, Umbilo, Durban* (Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College).

Maringira, G., & Masiya, T. (2018). Persistence of Youth Gang Violence in South Africa. *African Review*, *45*.

Maseng, J. O., & Gabara, G. (2025). Exploring the implications of Philoxenia on social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants: Empirical insights from African immigrants in Nelspruit, South Africa. *E-Journal of Humanities Arts and Social Sciences*, *6*(9), 1904-1916.

Manicom, L. (2019). *Foreign children in care: A comparative report of foreign children placed in Child and Youth Care Centres in Gauteng, Limpopo, and Western Cape provinces of South Africa*. Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town

Marks, S. P. (2005). The human rights framework for development: Seven approaches. *Reflections on the Right to Development*, 23–60.

McCorkle, W. (2018). The rationale and strategies for undermining xenophobia in the classroom. *The Social Studies*, *109*(3), 151–166.

McLinden, M. (2017). Examining proximal and distal influences on the part-time student experience through an ecological systems theory. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *22*(3), 373–388.

Meda, L. (2017). Resilience among refugees: A case of Zimbabwean refugee children in South Africa. *Child abuse research in South Africa*, 18(1), 62–69.

Migliarini, V., & Cioè-Peña, M. (2024). Performing the good (im) migrant: Inclusion and expectations of linguistic assimilation. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *28*(11), 2490-2509.

Modise, J. M. (2022). Jerusalema, a Heritage Day song of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Religions,* 14(1), 45.

Mothibi, K. A., Roelofse, C. J., & Tshivhase, T. (2015). Xenophobic attacks on foreign shop owners and street vendors in Louis Trichardt Central Business District, Limpopo Province. TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa, 11(4), 151–162.

Ngcamu, B. S., & Mantzaris, E. (2019). Media reporting, xenophobic violence, and the "Forgotten Dimensions": A case of selected areas in the KwaZulu-Natal Province. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies-Multi-, Inter-and Transdisciplinarity*, *14*(1), 131-146.

Ngwenya, D. (2017). *Healing the wounds of Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A participatory action research project* (Vol. 19). Springer.

Ngwenya, N., Makoelle, T. M., & van der Merwe, M. (2021). Participatory action research as change strategy: a case of developing inclusive teaching and learning practices in an adult education Centre in Gauteng East District of South Africa. *Interchange*, *52*(3), 393-414.

Nwobi, U. A., Nwokoma, U. B., & Uzozie, H. A. (2020). An examination of the xenophobic violence in South Africa and its impact on socio-economic lives of Nigerians in that country "2015-2019". *African Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, *10*(2).

Nyamadzawo, R. T. (2023). Empowering young voices: Using action research to combat xenophobia through children's initiatives. *Conflict Trends*, *2023*(4), 3-9.

Ørngreen, R., & Levinsen, K. (2017). Workshops as a research methodology. *The Electronic Journal of e-learning*, *15*(1), 70-81.

Oni, E. O., & Okunade, S. K. (2018). The context of xenophobia in Africa: Nigeria and South Africa in comparison. *The political economy of xenophobia in Africa*, 37-51.

Okeke, K. N. (2022). The Psychology and the Psychosocial Impacts of Xenophobia and Nativism. *Interrogating Xenophobia and Nativism in Twenty-First-Century Africa*, *37*.

Ottuh, P. (2020). Xenophobia in Africa: origins and manifestations. *Przestrzeń Społeczna*, *2*(2/2020 (20).

Papanikos, G. T. (2020). Philoxenia and xenophobia in ancient Greece. *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, *6*(3), 237-246.

Parra Grajales, M. F., & Decety, J. (2024). Effects of armed conflict violence exposure on children and adolescents' morality: A systematic review. *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*, *21*(3), 365-388.

Pillay, L. G., Pillay, B. J., & Sibanda, W. (2024). Youth exposure to violence and victimisation in a South African community sample. *South African Journal of Psychiatry*, *30*(1).

Richards, J. C. (2015). The changing face of language learning: Learning beyond the classroom. *Relc Journal*, *46*(1), 5–22.

Scorgie, F., Baron, D., Stadler, J., Venables, E., Brahmbhatt, H., Mmari, K., & Delany-Moretlwe, S. (2017). From fear to resilience: adolescents' experiences of violence in inner-city Johannesburg, South Africa. *BMC Public Health*, *17*, 51–64.

Sesheba, L. (2021). *Exploring the lived experiences of African immigrant students at tertiary institutions in the Gauteng region* (Master's thesis, University of Pretoria (South Africa)).

Shoyisa, T. N., & Ilesanmi, K. D. (2021). Xenophobia in historical perspective: causation, consequences, and conquest. *Xenophobia, Nativism and Pan-Africanism in 21st Century Africa: History, Concepts, Practice and Case Study*, 219-230.

Stats SA (2021, August 5). Erroneous reporting of undocumented migrants in SA. https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=14569.

Tang, W., Chen, M., Wang, N., Deng, R., Tang, H., Xu, W., & Xu, J. (2023). Bullying victimization and internalising and externalizing problems in school-aged children: The mediating role of sleep disturbance and the moderating role of parental attachment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *138*, 106064.

Tanhan, A., Taş, B., Agilkaya-Sahin, Z., Hayden, S. C. W., Korkmaz, O., & Gürsu, O. (2025). Perception of online education during COVID-19: Online Photovoice (OPV) and ecological systems theory. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 53*(1), 81–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2023.2247544

Tigere, F. (2015). The right to a name and nationality: The issue of undocumented migrant children. *De Rebus* (June) 13.

Tsheole, P., Makhado, L., & Maphula, A. (2023). Childhood trauma and exposure to violence interventions: The need for effective and feasible evidence-based interventions. *Children*, *10*(11), 1760.

Tsunga, L., Lake, M., Halligan, S. L., Malcolm-Smith, S., Hoffman, N., Heron, J., ... & Stein, D. J. (2023). Early childhood violence exposure patterns in the Drakenstein Child Health Study (DCHS). *Wellcome open research*, *8*, 36.

Turner, E., Kelly, S. A., Eldred, E., Bouzanis, K., Gatuguta, A., Balliet, M., ... & Devries, K. (2024). What do we know about how children and adolescents conceptualise violence? A systematic review and meta-synthesis of qualitative studies from sub-Saharan Africa. *PLoS one*, *19*(7), e0304240.

Vandeyar, S., & Vandeyar, T. (2017). Opposing gazes: Racism and xenophobia in South African schools. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *52*(1), 68–81.

Vestal, A., & Jones, N. A. (2004). Peacebuilding and conflict resolution in preschool children. *Journal of research in childhood education*, *19*(2), 131–142.