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The Weaponization of Football Dreams in Human Trafficking Schemes

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ABSTRACT

This Brief Report highlights how football (i.e. soccer) dreams are weaponized to traffic youth within West Africa. Framed as an athletic opportunity, the operation exploited the Economic Community of West African States' visa-free protocols, digital platforms, and the powerful appeal of sport-based mobility. Victims were confined, stripped of documentation, and coerced into soliciting funds from family members, with their phones repurposed to perpetrate further acts of fraud. While trafficking for forced criminality has gained visibility in Southeast Asia, this case marks a critical yet underexplored intra-African iteration, shaped by the symbolic economy of football. It challenges siloed policy frameworks that treat sport aspiration and cybercrime in West Africa as separate domains.

POLICY CONTRIBUTION (UN SDG 16)

By exposing how sport-linked dreams are weaponized to exploit youth, this report contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 16: promoting just, peaceful, and inclusive societies. It calls for stronger regional coordination and targeted awareness campaigns across the sport and youth sectors.

KEYWORDS

Sport-bait trafficking; football migration; football trafficking; West African fraudsters; human trafficking; Fraudulent sports agents

Introduction

Football[1] is culturally revered in West Africa as a route to manhood, mobility, and economic success (Kovač, 2025). Families invest significantly more in their sons' football ambitions than in their daughters' due to long-standing gendered roles (Bertho et al., 2024; Lazarus et al., 2017; Wafer & Flowers, 2024). This essay highlights how traffickers exploit this symbolic economy by mimicking legitimate academies and opportunities. I argue that "football" is bait. Traffickers lure vulnerable youth through digital deception and false promises of athletic careers (Naadi, 2025).

While most research frames this phenomenon as transcontinental, e.g., Africa-to-Europe sport migration (Darby, 2001; Kovač, 2025), this piece focuses on a neglected form: intra-African trafficking via deceptive football recruitment. Though sport migration remains a legitimate aspiration, it is increasingly hijacked by exploitation networks that bypass conventional anti-trafficking frameworks. The trafficking of 76 Ghanaian youth to Nigeria for fake trials reveals how digital tools, legal loopholes, and emotional appeals converge to entrap victims (Naadi, 2025). Recruited under free movement protocols, these victims were confined, stripped of phones and documents, and coerced into soliciting money from relatives. Although they were eventually rescued by the authorities, their contact lists had

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[1]In this report, "football" refers to the sport known as "soccer" in the United States, to distinguish it from American football.

already been used to defraud others, and they had been pressured to recruit peers. This phenomenon mirrors coercive tactics seen in Southeast Asian so-called "scam compounds" centers (Franceschini et al., 2025; Lazarus, Chiang, et al., 2025).

This case marks a broad shift: from overt physical coercion to psychological entrapment, and from traditional labor or sexual exploitation to forced criminality. Victims were not the dominant pattern, all-female, trafficked from Africa to Europe for sex exploitation (Apard et al., 2025). Victims were all-male, trafficked between Ghana and Nigeria. Such particularities remain under-explored in African contexts, where football, symbolically tied to masculinity, mobility, and economic escape (Darby, 2001; Kovač, 2025), has become a powerful recruitment tool. The Ghana-Nigeria case also exposes how regional frameworks like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), designed for free movement, can be exploited by traffickers. While previous research documents the voluntary relocation of Nigerian cybercriminals to Ghana to evade scrutiny (Lazarus, Button, et al., 2025), this reverse flow, Ghanaians trafficked into Nigeria, reveals a critical blind spot. It illustrates how aspiration, legal geography, and digital deception now intersect in emerging forms of intra-African exploitation. It also resonates with what scholars writing on Anglophone West Africa have conceptualized as "*Hustle Kingdoms*"—informal cybercrime academies that channel frustrated aspirations for mobility and economic success into digital fraud (Lazarus, Soares, et al., 2025). So-called football "academies" and trials draw on the same aspirational logics but route them through sport-linked recruitment.

Contextualizing Football, Aspiration, and Labor Migration

While labor trafficking through education, domestic servitude, or irregular migration is more widely documented, football-specific recruitment exploits culturally legitimized masculine aspirations that operate differently from generalized opportunity-seeking (Esson, 2022). In Ghana, Nigeria, and much of Africa, football is more than a sport. It is an aspiration and a culturally sanctioned escape from poverty. For young men struggling with limited educational and employment opportunities, football becomes a gender sanctioned route to fulfilling familial expectations, to become providers, protectors, and redeemers of entire households (Bertho et al., 2024; Lazarus et al., 2017; Wafer & Flowers, 2024). It operates as a symbolic economy of hope, manhood, and imagined transnational mobility (Kovač, 2025). For many young men, the dream of being discovered by a European club offers more than fame; it promises a path out of structural precarity and into social legitimacy (Darby, 2001). Icons like Samuel Eto'o (Cameroon), Michael Essien (Ghana), Nwankwo Kanu (Nigeria), and Jay-Jay Okocha (Nigeria) are celebrated for embodying this possibility. For youth facing limited opportunities, football is often viewed as a legitimate alternative to education or formal employment. Families invest emotionally and financially in these dreams, reinforcing their social legitimacy. In the case examined here, victims were lured by promises of international placements that tapped directly into this narrative (Naadi, 2025).

Exploitative brokers and informal networks have long shaped football migration (Poli, 2010). Agents, scouts, and academy owners often operate as "hope brokers," navigating a morally gray zone defined by weak oversight and high expectations (Kovač, 2025). Traffickers mimic the language, rituals, and aesthetics of legitimate sports migration. Their offers, visas, elite training, and trials are carefully crafted to align with local aspirations. This is not an aberration, but a convergence of cultural desire, economic insecurity, and speculative deceit. Trafficking here merges coercion with emotional resonance: not just the theft of opportunity, but the manipulation of what communities most revere. Football's global prestige often obscures its instrumentalisation in fraud, especially within South-South migration routes.

Scholarship on football migration shows that exploitative recruitment and deceptive mobility schemes operate within and alongside legitimate football economies (Esson, 2015a, 2015b, 2020; Lab, 2021; Mission 89, 2024; Poli, 2010). For many young African athletes, migration begins in promise but ends in deception, abandonment, and dispossession (Ejekwumadu, 2025; Lab, 2021; Mission 89, 2024). Poli (2010) introduced trafficking in football and trafficking through football to

describe how aspiring players are moved under promises of opportunity within neo-colonial systems of selection and exploitation. Other researchers further reveal how unlicensed intermediaries and "*hope brokers*" operate across licit, illicit, and gray zones, using the appearance of legitimacy while profiting from precarity (Esson, 2015a, 2022; Kovač, 2025). Grey literature also documents youth from Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Mali playing for clubs in Ghana and the Ivory Coast to obtain passports or eligibility, sometimes contravening Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) rules (McDougall, 2008).

Institutional analyses situate these practices within broader regimes of sport corruption and weak oversight, demonstrating how the formal football industry, encompassing clubs, agents, associations, and governing bodies, can foster a permissive environment for trafficking (2024; Lab, 2021). Prevention, therefore, requires coordinated action beyond prosecution. ECOWAS, the Confederation of African Football (CAF), national ministries of sport, and FIFA should jointly strengthen agent licensing, transparency standards, and public awareness. Such measures would weaken success rates of criminal acts but also the structural complicities that turn football dreams into trafficking realities.

Digital Lures and Coercive Conditions

The trafficking of Ghanaian youth through fake football recruitment reflects a shift from overt force to the manipulation of trust, amplified by digital deception. Recruiters used messaging apps, Facebook posts, and targeted ads to simulate legitimacy. Promises of academy spots, overseas trials, and job sponsorships were tailored to appeal to young men facing structural precarity, leaving little room for skepticism. As recent studies show, trafficking now unfolds through hybrid systems: digital lures initiate the trap, and physical coercion enforces it (Franceschini et al., 2025; Lazarus, Chiang, et al., 2025; Ullah, 2025). Many victims, traveling in hopes of scholarships or contracts (Naadi, 2025), arrived to find their phones and papers seized.

Confined to overcrowded compounds and closely monitored, they were isolated and made dependent. Victims were coerced into soliciting money from relatives, citing false training or travel costs. Traffickers exploited family trust, turning intimate bonds into tools of manipulation. They impersonated victims to defraud contacts, echoing tactics in Southeast Asian "scam compounds" (Franceschini et al., 2025; Lazarus, Chiang, et al., 2025; Luong, 2025). More troubling was the enforced recruitment of peers, often through digital networks. Mimicking Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) models, this tactic scaled the scheme while concealing its coercive roots. This case reveals a layered model: digital seduction, coercion, confinement, and cyber extortion. Trust becomes the leading resource exploited, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. Binary legal categories based on consent or coercion fail to capture these dynamics.

Policy and Scholarly Blind Spots

Despite expanding literature on trafficking and cyber exploitation, sport-enabled trafficking remains a blind spot in both policy and academic discourse. While the migration of football from West Africa to Europe has received modest scholarly attention (Darby et al., 2022; Kovač, 2025; Poli, 2010), the intra-African weaponization of football for trafficking purposes, particularly through digital deception, remains under-theorized. Most trafficking studies have concentrated on sexual exploitation, irregular migration, and domestic servitude, leaving sport-based fraud schemes largely outside the analytical frame.

The trafficking of Ghanaians to Nigeria through fake football academies echoes QNET-style[2] hybrid fraud schemes, operations that fuse multilevel marketing tactics, aspirational messaging, and digital coercion. These schemes masquerade as talent incubators or job pipelines (Naadi, 2025). They

[2]QNET is a legitimate Hong Kong-based multi-level marketing (MLM) company accused of operating fraudulent recruitment schemes in various countries, particularly across Africa and South Asia. These schemes often involve promises of lucrative jobs or training opportunities, such as in sports or sales, but result in debt, coercion, and exploitation.

thrive on a potent mix: digital reach, cultural desire, and legal ambiguity. Ghana-Nigeria free-movement protocols, originally designed to foster regional integration, are easily exploited for cross-border trafficking. The absence of rigorous identity checks or coordinated enforcement enables traffickers to operate with impunity.

A further complication is the symbolic sanctity of football. As a celebrated site of national pride and global recognition, football resists critical scrutiny. Policymakers may hesitate to link it with trafficking for fear of tarnishing its status. This hesitancy obscures the fact that football dreams are now a recruitment tool, no less exploitative than false job offers or sham education schemes. The divide between cybercrime enforcement and anti-trafficking responses further weakens policy coherence. Ghanaian and Nigerian strategies treat these domains as distinct, despite clear convergence. As long as sport, mobility, and digital fraud are handled in silos, interventions will remain misaligned with the evolving nature of coercion.

This case also challenges the prevailing narrative of colonial retaliation in cybercrime. Studies hold that West African offenders primarily target Western victims as a symbolic response to colonial harms (Abubakari & Blaszczyk, 2024; Lazarus, Hughes, et al., 2025). Instead, it shows how Nigerian cybercriminals exploit fellow West Africans, revealing how economic desperation, trafficking logics, and profit motives can override Pan-African or anti-colonial solidarities. The symbolic "brotherhood" of West African youth is betrayed, signaling a shift from protest to predation within regional illicit economies.

Discussion: What Needs to Be Done?

Trafficking via fake football schemes exposes failures in regional coordination, awareness, digital oversight, and scholarship. In societies where football reflects collective aspiration, influenced by poverty, family pressure, and masculinity, these schemes exploit more than opportunity. They prey on structures that sustain hope. In Ghana, limited jobs and education make football a symbolic and economic escape. In Nigeria, a larger but unstable football economy thrives within informal opportunity-seeking, attracting deceptive recruiters. In both settings, football symbolizes redemption, intensifying its power as bait.

Tackling this requires coordinated, multi-level action. First, cross-border policing and intelligence sharing must improve between Ghana's Criminal Investigations Department and Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. Sports-linked trafficking exploits Ghana-Nigeria mobility amid fragmented enforcement. Second, culturally grounded awareness campaigns must target schools, clubs, and informal educational institutions. They must address youth and family hopes, challenging "opportunity trafficking." Third, digital platforms used in recruitment need closer scrutiny. Apps like WhatsApp and Facebook are key fraud-enabling tools. Tech firms and regulators must flag fraudulent content while respecting digital rights.

Scholarly attention is equally vital. Scholars must examine how athletic dreams intersect with deceptive networks. This case is unlikely to be unique. Research must map: Who funds them? Who else profits? What roles do finance systems and diasporas play? Response requires seeing football as a symbolic economy tied to youth identity. It has become a channel for intra-African exploitation. This commentary calls attention to a neglected form of trafficking blending mobility, fraud, and dreams. Though rooted in real events, this interpretive analysis rethinks how coercion, deception, and hope converge.

Conclusion

The trafficking of 76 Ghanaians to Nigeria is not an isolated case. It signals a broader shift in exploitation tactics. Here, aspiration becomes the vehicle of abuse. This case shows how sport-linked, digital trafficking thrives by manipulating hope, trust, and opportunity, not brute force. It exploits gaps between cybercrime, sport, and trafficking, areas still siloed in research and enforcement.

This separation creates blind spots and policy gaps. Traffickers exploit mobility regimes, digital connectivity, and aspirational economies. Their success rests on our failure to see how legitimate desires, like becoming a footballer, can be weaponized. Effective response requires linking sport sociology, digital policy, and anti-trafficking efforts. Football must no longer be treated as immune but recognized as a symbolic economy prone to abuse. Migration governance must consider the emotional and digital infrastructures that traffickers exploit.

Addressing these dynamics requires action beyond individual enforcement. Regional and international bodies must assume responsibility, including the ECOWAS, the CAF, FIFA, national ministries of sport, and youth development agencies. Oversight must be strengthened, intermediaries must be regulated, and agents must be properly licensed. Awareness campaigns, athlete-protection measures, and targeted digital monitoring are also essential to reduce the permissive environments in which recruitment fraud thrives. To preserve football's promise, it must be disentangled from exploitation.

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