



Commentary: Ending Human Trafficking in Sport - A Playbook for Forward Progress

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Human trafficking is an abhorrent crime that impacts an estimated 25 million people globally through labor or commercial sexual exploitation (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022). The primary tactics used by perpetrators include force, fraud, and coercion (Talbot & Suzuki, 2021). Survivors of human trafficking face deprivation of basic entitlements, freedom, human rights, and a limiting ability to achieve a meaningful life (Helton, 2016). Human trafficking receives attention from global leaders as one of the most crucial international social justice issues of our time (Schwarz, 2019; Talbot & Suzuki, 2021). Leaders recognize the need for prevention, intervention, postvention, and prosecution related to horrific acts of human trafficking (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022).

While there is a lack of awareness of human trafficking among the general population, there has been growing interest among helping professionals, including law enforcement (Mapp et al., 2016), health care providers (McAmis et al., 2021), and social workers (Enrile, 2018; Welch-Brewer et al., 2021). Understanding and identifying the red flags of human trafficking are crucial for those helping professionals working on the front lines, as they may encounter victims

or survivors in their case load and recognize the need to connect them to necessary resources (Enrile, 2018). Despite efforts to increase identification and awareness of human trafficking, many individuals are largely unaware of the connection between sport and human trafficking (Mission 89, 2022).

Human trafficking of athletes was recognized by the U.S. Department of State (2020) Trafficking in Persons Report and issued a call for nationwide and international public awareness campaigns. Many aspiring athletes are lured into human trafficking with the false promise of playing for a professional team, which may involve crossing state and national borders. If they are not selected to move to the next level, they could face exploitation (Ume-Ezeoke, 2018), including different forms of human trafficking (Ruggie, 2016). For example, soccer scouts bought tickets for young African men (many under 18) promising a career in sport; however, many of these men were forced into prostitution and deprived their basic human rights (Wigmore, 2015). Cuban men often pay *lancheros* (boatmen) to smuggle them out of Cuba with the hope to play professional baseball in the United States (DeGregorio, 2021). In return, these Cuban prospects may be forced into debt bondage, where they have to work off their debt to pay back the smugglers. In each of these scenarios, athletes experienced exploitation, deception, and risk of trauma. Furthermore, sex trafficking and global sporting events have a history of interconnectedness (Finkel & Finkel, 2014; Lamela, 2013). During the Super Bowl, host cities like New Orleans and Miami saw an estimated 10,000 individuals trafficked for sex (Mogulesu, 2014). Similar concerns exist with the World Cup, where countries like Brazil, Germany, and South Africa made predictions that 40,000 women and children would experience sex trafficking (Carrier-Moisán, 2019; Lamela, 2013). Although research is mixed as to whether sex trafficking increases during major sporting events (Perrin, 2007; Latonero et al., 2011; Deering & Shannon, 2012), large sporting events cause moral panics around sex trafficking as concerns rise about the rights and freedoms of community members. To ensure the end of human trafficking of athletes and the full prosecution against traffickers, Swiss-based non-governmental organization Mission 89 formed in 2017 (Mission 89, 2022).

Mission 89 is one of the few organizations that focuses exclusively on addressing human trafficking of athletes. The goal of Mission 89 reflects goals of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2022) and the Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Mission 89 (2022) aims to mitigate human trafficking of athletes through research, education, and the implementation of mandatory regulations to keep sports organizations accountable for the safety and well-being of communities. With successful educational initiatives and research project proposals underway across continents, including the popular #NotInOurGame social media campaign and a qualitative research project underway in South Africa interviewing survivors, Mission 89 has sought to amplify their efforts through global partnerships to raise awareness of human trafficking of athletes with organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (Kratz & Rosado, 2022).

Social workers, in particular, are at the forefront of the anti-trafficking movement (Enrile, 2018; Healy, 2015). Due to their commitment to the ethics and values of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2022) social workers specialize in practice settings serving vulnerable groups (Welch-Brewer et al., 2021). Social workers ensure access to education on social injustices, help individuals address biopsychosocial challenges, and practice from a lens of cultural inclusivity (NASW, 2022). While social workers have a rich history of working with survivors of human trafficking (De Shalit et al., 2021), there is limited knowledge available about the role of social workers in addressing human trafficking of athletes. This

commentary outlines the need for sport social workers to expand their practice to include heightened efforts to combat human trafficking.

The Role of Sport Social Workers

Sport Social Work is a subfield of social work that promotes social justice and social change by focusing on the unique needs of athletes at both an individual and environmental level. Sport social workers promote the health and well-being of athletes through direct practice, community organizing, advocacy, policy development, education, and research (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). A sport social worker achieves this focus through the competencies of the social work profession and through adherence to the values and ethics of the social work profession (Kratz & Rosado, 2022; Moore et al., 2018). Given the roles and responsibilities of a sport social worker, they present as strong partners with the global initiatives of Mission 89 (2022), the United Nations, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2022). The below playbook provides targeted initiatives sport social workers can take to battle human trafficking in sport. These plays also support the policy platform of the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS, 2022).

Offensive Plays

- Enhance education and outreach efforts, including for at-risk sport populations (e.g., youth athletes, athletes from countries with a low-to-middle income residency status).
- Provide training for coaches and recruiters in the athletic community on recognizing signs of human trafficking of athletes by building the capacity to prevent the increase of sport trafficking (e.g., lead task forces at major sporting events).
- Enhance sport-coordinated responses to human trafficking of athletes (e.g., work with sport governing bodies like Federation Internationale de Football Association, National Football League, National Basketball Association, United States Olympic Committee, and Major League Baseball).
- Strengthen efforts to identify, prevent, and address human trafficking of athletes (e.g., undertake domestic and international efforts in conjunction with sport organizations, governmental entities, and social service agencies).
- Identify and engage with survivors in a survivor-centric, trauma-informed, and culturally competent manner (e.g., work with licensed clinical social workers).
- Support survivor-informed interventions to improve service delivery and inform survivor assistance policy decisions (e.g., client-centered, empowerment, and strength-based approaches).
- Conduct research to further study the phenomenon of human trafficking of athletes and identify best practices for working with survivors (e.g., use qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods)
- Increase access to social services for survivors of human trafficking of athletes to increase short- and long-term stability (e.g., focus on ecological and systems perspectives).

Defensive Plays

- Support coordination among law enforcement to increase accountability for human trafficking of athletes (e.g., social welfare policy and legislative advocacy).
- Enhance efforts to bring perpetrators to justice by deploying a broad range of tools (e.g., financial sanctions and prosecution).
- Deepen our understanding of human trafficking of athletes (e.g., collaborative partnerships between Mission 89 and ASWIS).
- Enhance information sharing to inform a strategic outcome (e.g., research initiatives such as program and impact evaluations).
- Strengthen international anti-trafficking efforts through external partnerships, including with both private and public sectors.
- Advocate for organizational and governmental policies that better protect athletes from exploitation and funding to support survivors of sport trafficking.
- Raising awareness and leading sensitization activities (campaigns).

Conclusion

Sport social workers play a unique role advocating and protecting the wellbeing of athletes across the lifespan. To that end, ASWIS, as the representative body of social workers in sport, supports policies and all forms of direct practice and advocacy efforts that promote social justice, address the physical, mental and emotional impacts of human trafficking of athletes, and protect the greater community and environment in which athletes compete and live nationally and globally. This proposed playbook will be useful to sport social workers to better identify and address human trafficking in sport....

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