



University of  
**Nottingham**  
Rights Lab

# The problem of sports trafficking: setting an agenda for future investigation and action

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# Foreword

## Baroness Lola Young of Hornsey OBE

Modern forms of slavery come in a wide variety of guises, and are sometimes revealed in unexpected places. Often deceived into thinking that a new, prosperous life elsewhere beckons, millions of women, men and children around the world endure a loss of their fundamental human rights as they are exploited and abused. In order to understand, analyse and eliminate these complex crimes, we need reliable data and information about the many ways in which people are trapped in this way.

In the global sports business, modern forms of slavery may be manifested in different ways. If we think about supply chains, mega sporting events and the infrastructure they require, and the pursuit of sporting talent, it soon becomes clear that there are a myriad of opportunities for labour exploitation. For example, the manufacture of sports products such as uniforms and memorabilia, the construction of buildings used to host sporting activities, and the recruitment of athletes. Despite this, there has been limited attention paid to the impact of the global sports business on the enjoyment of human rights. Its positioning as a ‘non-political’ space where millions are entertained, and where the most talented can fulfil their dreams on the global stage contributes to the widely held view that it is above such considerations as human rights. Unfortunately, this positioning also means that it is prone to being implicated in practices such as forced labour and human trafficking.

This report outlines a research agenda that should enable policy-makers and sports governing bodies to improve their understanding of the problem of sports trafficking, where aspiring athletes are lured into exploitative situations with the promise of developing and professionalising their technical skills. This area of activity is one that has received relatively limited attention from national governments and sports organisations. This is due in large part to the lack of evidence on the nature and scale of the problem. In the absence of the information which is critical to tackling this phenomenon, this report identifies the gap and is thus an important piece of work, highlighting the problem of trafficking in sports, and setting out an agenda for future investigation and action in this area.

## Introduction

Tackling human trafficking and modern slavery is an ongoing problem on national and international political agendas. Modern slavery can be understood as the illegal and severe exploitation of people for personal or commercial gain. It is an umbrella term that covers various forms of human rights abuses including forced labour, bonded labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and human trafficking. Human trafficking is the process by which people are exploited. The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children ('Palermo Protocol') (UN General Assembly, 2000), define human trafficking as:

“[T]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”

Accordingly, three elements, the Act (for example recruitment and transportation of persons), the Means (for example use of force, coercion, deception) and the Purpose (exploitation) must be present to constitute the crime of human trafficking. However, in the case of child trafficking (any person under 18 years of age) the “Means” element is not required. This does not necessarily mean that these methods are not used in the trafficking of children, however, the UN’s definition recognises that children cannot give informed consent to their own exploitation, even though in some cases children may agree to their movement and are aware of their situation.



The Global Slavery Index suggests that there are **40.3 million people trapped in conditions of modern slavery worldwide**, with 24.9 million exploited in different sectors and industries within the economy (Global Slavery Index, 2018).

People can be trafficked and/or exploited within and across borders for a variety of purposes such as forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and debt bondage. Traffickers and exploiters often take advantage of vulnerable people facing difficult circumstances such as economic hardship, conflict, discrimination and marginalization. Many victims are deceived of prospects for a better standard of living and find themselves lured into situations of exploitation which they are unable to escape.

While extant research has focused on various aspects and purposes for which people are trafficked, one under-researched area is sports trafficking, though awareness of the trafficking of migrant athletes, often children, has been gaining traction. This phenomenon was included for the first time as a topical issue in the US Department of State’s Annual Trafficking in Persons Report (2020). However, to date, only a limited number of studies have been conducted on sports trafficking. Consequently, there is a lack of quantitative and verifiable data, and research on the topic tends to be based largely on media reports (Mission 89, 2018). It remains an area that is poorly understood, with uncertainty around its nature and scale, and the effectiveness of current anti-slavery and anti-trafficking approaches in addressing this unique type of exploitation.

This report presents the findings of a brief research conducted on the nature and problem of trafficking of people in sports. The research does not capture trafficking and exploitation in other aspects of sports such as the reported use of exploited labour in the construction of the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) world cup stadium in Qatar, the sexual exploitation of athletes within world sporting activities, or the procurement of sexually exploitative services at sporting events. It focuses specifically on the trafficking of athletes with aspirations to develop their abilities and join national and internationally recognised sports leagues.

This report was written by Dr Akilah Jardine, Rights Lab Research Fellow, University of Nottingham, Taylor Turner, Research Assistant on Trafficking in Sports (School of Politics and International Relations Placement Student) and MSci Student in International Relations and Global Issues at the University Nottingham, and Dr Lucas S. Capalbo, Academy Coach at Bloomsbury Football, London.

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## Research design

This research was conducted between April and June 2021. The research relied on secondary resources to grasp an understanding of current evidence on the trafficking of people in sports to set priorities for future investigation and action.

The research team collated and analysed accessible and existing materials on the nature and problem of sports trafficking. There exists a very small body of literature on the specific phenomenon of trafficking in sports, however, it has been discussed in scholarly work such as sports and human rights, sports and global migration, and sports and child rights. Information was gathered from academic work already undertaken on trafficking in sports and grey literature such as media reports, and evidence and information published by international bodies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Grey literature included information provided in the US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (2020), evidence and information provided by United Nations (UN) bodies, and Mission 89, an organisation focusing on the exploitation of young athletes. A key limitation of the review is that the majority of work available focused on sports trafficking in football, though some evidenced other types of sports athletes are trafficked for.

The sources were reviewed to progress understanding of the problem of sports trafficking, migration patterns, nature of recruitment, nature of exploitation, and current response and challenges to addressing this issue.

## Findings

### The problem of sports trafficking

Reportedly, the trafficking of migrant athletes, often children, in sport is a problem prevalent across the global sports industry. According to Brackenridge, Fasting, Kirby and Leahy (2010) "Trafficking in the context of sport involves the sale of child athletes, usually across national boundaries and for profit. This has been described as a new form of child slavery that leaves players in a precarious legal position." Focusing on the trafficking of athletes within football, Esson (2019) notes the distinction between two processes of trafficking. The first is trafficking in sports which involves young players who pay agents or intermediaries purporting to have contacts with professional clubs abroad. Here, players obtain a contract or the opportunity to trial with a club, though it involves degrees of exploitation. The second is known as human trafficking *through* sports which occurs in most cases. According to Esson (2020, p.1) "[T]he alleged interest from a foreign club is bogus, and the intermediary abandons the player on arrival in a destination country. This is often after taking the player's documentation and money. Once the precarious nature of their situation is realized, the player is often said to be too ashamed to return home. He remains in the destination country illegally without any means of subsistence." Together, both processes can be described as 'sports trafficking.' This report uses the terms interchangeably to capture both phenomena. McGee (2012) asserts that trafficking in sports is a form of labour trafficking involving clandestine networks of actors including agents, intermediaries, and powerful sports bodies who exert ownership and control of young athletes.

While there is a growing body of literature on trafficking in sports, there is still a lack of data on this problem (McGee, 2012) and the extent to which the movement of aspiring migrant athletes constitutes human trafficking as defined by the UN's Palermo Protocol. For instance, according to Mauro (2017, p. 839) in one case, a Belgian court did not proceed with a case on potential trafficking of young Nigerian athletes as it was decided that they were not forced into "embarking into a journey of uncertain end." Further, according to Mauro (2017, p. 840), a former Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) executive expressed that trafficking of young athletes 'is an urban legend that justifies protectionist rules. It is part of the general fear of foreigners that exists in Europe. I think we in Europe are more concerned about closing our borders than protecting the rights of children.' This statement reflects current criticisms of anti-slavery and anti-trafficking approaches by countries where governments have used the problem of human trafficking to drive anti-immigration agendas.

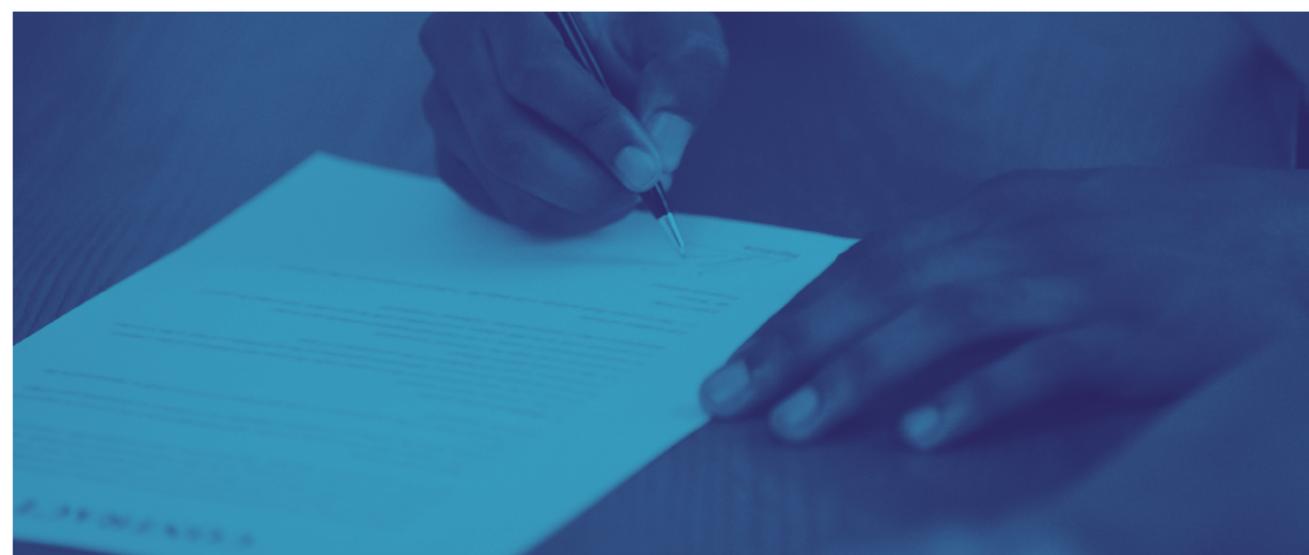
The exploitative nature of trafficking in sports is not always apparent and therefore, some cases may seemingly not fall within the scope of the UN's definition of human trafficking. However, a review of the literature suggests that in some cases, there are various degrees of exploitation, deception and coercion (Samples, 2019). Similar to many other types of trafficking, whilst some athletes consent to their transport within and across borders in pursuit of an international career in sport, they can still be exploited on route or within the

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destination country (Mission 89, 2020). Additionally, McGee (2012) notes that the recruitment of children into sports can involve a ‘cocktail’ of deception by unlicensed sports agents and businessmen, coupled with corruption, fraud and exploitation to “auction the child off to sports franchises and clubs around the world, in a quest to maximize the financial return on their investment” (p. 74). He notes competition between licensed and unlicensed agents in securing talented players and the use of deception to lure parents into signing fraudulent contracts. Relatedly, parents have handed over money to fraudulent agents who make false promises of trials for their children with professional sports clubs (UNICEF, 2020b). Like other forms of trafficking, agents take advantage of athletes and their families’ aspirations to become successful and better their livelihood. However, the reality is that becoming a recognised world-class player is rare (Ungruhe, 2017).

Despite limited international attention, the problem of trafficking in sports has been recognised by some instruments and actors in the international community. For instance, international instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Labour Organization’s conventions on child labour recognises the fundamental rights of children which speaks to the problem of human trafficking in sports. Separately, the 2016 UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children stated: “the sale of child athletes for competitive training and ultimately profit amounts to a form of sale of children for forced labour.” Sports trafficking generally features an imbalance of power and gross socio-economic inequality that exists in the Global South, with entry into the Global North viewed by individuals as a meritocratic haven. Ultimately, agents, intermediaries and sports academies have directly and indirectly exploited this. Children and their families who face economic hardship are lured into unfair practices over which they have no control. Recruiters may then treat athletes as commodities with no rights, whose ‘value’ depends on their capacity to work and from which they expect to make a rapid profit (UN General Assembly, 2016). Moreover, the 2019 UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale

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and Sexual Exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material, makes the association between the sale of children in the context of sports and child labour. They highlighted Articles 32 and 35 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibit all work that may affect the development of a child and the sale of children in any form (UN General Assembly, 2019).

As data on trafficking in sports has been lacking, the scope of the problem is difficult to determine. Reportedly, the trafficking of individuals for sporting purposes is predominantly found in football, and baseball, but also ice hockey, basketball, and other lesser researched sports (David, 2005; McGee, 2012). As Brackenridge, Fasting, Kirby and Leahy (2010) note, “There are known cases of trafficking in baseball and football, but finding systematic data on the practice is challenging.” The US Department of State (2020) annual report on trafficking in persons estimates that thousands of migrant athletes are victims of human trafficking in football every year. This was the first time that this phenomenon was highlighted in detail within the report and it was listed as one of seven topical issues. It has been suggested that each year, approximately 15,000 young individuals are trafficked from West Africa into Europe to play football (Guilbert, 2015). According to McGee (2015), Culture Foot Solidaire, an NGO in Paris focusing on the protection of young footballers, suggests that in 2007 there were over 7,000 Africans in France who were unsuccessful in signing to a club, while an undercover media investigation suggested that there were over 20,000 aspiring footballers trafficked into Europe. In 2005, Belgian senator Jean-Marie Dedecker expressed that there were over 400 cases in Belgium involving the illegal movement of young athletes from Nigeria (Sparre, 2007a). Data on the extent of trafficking for other sports is still limited. An earlier reference in 1999, estimated that approximately 500–700 Latin American baseball players are sent to the United States every year (Breton and Villegas, 1999; Timpka et al, 2008). Regarding less popular sports, there is a lack of data, which means that approximate estimates of individuals who are trafficked are not available. The novelty of such research means that the scope of this issue remains unknown and misunderstood.

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## Migration patterns

Labour migration is an established practice for the global sports industry which involves athletes moving within and across borders (Maguire, 2011). Existing literature purports numerous migration patterns for the trafficking of persons in sports. Reportedly, many powerful international sports bodies often scout players from South America, Africa and Asia (McGee, 2012). Individuals are also said to be predominantly trafficked from Africa, Latin America and occasionally Eastern Europe to the United States or Europe (David, 2005). Consequently, aspects of migration have been viewed as a form of human trafficking. However, migration patterns vary depending on what sport a person is being trafficked for.

A large proportion of individuals are reportedly trafficked from Africa into Europe to play football. According to Poli (2010, p. 1005) for many young African footballers, “Europe remains the preferred destination, not only regarding earning potential, but also, and perhaps most importantly, because of the symbolic attraction held by clubs from this continent.” Esson (2015a, p.1383) also identifies that “European clubs use their economic clout to shape the labour-migration process and dictate trade on terms benefitting the European football (core) to the detriment of their African counterparts (periphery).” Therefore, the movement of African football players is typically observed from a European perspective. Despite this, however, observing the trafficking of football players from a Eurocentric perspective does offer an approximate illustration of migration patterns within the football industry (Esson, 2015a).

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Particularly in West Africa, there have been cases of Gambian players having left their country of origin to tryout for European teams in Italy and France (Barry, 2017). Additionally, it is reported that many European destination countries that African athletes are recruited into, though not always, have a past colonial link to Africa such as England, France, and Portugal (Darby, Akindes and Kirwin, 2007; Ungruhe, 2017). There have also been cases of players from Africa being trafficked to South Asian countries such as Pakistan (Ali, 2008). According to Ungruhe (2017, p. 1770-1771), “African players were seen as good value for a comparable little financial investment. In addition, European clubs also take advantage of footballers from African countries since African players are considered as adding certain qualities to European football: African footballers are either perceived as playful and trick-long or strong and physical – alleged attributes which have its roots in colonial and post-colonial images that may rather reflect European stereotypes of Africa than actual playing abilities.” There have also been cases of players who were trafficked to Turkey to tryout for Turkish soccer clubs but were abandoned in Istanbul (Hall, 2018).

Although trafficking of West African players into Europe appears to be the most common migration pattern for football, alternative migration routes are said to exist yet have been researched less. Migration patterns from Latin America have been reported. For instance, in one case, twenty-four Brazilian football players were detained in Aruba, supposedly on route to the Netherlands to trial with different football clubs (Esson and Drywood, 2018). Poli (2010) also examines the migration of African athletes into Asia. Although this research predominantly discusses the international recruitment of athletes, it does identify potential migration patterns in sports trafficking that requires further investigation. There are also lesser-known, in-country migration patterns from West African countries such as Ghana to Southern African countries such as Zimbabwe (FIFPRO, 2020).

Additionally, with a surge in popularity of women’s football in recent years, reportedly female footballers are also becoming vulnerable to sports trafficking. Regions, where female participation in sports is not as readily acceptable, is said to be a key driver for migration (Mission 89 2020a). Women footballers share the same aspiration as their male counterparts, and often are ready to take even greater risks as breadwinners. Women footballers also follow the male trend to migrate to countries with better competitions, leagues, infrastructure and therefore increased commercial opportunity. Relocating to Europe or the United States where professional women’s leagues exist, can enable women to participate in sport at a higher level in comparison to their origin country.

Separately, there have been reports of baseball players being trafficked from Latin America to the United States. A large proportion of these individuals are said to be trafficked from Cuba (Burton, 2020). There were two key migration routes noted of Cuban baseball players to the United States. The first involved Cubans migrating directly to the US and the second, to the United States via other countries. Before its repeal in 2017, Cuban baseball players could be directly moved from Cuba to the United States due to the ‘wet foot, dry foot’ policy that enabled eligibility for permanent residency for Cuban migrants fleeing Cuba (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2014). Alternatively, a person may be trafficked to a third country before the United States as the final destination (Burton, 2020). The US embargo against Cuba means that a Cuban baseball player cannot sign a contract with a Major League Baseball (MLB) team while residing in Cuba. Due to MLB rules, they travel to the Dominican Republic or Mexico and establish residency there before being arriving in the United States (Lind, 2014).

There are also lesser-known migration patterns for alternative sports that require future research. For instance, in 2016, 25 young boys were supposedly trafficked from India to France for a rugby training camp. Concerns arose over the legitimacy of the training camp and the possibility of child trafficking (Vardhan, 2018). Alternative migration patterns for other sporting activities require further investigation.

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## Nature of recruitment

For many young people, playing sports is more than a leisurely activity and many have aspirations and dreams of becoming a professional player. For those facing limited opportunities, sports is seen as an opportunity to better their lives. Even where other opportunities do exist, there is heightened uncertainty around securing their livelihood. Commenting on the aspirations of a young athlete in Ghana, Ungruhe (2017) notes that whilst he balances his football ambitions with an ICT course, there is still a presence of uncertainty and risk: “On the one hand, it is not certain whether his education would allow securing his livelihood if his ambitions in football will fail. On the other hand, his way to becoming a professional footballer in Europe is paved with uncertainty and privation. The likelihood of failure is high” (p. 1775-1776).

Human trafficking in sports takes advantage of young people facing difficult socio-economic circumstances who may see a professional career in sports as a way out of poverty and a way to financially assist their families (Esson, 2015a; Esson, 2020). Improving one’s economic situation is a key motive for people to pursue sports in countries/regions which possess greater financial power such as North America and Europe (David, 2005).

Many migrant athletes are trafficked with the promise of a lucrative professional career in sports abroad. Professional athletes, particularly footballers, who have migrated from Africa embody success and are considered powerful figures in West Africa (Esson, 2015b; Esson, 2020; Ungruhe, 2017; Poli, 2010). Becoming a renowned professional athlete is therefore an aspiration of many. Individuals may be attracted to success/fame, multi-million-dollar contracts, sponsorships and opportunities to travel abroad (US Department of State, 2020). One example of this is the case of Matthew Edafe, an individual trafficked from Nigeria and abandoned in Cape Verde after being deceived about joining a team of players in Spain. At a session on sports trafficking hosted by the European Parliament Intergroup on Sport in 2018, Matthew pointed out that “Big names and sporting heroes were “name-dropped” by sham agents to authenticate a claim of football success” (Mission 89, 2018). At the same event, Zelfiki Ngoufanja, former senior manager for FIFA’s development programmes Africa, held that in the case of football “the success of African footballers is being used to sell success to African children’ and that “the prospect of receiving a professional amount of money was tempting to many families, even if the story for us (on the other side) seemed “too good to be true” (Mission 89, 2018). Moreover, success stories of athletes, who have left their origin country and have become internationally recognised sports figures, can “mask the many cases of failure and are sufficient to convince young people and their families that it is worth giving oneself body and soul to football” (Poli, 2010, p.1008). Therefore, the increasing number of young people aspiring to become international athletes draws in agents and intermediaries who seek to exploit athletes’ hopes and dreams. Sports trafficking becomes easier as agents rely on the fact that young people await the opportunity for an international, professional career (Najarian, 2015).

The trafficking of individuals to play sports relies on the initial passion for the sporting activity. In one study, footballers relocating from West Africa to Europe was considered a success in itself (Esson, 2015b). Agents or pseudo-agents take advantage of these vulnerabilities to potentialize their earnings. The dream of competing in these countries, in conjunction with

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inexperience, hopes of escaping poverty, the athlete’s desire to play high-level sports, and potential international fame makes young people easily exploitable to sports trafficking (US Department of State, 2020).

According to Esson (2015b) and the European Commission (2009), young athletes may be recruited by someone purporting as an agent who offer them an opportunity to try out for professional clubs abroad in exchange for a ‘placement fee’ and travel costs (£2,700-£4,500). An individual who is claiming to be an agent does not always physically meet the athlete, as technology has enabled false agents to remotely recruit and secure athletes (Esson, 2015a; Esson, 2015b). The young athletes’ families often borrow money or sell possessions to afford the costs. This includes families taking out loans or removing siblings from their schooling (Esson, 2015b). Adult actors such as family members are willing to go to such lengths to assist their child/young athlete to travel abroad. According to Mason et al (2019, p.741), “the actors that children encounter here such as teachers, coaches and family mentors, play a crucial role in influencing early experiences and motivations to pursue a professional career in the game.”

In some regions, unlicensed sport academies have appeared and are controlled by people posing as sports agents who often have little experience in the industry. Most academies are merely roadside operations and lack proper facilities and equipment. In Ghana, there are thousands spread across the country (Ume-Ezoke, 2018). Those in control of its operation take advantage of young people and their families, and their desire to escape poor economic conditions. In order for young players to attend they are required to pay excessive upfront costs or may enter into suspect agreements with their ‘coaches’ (Ume-Ezoke, 2018).

The trafficking of baseball players operates slightly differently. Reportedly, talented Cuban baseball players are eligible for far greater rewards and more lucrative contracts, meaning that they may attract more organised and large-scale trafficking. Traffickers not only focus on the movement of baseball athletes from one country to another but also on keeping a player under their control once they have arrived at the destination country and have signed a professional contract (Lind, 2014). Cuban baseball players are also eligible for a larger MLB contract if they stay in a third country, such as Mexico or the Dominican Republic, rather than travelling directly to the United States. If a baseball player travels to a third country before arriving in the United States, they might have the opportunity to negotiate with all MLB teams. This can result in a better contract and increased payout which ultimately attracts exploiters (Burton, 2020). This is said to make Cuban baseball players particularly vulnerable to trafficking.

In some cases, young people could also be ‘recruited’ via social media platforms. Juliet Bawuah, a Ghanaian sports journalist has highlighted how social media was used to contact and recruit five aspiring young athletes: “[I]nitial contact from the “agent” was made via Facebook; they confiscated from the players USD 1,000 with the promise of taking them to Bulgaria whereupon they would receive official visas. They travelled via Libya to Dubai and spent almost one week in Dubai before they realized they had been duped’ (Mission 89, 2018).

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## Nature of exploitation

Reportedly, once an individual is recruited by an agent, the aspiring athlete may arrive at the destination country through legal channels under a short-term tourist visa. In some instances where legal channels are not used, agents utilise traditional modes of transport where athletes possess false passports and other travel documents (Esson, 2015b). Once they have arrived agents retain their money, passports and any other documents may be kept.

In the case of football, when arrived at their destination, there is a potential for some young football players to tryout for a professional club. However, football tryouts often never occur or do not exist at all. For instance, in one case, an individual was trafficked into the UK for a tryout with Tottenham Hotspurs football club only to find that there was no tryout (Samples, 2019). Some agents may cease contact and immediately abandon the young athlete while in transit or once they have arrived at the destination country (US Department of State, 2020; Esson, 2015a). This was the case regarding a Nigerian soccer team. Nigerian players gave money to an agent in return for the opportunity to trial for Spanish football teams but were abandoned in Cape Verde without any money (Hall, 2018). In other cases, athletes may be allowed to try out for clubs by unscrupulous and fraudulent agents and then abandoned: “Unofficial, and therefore unregulated, football training centres test young players, who are then recruited or discarded. These players may become involved in illegal migration or be traded from club to club” (Brackenridge, Fasting, Kirby, and Leahy, 2010). Agents abandon young athletes with no connections, money, resources, and may take all of their possessions. Moreover, once their short-term visa expires, their stay in the destination country becomes illegal (ENGSO, 2020). Left in an unfamiliar country without money and a visa, players are left without the means to return home. Reportedly, to survive, young athletes may resort to criminal activity, homelessness and in some circumstances, prostitution (Ume-Ezoke, 2018).

Whereas some young athletes are immediately abandoned upon arrival, others may tryout for local clubs until they are offered a contract. In this case, the agent may assist the young athlete in attending multiple sports trials. At this stage, traffickers posing as agents have established a relationship with the athlete and instilled a sense of trust (US Department of State, 2020). If and once offered a contract, the agents utilise the player’s sense of dependency and will negotiate the terms of the contract to favour themselves rather than the athlete (Esson, 2015b; Mason et al, 2019). If the trials are successful and the agent is satisfied with the terms of the agreement, the player signs with the professional club. However, the reality is often not what

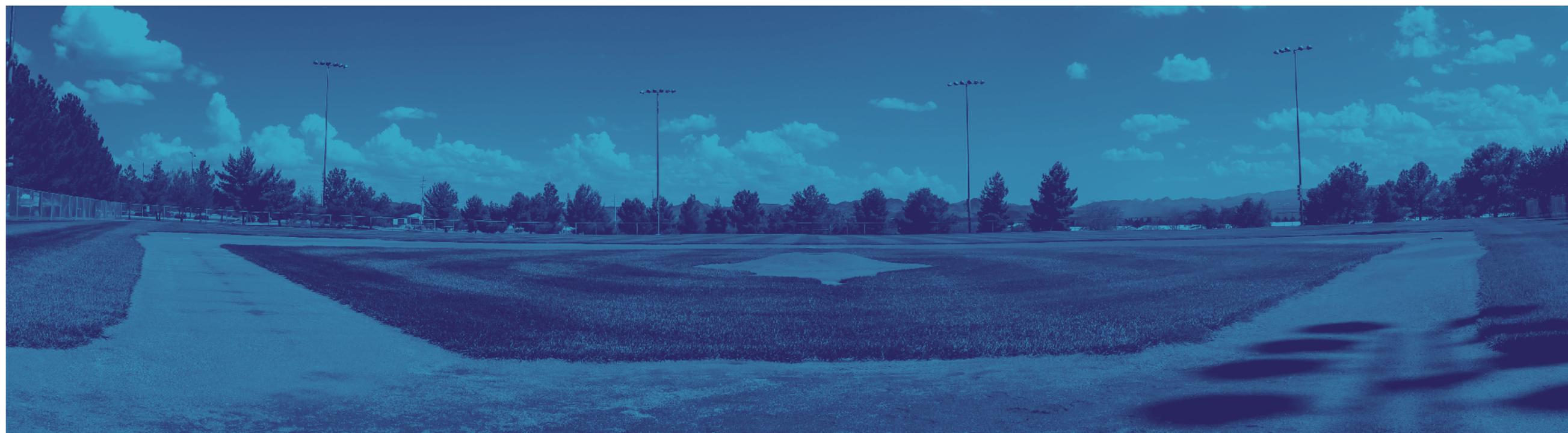
the young athlete may have envisioned. Ume-Ezoke (2018) highlights that the majority of those trafficked will play in lower sports divisions, whereas only a small majority will play in the major leagues. Playing in a lower division means that pay is minimal. As a result, some players offer to play for free to gain exposure. Moreover, as lower divisions are based in rural areas away from major cities, players may face increased isolation (Ume-Ezoke, 2018).

Ungruhe (2017) reports that in the case of football, the commodification of players has led to European clubs taking advantage of footballers’ labour, and in some cases, exploit players by underpaying them and making use of their skills. These clubs view this ‘transaction’ as a way to maximise profit from little investments. Spanish football clubs have also come under scrutiny for the international recruitment of minors, resulting in sanctions for breaking FIFA regulations (Esson and Drywood, 2018).

Unsuccessful athletes and those whose contracts are not renewed may be abandoned by their agents and/or left homeless within destination countries (Ungruhe, 2017; Maguire, 2011; McGee, 2012). The athletes are then left stranded, living illegally with no means to return to their home countries. In some cases, athletes may be lured through sport but exploited in other means. For instance, they may be forced to work to pay off debts for their travel (UNICEF, 2019). In other cases, they may be subject to sexual exploitation. One example is the case of Al Bangura, a former Premier League footballer who was promised a career in football but forced into prostitution (Kotecha and Bell, 2015).

Athletes may not report traffickers to the authorities out of fear that there will be a potential backlash aimed at their families in their origin country (Samples, 2019). Moreover, young athletes may feel a sense of self-blame for falling victim to the tactics of traffickers and are often too ashamed to return to their origin country (Esson, 2020). Not wanting to shame or embarrass their families, abandoned athletes may turn to criminal activity or become homeless. This in turn increases their vulnerability to other traffickers (US Department of State, 2020).

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## Response and challenges to addressing sports trafficking

There are various challenges to addressing sports trafficking. A key challenge is the absence of reliable data. Lack of data means that both the scale and nature of trafficking in and through sports and preventative measures to effectively tackle this issue have remained unidentified or inadequate (UNICEF, 2020a). Data is scarce and therefore, people and organisations remain ignorant of this issue (ENGSO, 2020).

A lack of government enforcement and unsatisfactory oversight by sports governing bodies also enables trafficking in sports to persist (US Department of State, 2020). The few efforts to tackle the growing incidence of trafficking of athletes has proven insufficient. Furthermore, similar to other forms of trafficking, a challenge in address trafficking in sports is that it is a cross-border activity with athletes transitioning between different legal and regulatory systems (Mission 89, 2018). Relatedly, there is the problem of recruitment practices being regulated by sports governance actors in the global sports industry such as FIFA, which may not adequately address this phenomenon.

Additionally, trafficking in sports can be difficult to detect. For United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons to apply, there must be evidential criteria of human trafficking rather than a poor or misguided sporting opportunity on behalf of the athlete (Samples, 2019). As many young people dream of becoming internationally recognised athlete, they often make the voluntary decision to willingly leave their country of origin. When considering the UN international definition of human trafficking, exploitation is a major determinant of trafficking. As there can be voluntary aspect in sports trafficking, the issue of whether an athlete was exploited arises. Nevertheless, exploitation, deception and coercion can occur to encourage an athlete to leave their home. However, in the case of children, it is irrelevant whether they consented to circumstances that led to them being trafficked.

“As many young people dream of becoming internationally recognised athlete, they often make the voluntary decision to willingly leave their country of origin. When considering the UN international definition of human trafficking, exploitation is a major determinant of trafficking.”

Whilst there is a sense of deception if an agent misleads an athlete, some athletes are given the opportunity to tryout for different clubs. Samples (2019, p. 61) identifies that agents are not necessarily participating in human trafficking as they are giving the athletes “what they bargained for, even if it ended in unfortunate results,” such as an athlete may not be successful in the tryouts. However, if a tryout is successful for a young athlete and a contract is secured, this may still be considered as human trafficking: “[W]hat allows this process to be defined as trafficking is that these contracts are often highly exploitative and unfavourable for the player with agents taking as much as 50 percent of the player salary for the duration of the contract’ (Mason et al, 2019, pp.746-747).

Multiple preventive measures have been conducted to respond to this issue, but many were found ineffective (Esson, 2015b). Mason et al (2019, p.739) acknowledges the “ongoing debate involving international, regional and national governing bodies of the game, sport and non-sport NGOs, politicians, the media and the United Nations around how best to ensure that the interests and well-being of young football players are adequately protected and risks to their rights and welfare are identified and addressed.” Actors who have attempted to respond to this issue include sporting associations such as FIFA, who created guidelines which

criminalise the international transfers of young people under the age of 18, except for five exceptions: parents moving to a new country in which the new club is located for reasons not linked to football; the transfer takes place within the EU or EEA; proximity to the national border; the player flees his country of origin for humanitarian reasons without parents and is temporarily permitted to reside in the country of arrival; and the player is a student and moves without his parents to another country temporarily for academic reasons (FIFA, 2021). This implementation of an age limit seeks to minimise the possibility of sports trafficking and exploitation of young athletes (Lindsey and Darby, 2019). However, reportedly, this rule has not been adequately enforced (Ume-Ezoke, 2018) and according to Nkang (2019a) “have resulted in numerous disputes [which] either indicate a lack of clarity within FIFA rules, or they show the intention of football clubs to capitalize on regulatory loopholes to exploit and traffic foreign minors.” In particular, several professional Spanish football clubs have been sanctioned for breaking these regulations that prohibit the recruitment of minors under 18 years of age (Esson and Drywood, 2018). For example, a Spanish club, Cadiz FC, argued for the parents relocating exception when a mother of a Paraguayan player moved to Spain. Cadiz FC claimed that this was unrelated to her son being contracted by the football club shortly after her relocation (Nkang, 2019b). Other clubs have also exploited the exceptions within the regulations. In 2007 a Danish club, FC Midtjylland, was reported to FIFA and accused of trafficking young football players from Nigeria. The club claimed that young African players were primarily in Denmark to study (Nkang, 2019b; Sparre, 2007a), thus exploiting the EU exception. Further, there were accusations that the Danish club made arrangements with a company based in Ghana in which potential earnings from players would be shared between the club and an individual in Nigeria (Sparre, 2007b). This lack of compliance within football clubs supports Firth’s (2019) research on football clubs playing in the Premier League where it was acknowledged that “there is no evidence of clubs showing leadership in the fight against modern slavery” (p.5). Further, as Play the Game (2015) – an international sports conference and communication initiative – note, “International and national sports federations insist that rules and protections systems are difficult to implement.

“Actors who have attempted to respond to this issue include sporting associations such as FIFA (2021), who created guidelines which criminalise the international transfers of young people under the age of 18, except for five exceptions.”



The protection of sporting youth largely depends on the willingness of clubs, investors and agents to volunteer information, and the sports transfer market is believed to be heaven for tax evasion, whitewashing, and corruption.”

Overall, FIFA’s regulatory responses to preventing the trafficking of persons in sport have thus been inadequate. Rules are unclear and consist of gaps that clubs and traffickers can exploit (Nkang, 2019a). Rather, clear and strict regulations must be designed and enforced. Nkang (2019a, p.10) highlights that “football transfers should be made more visible, accessible, trackable, and verifiable for all football players, including the homegrown and foreign minors.” Furthermore, rather than sanctioning European clubs for breaching FIFA’s regulations – which is an ineffective deterrent – Nkang (2019a, p.8) suggests that FIFA should “focus on more robust sanctions for rogue intermediaries who act as human traffickers within football, as this may be a more effective means of safeguarding the welfare of minors in football.”

NGOs have also attempted to address trafficking in sports. One influential organisation, Mission 89, have actively produced initiatives such as the “Framework on Safeguarding Children from Trafficking in Sport” (2020b) which aim to assist sporting bodies in the prohibition of trafficking in sport. Mission 89 have set up initiatives that draw on practice models from organisations such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and FIFA, to place the rights of the child at its forefront, hold all stakeholders accountable, and to raise awareness about sports trafficking (Parry, 2020). Another response involves anti-trafficking campaigns which aim to raise awareness of scams in origin countries to young players. However, according to Esson (2015b, pp525-526) for many migrants, entry into a destination country is seen as a success in itself and as a risk ‘worth taking’ and one that ‘becomes an issue of mediation not avoidance.’ Further, the use of professional players to spearhead campaigns has been considered problematic as they are likely to instil the possibilities of attaining success which resulted from them leaving their home country. As Esson (2015b, p. 525) notes: “[S]omeone else’s failure has little bearing on the likelihood of your own success, particularly if one believes in a higher power or entity.”

According to evidence submitted to the UK’s Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)’s Select Committee on the Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors, additional challenges to protecting individuals trafficked in and through sports include the lack of reporting, lack of access to support services and uncertain contracts (DCMS, 2020). Reportedly, the pandemic has brought about new challenges to migrant athletes and potential and actual victims of trafficking. For instance, one of the challenges noted in evidence submitted by Mission 89 includes the lack of attention to the welfare and protection of migrant footballers and victims of trafficking. Additionally, migrant athletes are likely to have limited access to support services, with resources being focused on responding to ‘Covid-19’ pandemic. This is also said to be the case for many European football clubs facing the economic effects of Covid, particularly smaller ones and lower leagues, who are likely to be the first point of contact for aspiring athletes. Relatedly, for migrant athletes playing for these smaller clubs, many may not have proper contracts in place which increases their vulnerability.

“Mission 89 have set up initiatives that draw on practice models from organisations such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and FIFA, to place the rights of the child at its forefront, hold all stakeholders accountable, and to raise awareness about sports trafficking (Parry, 2020).”

There have been some cases at the governmental level which attempt to address trafficking in sports. After the ‘Cuban Thaw’ – the restoration of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US, and initiated during the Obama administration (Hanlon, 2020) – the MLB reached an agreement with Cuba’s Baseball Federation. This agreement was an attempt to reduce the trafficking of Cuban baseball players by enabling players over the age of 25 to be scouted and signed to the MLB without having to defect to a third country (Yomtov and Fritze, 2019; Hanlon, 2020; Burton, 2020). This would have likely prevented human trafficking as Cuban baseball players would no longer need to defect to a third country before reaching the US (Passan, 2019). However, the Trump administration abruptly eliminated the agreement four months after it was reached. According to the Trump administration, the agreement would have enabled the Cuban government to subject players to human trafficking and allow them to take advantage of Cuban baseball players (Spetalnick, 2019; Hanlon, 2020). Now that the US is governed under the Biden administration, it has yet to be seen how this will impact the potential trafficking of Cuban baseball players aspiring to achieve a professional level in their careers. According to Burton (2020, p.289), “the termination of this historic agreement has forced and will continue to force Cuban athletes with a desire to play in Major League Baseball to continue taking extreme risks, such as subjecting themselves to human trafficking.”

A multi-agency approach to addressing and tackling trafficking sports is critical. However, as noted by Mission 89, a major challenge is that a multi-agency approach is currently non-existent (ENGSO, 2020). Addressing the root causes as to why people leave their origin country requires multi-agency cooperation. Sports associations, governments, border agencies, transport companies, sports agents and other actors must therefore cooperate to ensure the safety of athletes (Mission 89, 2020a; Timpka et al, 2008). Greater awareness and cooperation must be encouraged to address sports trafficking.



## Recommendations

Due to the limited attention and data on the specific problem of sports trafficking, considerably more reliable and verifiable data and work needs to be done to fully understand the nature and scale of this phenomenon. The following are recommendations for future investigation and action in this area.

### Recommendations for future investigation

- **Nature and extent of the problem.** It is still unclear the extent to which trafficking in sports as acknowledged in existing literature constitutes trafficking as defined by international law. More work needs to be done to progress understanding of the extent to which it satisfies the requirements laid out in the UN's Palermo Protocol. There is a lack of understanding of the exploitative elements associated with the movement of migrant athletes and the extent to which it differs from other forms of lawful and unlawful irregular migration, such as human smuggling where individuals voluntarily consent to their movement often in search of better opportunities to improve their livelihood. More information is needed on the nature of exploitation throughout the transfer process. For instance, are abandoned (or non-abandoned) athletes exploited in other ways (for example, through sexual exploitation, forced labour, and others). Fundamentally, what happens to migrant athletes during transit and once they arrive in a destination country? To what extent are they trying out for sports leagues, abandoned, or exploited in other ways?

Researchers interested in undertaking further work in this area should also consider work on the agency and lived experience of migrant athletes both into and within sports, how they perceive risks associated with migration, and unequal power relations existing in the recruitment processes of the global sports business.

- **Rates of sports trafficking outside of football.** The majority of work or attention on this area focuses on sports trafficking for football. However, some research has briefly touched on other types of sports. In addition to football, further work needs to be done on other forms of potential sports individuals may be trafficked for, the demographic of athletes, and the associated migration routes.
- **Extent to which it differs from other lawful recruitment practices into sports.** In many sporting activities across the globe, aspiring athletes are often scouted by actors and bodies with promises of the opportunity to develop their abilities and join national and internationally recognised sporting groups. Further, in many cases, children and young people are lawfully moved within and across borders by their parents or with their parents' consent to strengthen their skills and take part in tryouts for sporting activities. These practices are often seen as lawful and acceptable, though some may result in young people being subjected to intense training and preparation to increase their chance of success. Additional investigation is needed to understand the extent to which the movement of migrant athletes differs from these practices to be constituted as a form of trafficking. In the case of trafficking in sports, the difference is likely to be the outcome. Agents or scouts by nature would need to be involved in the migratory process, and they use different means to achieve this, ethical and unethical. However, there are individuals who purport to be agents or scouts but have no affiliation to a

sport. Additional investigation needs to understand how unlicensed and scrupulous sports agents are able to infiltrate recruitment and transfer processes.

- **Sports trafficking and ethical recruitment practices.** Relatedly, there is a question of whether sports trafficking is in itself an isolated issue or is also part of a much larger problem, such as the recruitment and treatment of athletes and aspiring athletes both in and through sports. Future research may wish to examine this connection and explore the potential role of ethical recruitment and treatment of athletes in addressing sports trafficking and more generally, the existing normalisation of the poor treatment of athletes (including transfer processes) in recognised leagues and clubs within particular sports. Additionally, further research is needed on the actors involved in the recruitment of athletes such as sports academies, clubs and leagues, governing bodies, and governmental agencies.
- **Government and industry response.** The problem of trafficking in sport highlights the extent to which vulnerability to trafficking is partly due to states ceding jurisdiction to regulating workspaces to private transnational organisations, institutions, and sports bodies. Further research is needed to better understand the extent to which governments are aware of the problem of sports trafficking, their response, if any, and associated impact in tackling this issue. Separately, work needs to be undertaken to map existing regulations by sports governing bodies and their effectiveness or lack thereof, in addressing the problem of trafficking in sports. Future research should consider potential loopholes in regulations and make recommendations for ways to strengthening existing measures. Research should also be conducted on the extent to which sports clubs, particularly nationally and internationally recognised clubs, are complying with relevant modern slavery, human trafficking, employment, labour, and child rights regulations.

## Recommendations for action

### Recommendations for sporting clubs, associations, and governing bodies

- **Raise awareness of the problem of sports trafficking amongst staff and how to identify and refer potential victims for support.** Similar to other forms of human trafficking and modern slavery, a lack of understanding and awareness of the problem makes it difficult to identify and support potential victims. Sports organisations should therefore raise awareness of the problem amongst their staff and ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and confidence to identify and respond to potential sports trafficking cases. This is also important for sports practised in rural areas, which research suggests risk concealing situations of exploitation.
- **Raise awareness of the problem of sports trafficking amongst professional athletes.** There are many success stories of athletes from impoverished circumstances leaving home and becoming internationally recognised sports figures. Reportedly, some have taken the same route that may have been considered sports trafficking but have ended up becoming successful. However, there is a risk that their personal experiences and accomplishments may be a contributing factor to the potential problem of sports trafficking, by inadvertently encouraging other aspiring athletes to leave their home countries, whether through legal or illegal means. Sporting clubs, associations, and governing bodies, therefore, need to raise awareness of the problem of sports trafficking

amongst professional athletes to help prevent the potential exploitation of aspiring athletes, particularly from their home countries, however, taking into consideration that the use of such athletes to spearhead anti-trafficking campaigns could unwittingly contribute to the problem.

- **Establish and review recruitment practices and associated regulations.** Local, national and international sporting clubs, associations and governing bodies need to ensure that they have regulations around ethical recruitment practices which are clear, consistent and align with modern slavery, human trafficking, and labour and employment rights standards. Additionally, given that the trafficking of people in sports can involve children and young people, these regulations must take into consideration the fundamental rights of children and align with relevant internationally recognised standards.

## Recommendations for national governments

- **Ensure that victim identification mechanisms are able to record and recognise instances of sports trafficking.** It is impossible to know the true scale of sports trafficking if potential victims are not being picked up by mechanisms aimed at identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery and human trafficking. For example, in the UK, data on types of exploitation for potential victims are aggregated into only a few categories and may also provide insufficient information on cases. Therefore, in the UK context, for example, it would be difficult to identify a) victims that have been trafficked specifically in sports and b) those who have been trafficked in sports but end up exploited in other ways. Therefore, governments must ensure adequate processes are in place to collect more detailed and reliable data to better understand this problem.
- **Raise awareness of sports trafficking as part of national communications around modern slavery and human trafficking.** Governments should invite sporting clubs, associations and governing bodies to be part of the national conversation around modern slavery and human trafficking. This will help to raise awareness of sports trafficking, progress understanding of the problem, and sporting practices (such as recruitment) that may contribute to the trafficking and exploitation of athletes.
- **Foster a collaborative multi-agency approach to progress understanding of sports trafficking and appropriate response mechanisms.** Due to the nature of human trafficking, it has been widely accepted that a collaborative multi-agency approach is needed to effectively tackle this issue. Consequently, the identification of sports trafficking victims and response measures require a collaborative and coordinated approach across relevant actors, particularly governments in both destination, transit and origin countries. Governments should connect with sporting associations, governing bodies, and key NGO actors, to begin the conversation around this issue with a view to establishing a multi-agency approach to better understand and tackle this problem on a national and international level.

## Afterword

### Lerina Bright, Executive Director, Mission 89

The intersection of sport and human trafficking are two fields that are not always discussed side by side. However, trafficking in sport is an economic activity, that is facilitated by individual criminals and groups using loopholes in international regulations to build a strong economic model. The pretence of a professional career in sport is being used to recruit young people into an underworld of illegal immigration and crime. Beyond the glimmer and the gold that we see represented in elite sport, there is a trail of exploitation that follows young people who want to pursue a career in sport. Children and their families are being ensnared by the empty promises of agents and trafficking networks who promise a better life and an escape route from poverty.

Mission 89 is the only NGO addressing this issue. Our aim is to mitigate child trafficking in sports through research, education, and the implementation of mandatory regulations to keep sports training academies accountable for the safety and well-being of children in their care. Every year, hundreds of thousands of children are smuggled across borders and sold as commodities, including promising young footballers who are trafficked by sham agents making false promises of fame, riches, and an escape route from a cycle of poverty. There are only broad estimates of how many young people leave their countries of birth to pursue an international career. It is difficult to determine the true extent of the problem.

Understanding the scale of the issue in sport is notoriously difficult for two key reasons. Firstly it is difficult to detect cases of human trafficking because of the hidden nature of the crime. One of the biggest challenges in developing anti-trafficking measures is the lack of reliable data which could shed light on the size of the problem and the help identify common migration channels, victims and trafficker profiles. The second problem is the way human trafficking is defined and perceived by people globally. Our perception of what human trafficking looks like is at the same time specific and abstract. The term 'human trafficking' conjures up images of young women bound by chains, forced into prostitution and child soldiers, while at the same time the term itself sounds nebulous at first mention, without knowing what the act itself entails. These images are rightly disturbing, but it is our responsibility to educate ourselves on the breadth of activities that fall under the umbrella term of 'human trafficking' and not limit ourselves to one definition.

This report is an important piece in the puzzle of tackling trafficking in sports. The recommendations outlined for future investigation and action in this area reflects the advocacy asks and challenges faced by organisations in drawing attention to this problem. We hope that researchers and those working in this space continue to take an interest in this area of human trafficking that is so under-researched.

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